



Intercultural Communication Checklists

Canada

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Enabling you to communicate across cultures

Intercultural Communication • Interpersonal / Intergroup Skills • Advanced English Training
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[Author's note: This text is written from the perspective of German communication behaviour, which is also prevalent in varying degrees in other Northern European cultures. Therefore, depending on where you're from, some of the points made, in particular in the checklists, may not readily apply to your situation.]

The checklists below are meant to guide you to a smoother, more communicative interaction with Canadians. However, these lists are the *products* of intercultural communication competency and not an end in itself. Knowing *how* to communicate effectively with other cultures follows from understanding *why* they behave the way they do. Our approach is to provide you with a framework of cultural core values which impact behaviour and communication styles in the Canadian culture (and other cultures with similar core concepts) at the *national* level. This knowledge is the foundation for developing those skills necessary to bridge communication gaps between cultures where the distance between two sets of cultural assumptions is the greatest. Our aim is to enable readers to develop intercultural communication skills to a point where they can eventually create their *own* checklists. That is why, in addition to the standard Do's, Don'ts and Be Aware lists, and a compilation of small talk topics, we provide a more vital 5th list of guidelines to help readers to actively apply the intercultural communication “vocabulary”. Against a solid framework of knowledge, *this* is effective “learning by doing”.

Before reading these checklists, make sure you read

- the terms and conditions that apply when you are using the information provided (www.aspetersen.de/terms_e.html),
- the article on Canada itself (www.aspetersen.de/countries_e.html), and
- the introduction to our country-specific articles (www.aspetersen.de/countries_e.html).



Points to avoid

1. Do not automatically assume social friendliness and camaraderie to be an invitation to friendship. Small talk facilitates an “ideal” social situation where two strangers are no longer strangers but not necessarily friends. At the least one avoids an uncomfortable silence; at the most one establishes some basis of commonality that may contain the *potential* for a future relationship.
2. As much as your facts and figures will be expected and appreciated, do not begin your presentation with extensive historical background of an issue, which will bore the audience. North Americans are as a rule more interested in just what they need to know right then and how it all applies to their tasks.
3. Be careful in how you express criticism or correct others. Though Canadians are informal and easy going, it is precisely because social behaviour should generally be easy going and harmonious in tone that being corrected or openly reprimanded in public is considered very offensive. Even when you think you are on technical and therefore

neutral ground, keep in mind that this will not necessarily be the message received.



Points to be aware of

1. Like Germany, Canada is on the ‘low context’ end of the communication scale. This means that what is said is exactly what is meant. There is little implied context in communication, which is clear, precise, and to the point. Clarity and precision generally have a positive value, as in both cultures they serve to avoid misunderstandings, which in business can prove especially costly.

Unlike in Germany, however, Canadians prefer to be less direct when it can be avoided. Faced with situations, especially in business, where directness is necessary, or even productive, words will not be diced, and a spade will be called a spade, but the prevailing attitude prefers to emphasise a combination of moderation and harmony. Unqualified directness is a last and uncomfortable resort, and even then preferably a degree or two softer in tone than outright aggressive!
2. A low-key and understated manner is a high social value for Canadians, who are quick to differentiate themselves from Americans on precisely this point. In tricky situations that require a delicate hand, moderation and common sense are considered a more successful route to results than aggressive methods. European businessmen planning on dealing with Canadians should be careful about employing the same hard-ball tactics with Canadians as they may with Americans.
3. As in Germany, Canadian time management is linear and schedule-bound. Because time is resource-focused, it is split into units, and if time is even less available, each time interval becomes shorter. However, because North American business is much more future-oriented, business is conducted at a more urgent pace. This is immediately noticeable in, for example, not only the characteristic brevity but terseness of North American emails. This contrasts notably with the personableness of Canadians at face-to-face meetings, and often leads to typical misattributions of ‘superficiality’.
4. Like most ‘new world’ immigration countries, Canada does not place a high value on hierarchy *per se*. Institutional structures are far less encumbered by bureaucracies and visible formalities than German institutions, which enables decisions to be made much more quickly. Speed and flexibility, therefore, are basic prerequisites valued in potential business partners.
5. Though Canadians have a more relaxed and informal working environment, it is important to remember that there *are* nonetheless lines of authority, though these are seldom spelled out. For example, even if employees call the boss by his or her first name, the boss has plenty of power, and both employer and employee know it. Therefore, be aware that while you should adopt a more informal tone in your business interactions with Canadians, respect for superiors should be shown subtly.
6. Within Canada, communication behaviour can differ between English-speaking and French-speaking regions. Verbal communication in Quebec tends to be more indirect and formal compared to the norm in the rest of English-speaking Canada, though much less so than in France.
7. Germans doing business with Canadians will most likely end up in Toronto, the Canadian financial capital, and Vancouver in a strong second place. These two cities are two of the most culturally and ethnically diverse cities in the world. Europeans should keep in mind

that North Americans define their national identity in fundamentally different ways than Europeans. For example, Canadians define “nationality” based entirely on birth and residency (“nationality” in North America is used interchangeably with “citizenship”), not on ethnicity. This crossing of physical and cultural space defines the immigration experience. Europeans will very likely do business with the most colourful range of ethnicities in Canada, and are advised to be careful of assuming that persons of non-European ethnicities are not “real” Canadians. Questions like those mentioned in the corresponding article would be considered very awkward and improper, in some cases even insulting.

8. Keep in mind that North Americans have considerably less time (e.g. much longer commuting times, longer working hours and less holidays) than Germans. This may be one reason for longer delays in following up on initial or new contacts.



Points to do

1. Expect Canadians to *be much more socially informal* than you are used to in Germany, both inside and outside the business environment. The relative lack of institutional and social hierarchy means that one can more easily socialise across ranks. Also, while Canadians recognise superiors and show appropriate respect, they do not automatically defer to higher status.
2. *Be prepared to act and react much more flexibly* in handling tasks. Be prepared for projects to begin based on a set of different possible game plans and several contingencies that keep as many potentially profitable avenues open as possible. For Canadians, sudden, new developments can present opportunities. A sign of competence and business acumen is therefore to demonstrate an ability to “go with the flow” with flair and creativity.
3. *Be prepared for a much more direct tone in written correspondence, especially in emails*, than what you will experience in personal meetings. (Typically, North American emails may not even include a salutation, especially if initial contact is established via email! In this respect, Canadian emails can be even more low-context than the most direct German emails. However, what is important for Germans to realise, who might be following up an initial contact established through email, is that the tone used at face-to-face meetings and after-hours socialising often sounds much softer, more indirect, and more personal than the emails may lead you to expect. Employing a gentler tone to cultivate a more personal relationship generally serves to counterbalance and compensate for when the talking gets a bit rough inside the boardroom.)
4. *Do more small talk* than you think is necessary. You can expect to have to “mingle” and network with many people you do not know, but this form of socialising will be very much part of the process of making deals. Be prepared to share more personal details with your conversation partner. Keep in mind that North Americans consider different information to belong to the public domain (e.g. salary) than Germans. Therefore, be prepared to some degree to *speak more frankly and cultivate camaraderie* on a more personal level than you would normally do with German business acquaintances.
5. Like Germans, Canadians take time to define an action plan and then follow through the steps and procedures laid out. However, expect Canadians to *be more flexible when it comes to exploring new contingencies*, trying out untested ideas, diverging from an

agreed game plan at the last minute or even after work has begun. Risk and change are not automatically considered liabilities; managerial skills are judged by how prescient they are of the former and how dextrously they react to the latter. Therefore, provide as much structure as you think is needed: reports, memos, documentation, procedures, etc., but be prepared to *be intuitive and to make some decisions spontaneously*.

As in Germany, Canadian business meetings similarly evolve around an agenda. Important topics of discussion are usually listed on the agenda ahead of time. Canadian business communication behaviour, however, tends to be much more informal and relaxed, and is often injected with easy bantering and humour to counterbalance the more direct tone of debate. The aim is to agree on principles and work out details later. Meetings can be held for many different reasons; they are, however, seldom pro forma. The purpose is not to give formal approval of decisions already made, but to debate an issue thoroughly, brainstorm for new ideas, present opinions backed by substantial data. Therefore, if you have something to contribute or want a decision to be made, be prepared to argue your position convincingly but with a *moderate tone*, support it with facts and figures, and practise your verbal presentation beforehand. Communicate technical competence but be sure to inject *personality and flair*.

6. *Keep presentations short, punchy and humorous.* Expect a much shorter timeframe in which to make your presentation than you would expect in Germany. Summarise the most important information in an easy to read report to circulate. (Recently we were invited by the Toronto Board of Trade to give the ‘Power Seminar’ in one of their monthly events, which among other things included networking, a sit-down dinner, and a keynote speaker. The seminar was allotted 30 minutes, and dinner 45 minutes. Germans would wonder how one could learn anything in 30 minutes, while for the French 45 minutes would just be enough time to get through the first round of appetisers!)



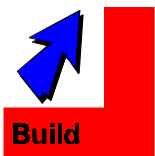
Small Talk Topics

Symbols: ⊕⊕ very good topic, ⊕ good topic, ⊖ avoid topic, ⊖⊖ bad topic.

- ⊕⊕ Current activities (building house, economy, weather, etc)
- ⊕⊕ Politics, travel, sport (Note: European football is a relatively unknown sport in North America, where baseball, hockey, baseball and American football are the national sports)
- ⊕ Cost of living (Note that North Americans talk much more freely about general pay brackets and the cost of personal consumer items like cars, house, etc.; this is considered ‘technical’ information in the public domain and is generally given and received more neutrally.)
- ⊕ Profession, professional experience
- ⊕ Hobbies, food, cultural events
- ⊖ Ask questions that imply criticism
- ⊖ Over-emphasise the negative
- ⊖⊖ Make ethnic jokes
- ⊖⊖ Assume or imply a Canadian with non-European ethnicity is not a ‘real’ Canadian

General rules

- Keep the conversation positive
- Keep the conversation light (e.g. it's not necessary to go into great depths; North Americans prefer to comment more generally on a broader range of topics than go directly into depth on one specific topic.)
- Be communicative, talk a lot
- Be careful about talking *too* much about yourself; avoid the detail-heavy "20-minute monologue", unless real interest is shown
- Don't continue to talk about a subject when you don't hear follow-up questions
- Ask as many questions as you answer
- Take care of others' talking time
- Add reactive words and phrases, etc. to give feedback
- Don't just ask questions for information; be also prepared to ask out of politeness



Becoming interculturally literate

1. What previous (or typical) cross-cultural experience(s) have you had with Canadians where you did not initially consider a possible problem to be one of *intercultural communication*? Can you now re-evaluate the experience in an intercultural communication framework? How would you now act/react in the same situation?
2. Can you identify other cultures that may exhibit similar behaviour or communication styles as the Canadians?
3. Can you imagine other situations where the Canadians may react negatively to something that is said or done, but which you consider normal?
4. What other aspects of Canadian communication style and behaviour have you had experience with? What cultural values do you think are at the root?
5. How do German communication style and behaviour in the same situation differ? What is the German value at the root?
6. Isolate the areas of greatest difference between the German and Canadian communication behaviour and predict the most likely situations of misunderstandings you can expect to encounter in your professional field.