



Intercultural Communication Checklists

Spain

Alexia & Stephan Petersen – English Communication for Professionals

Enabling you to communicate across cultures

Intercultural Communication • Interpersonal / Intergroup Skills • Advanced English Training
Im Mittelfeld 97 • 52074 Aachen • Germany • info@aspetersen.de • www.aspetersen.de

[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 Spaniards. 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 Spanish 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 Spain 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. Don't aim to plan everything 100% perfectly. What the Spanish value is how you react when unforeseeable conditions arise. The effort spent on building the personal relationship invests in a mutual trust that safeguards everyone's “face” in tricky situations. Expect delivery dates, schedules, budgets, forecasts to be only approximations and rough guides for action. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? The sign of competent leadership is courage (*valiente*) and how one responds to the unpredictable.
2. Don't go into initial meetings with a fixed agenda and points ready to be ticked off. Be prepared to do more socialising during business than you consider “normal” or beneficial. Don't make the mistake of thinking it is all a “waste of time”: your body language can break any potential deals!
3. You don't win points with Spaniards by pursuing a discussion based on who is *technically* correct and incorrect, or who is at fault and who is not. The quality of the relationship and one's obligations to it are more important.

4. Avoid talking about business or giving detailed descriptions of your job/current projects, etc., once you and your colleagues have moved out of the business environment. If someone asks, keep it short and sweet. Social occasions are *not* an extension of the business day. No one is *that* interested in all the details! Remember: they are more interested in *you*.



Points to be aware of

1. In contrast to German meetings, Spanish meetings are often not for decision-making but about exchanging opinions and collecting information, and for strengthening interpersonal relationships. In fact, important decisions can often be made at the casual dinner table.
2. Be aware of how you express criticisms and complaints or even a strong wish. Remember that everything you say to a person from a *relationship*-oriented culture is received in an *interpersonal* context. Criticisms and complaints, even if expressed neutrally for you (e.g. fact-based and technical) can actually sound harsh and cold and give personal offence.
3. Be aware that if you ever reach a point where you feel the *need* to qualify your blunt actions or words (e.g. ‘Please don’t take it personally’), you have likely already gone too far and from then on you should focus on damage control.
4. Note, in contrast to Germans, Spaniards value an openness to risk-taking; courage and risk-taking are valued as leadership qualities. There is a strong temperamental aversion to forecasting and planning, especially to grandiose schemes based on in-depth analyses. This can affect the quality of joint ventures with long-term objectives.
5. Note that even on formal business occasions manners can be based on an easy and relaxed informality; remember that familiarity and a quality of a relationship based on trust are highly valued. Be circumspect, see what others do!
6. Be aware of going too far by pursuing arguments or points on purely technical grounds because a) the interpersonal element is valued over the technical truth, and b) a degree of modesty (*modesto*) is valued over assertiveness.
7. Be aware that time is less linear and compartmentalised into units (monochronic), but more flexible and overlapping (polychronic) to serve a purpose or relationship.
8. Be aware that, like the Chinese and Japanese (!), losing and giving ‘face’ is an important value in building interpersonal relationships. Unlike the Asians, however, the Spaniard may react with visible touchiness and sensitivity when they feel their personal dignity and point of honour (*pundonor*) have been compromised.



Points to do

1. When making criticisms or expressing personal wishes, use a softer tone than you would in German.
2. If you are asked personal questions (e.g. family, personal experiences) take that as a cue that these topics are favourable small talk topics.
3. Be prepared to „small“talk more than *you* think is necessary. Understand the function

that it serves in the culture.

4. ‘Business *is* personal’: in Spain, be prepared to work hard for it to be more personal; business will come automatically.
5. Be prepared to cope with a much higher degree of improvisation compared to what you may expect in Germany. A businessman’s or manager’s reputation is build on how he acts and reacts under unpredictable circumstances.
6. Be prepared to be less perfect, but more *authentic*.
7. Be prepared to offer to treat your colleagues more often than you would consider necessary in Germany, inside *and* outside of company time; sometimes you need to let the needs of a relationship cue what you *should* do, even when the rules say you don’t *have to*.
8. At least *show* interest in and appreciation for the personal well-being of those close to Spanish colleagues, and be prepared to receive likewise from them with graciousness. Listen to who your colleagues mention during “small talk” (e.g. family members, mutual acquaintances) and remember to inquire after them next time you meet.
9. Do try to “feel out” mutual acquaintances and connections with Spanish colleagues; do not be afraid to ask. Expect much time during social occasions to be spent discovering who you know in connection to someone else. Good references from trusted connections speak more for an individual than only technical competence and ability. The best reference you can give about another person is ‘he’s a good friend of mine’.



Small Talk Topics

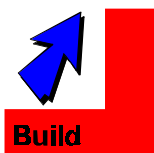
Symbols: ⊕⊕ very good topic, ⊕ good topic, ⊖ avoid topic, ⊖⊖ bad topic.

⊕⊕ Family and mutual acquaintances (Much effort is made by Spaniards to establish some form of personal connection through mutual acquaintances. Much time is spent at the beginning of a new relationship feeling out each other’s ‘references’. Since in Spain business relationships reflect a greater degree of personal trust and friendship, the trustworthiness of even a friend of a friend can be relied on and transferred through your friend to you, and vice versa. The most reliable reference you can receive about anyone from any contact, therefore, is that ‘he is a good friend of mine’.)

⊕⊕ Travel, leisure, holidays (Be aware, however, of giving minutely detailed descriptions of your holidays. No one is *that* interested in a monologue. Make sure you at least ask as many questions as you answer! Keep it anecdotal and positive in tone, and keep in mind to stress *common* experiences where you can. It strengthens the bond you are aiming to establish with your colleague.)

⊕⊕ Sport (As in Brazil, football’s importance extends beyond sport. In a country divided by regional loyalties, football is relatively neutral ground. Following football and attending major football matches is considered to be almost a social obligation, with most males belonging to a football club. Many larger companies have access to tickets for major events and corporate entertainment can include attending football matches. Even the most disinterested foreign business associate would be well-advised to go along with the show. As with many social events in Spain, participation is usually more important than one’s technical interest in an event.)

- ⊕ Politics, current events and scandals
- ⊕ Wine and food
- ⊖ Job or profession (As Spanish social events provide the time and place to cultivate personal relationships, jobs or details of one's profession are not immediately the first topics of conversation. If asked at all, answers are kept general and short. Talking shop belongs at the office!)
- ⊖⊖ Money (Salary, cost of personal possessions)
- ⊖⊖ Problems and difficulties (Avoid focussing on problems and complaints in explicit detail and dwelling on them too long. The German habit of first detailing what is wrong, not possible, or unfavourable, be it regarding the weather or in response to a greeting, often provokes uncertainty in members of relationship-oriented cultures. This leaves the other not knowing how to react to what sounds like bad news. In other, highly group-oriented cultures that prioritise group harmony, this can even cause considerable psychological stress. To yet other cultures that tend to stress the positive or doable, this may sound like negativism and complaining, and in turn boring or inappropriate.)



Becoming interculturally literate

1. What previous (or typical) cross-cultural experience(s) have you had with Spaniards where you did not initially consider the 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 Spanish, though for (slightly) different reasons at the core level of values?
3. Can you imagine other situations where the Spanish may take what is said or done as a serious personal insult, but you consider normal? How do you think they will react?
4. What other aspects of Spanish communication style and behaviour have you had experience with? What cultural values do you think are at the core?
5. What are the German values of these *same* concepts, and how do they manifest themselves in German communication style and behaviour?
6. Isolate the areas of greatest difference between the German and Spanish values systems and predict the most likely situations of misunderstandings you can expect to encounter in your professional field.