Intercultural Stories: A Series of Critical Incidents from the International Business World

“The Chinese businessman who always went home hungry”: The German Sincerity Postulate meets Chinese Modesty

For many years now, Professor Beneke has focussed on intercultural communication, both in his teaching and in his research. His aim was and still is to make the results of academic research serviceable for the business world. It is such a transfer that creates added value for both spheres – academia and the business world.

Jürgen Beneke has a long and successful record of serving as a consultant and trainer for Small and Medium-sized Companies (SMEs) and large companies on a national as well as on the international level. The public sector, including the armed forces, has also benefited from his expertise.

Currently, Professor Beneke works on a series of short cases, so-called critical incidents, which he calls „Intercultural Stories“. The driving force behind this approach is the well-known fact that from times immemorial humans have learned to cope with the challenges of “new” situations by listening to the stories told by those who have “been there”. Storytelling has always been one of the most powerful instruments of learning and the transfer of knowledge.

There is a good chance that such stories “from the coalface” can sensitize readers for situations where things don’t seem to “run smoothly” or where something obviously is “amiss”. Unfortunately however, very often they just stick in our memory as an “interesting” or even “weird” anecdote.

Learning in the sense that readers are empowered to enhance their competencies for coping with “new” situations which have something in common with “old” situations can only happen when the “reasons” for the behaviours observed are analyzed and when some general principle can be distilled from the story that can be applied to future events.

That is why the stories here are supplemented with a background that aims at explaining the behaviour reported. Researchers and practitioners in the field of intercultural communication are convinced that generally human behaviour is “coherent” and follows a clear logic that is comprehensible to the members of the cultural group the interactants belong to – and only to them. What counts as coherence, logic and comprehensibility is culturally “acquired” and therefore highly culture-specific.

When readers make an effort to discover the “hidden logic” behind such stories and allow themselves to get emotionally involved in them, there is a good chance that they will develop their intercultural competence for similar situations in their private lives as well as in business.
The first news-story within the series deals with a Chinese businessman who always went home hungry and thirsty from German invitations; the story also helps us a lot to understand „German ways“:

A Chinese businessman recently admitted that it had taken him 10 years not to go home hungry and thirsty from a German invitation. His German is flawless, so the problem was not a poor command of the language. There must have been a code that he had not been able to crack – but which?

When he mentally reviewed the typical phases of a German dinner, he remembered the following. After the welcoming and (relatively short) small talk phase dinner is served. The host wishes everyone present “Guten Appetit”, for which phrase incidentally no simple English equivalent exists. The closest would be the American “Enjoy” or “Enjoy your meal”. He or she encourages everyone to either help themselves from the dishes or he sees to it that a waiter or waitress serves every guest a ration of their choice. So, the Chinese gentleman, too, is served. The waiter asks:

- “May I offer you a portion of this? It is a local specialty, you know.”

Our friend murmurs:
- Yes, but just a little bit.”

Consequently, he finds a very small ration on his plate at which he hesitatingly nibbles.

After a while, the waiter friendly asks:

- May I serve you some more?“

Mr Li softly says:

- No, thank you.

The German host notices this and cuts in:

- Is the food not to your taste, Mr Li?”

Mr Li:
- No, no, it tastes very good, thank you very much.

Host:
- “Then why don’t you have a second helping – it is a specialty from the region, you know.“

Mr Li (smiling in an embarrassed way)

„No, thank you.“

Host: „So you don’t like it after all.“

Mr Li: “Tastes very nice, thank you, but no more please, thank you.”

The German host is rather disappointed, but refrains from any further attempt to persuade Mr Li to have a second helping. He thinks by himself: “He probably does not like the dish after all, but he is being too polite to admit to it. I have to leave him alone and respect his decision.
The drinks procedure is very similar. So at the end of the evening Mr Li goes home hungry and thirsty – and the German host is confused and disappointed.

Background

What is it that Mr Li really wanted? He said he did like the tasty German dishes and he really wanted a larger helping the second time he was asked. But following the rules of good and well-educated behaviour in his own culture, he was obliged to decline the offer several times. Otherwise he would be considered „greedy“ and „immodest“. He would have to decline three to five times, before eventually accepting the offer. His resistance, however, would become weaker with every time he declined. For a member of his own culture, it would have been apparent that every „No, thank you“ was only a move in a well-organized game. In order to correctly understand – and to act competently – the players of this game have to understand the subtle and highly implicit rules. After several attempts to persuade him, the Chinese gentleman would finally give in and accept „just a tiny bit“. At the core of this game is the Chinese obligation to display “modesty” and “good education”.

The German host also follows rules, but these are German rules. He plays the game: “Act sincerely” and „don’t pressurize others“. These rules imply that every person means what he or she says, because you have to be honest and sincere and should not fool around. It is unethical to “deceive” people – such behaviour is considered to be dishonest. If somebody declines an offer, that has to be respected and you must not pressurize that person. He or she will certainly have good reasons for their decision.

The Chinese type of behaviour is called “token resistance” – you only pretend to resist. A German standard reaction to this game is, “But why do these people not say what they mean? Why do they make me guess?”

The obvious answer is „But they do say what they mean – you only have to know the code“. This indirectness, this speaking „between the lines“, is one of the single most challenging aspects of intercultural communication for Westerners, notably Germans. Indirectness is very often considered to be akin to cheating and therefore meets with incomprehension and strong resentment. In Germany the Sincerity Postulate rules supreme. A further ramification of the Sincerity Postulate is that Germans generally have reservations against polite phrases like the American “Have a nice day”, uttered, for instance, by a shop assistant who sees you for the first time. The subdued German response is: “How utterly superficial –this person does not know me, how can he show any interest in me. It must be dishonest.” But they should be aware that such is the very nature of politeness – you don’t mean what you say, at least not always, not even in German. If we are not wary of these processes, the typical outcome will be the “classical” German stereotype of Americans: Their politeness is only a cheat, they do not really “mean” what they say – we’ve known it all along that they are “superficial”.

Dear readers, I sincerely wish you a nice day.

Jürgen Beneke
If you want to learn more about Professor Jürgen Beneke as a trainer and consultant, please send an e-mail to Nina Frauenfeld or just call us: +49. (0)6221 – 7351371. We will be glad to hear from you!