

# German objectivity (Sachlichkeit) at the work place and its historical origins\*

by Patrick Schmidt

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A Spanish colleague goes to Spain for holiday and brings back Spanish wine to offer to his German colleagues. In the office, he says: “ This is a Spanish wine which you can try out. It’s a small present.” The Germans are completely surprised “This is for me. Why?” It’s almost embarrassing for them to accept the wine and struggle to find a few words to thank him. Going home, the Spaniard has the feeling that he has caused more embarrassment than joy.

To fully understand the above situation, we must first consider the concept of communication. When two people interact, they meet on two levels: contents (objective level) and the personal (relationship level). Both these elements play a roll in the communication process. Cultural differences appear when one person from one culture stresses the contents as important and the other person perceives the relationship as important.

What we can learn from the above example is that relationships to colleagues in German companies are above all defined through work. Giving presents actually goes too far. They are only to be given for a special occasion.

The second example is another facet of work relationships in Germany:

An English engineer is department leader in a German company. Because of an urgent order, he asks some of his staff to come in on Saturday to finish the work. They come (and are paid overtime). On Monday, the English department leader goes to those who worked on Saturday to thank them and say they had done good work. His German co-workers appear surprised and astonished.

In Germany, working on Saturday is settled through overtime payment and it is not considered necessary for the department leader to thank his staff.

Both examples make clear that Germans at work act primarily on the factual, objective level; social factors, although nice, are considered secondary and not necessary.

Concentrating only on the work objectives and playing down the relational aspect can sometimes go so far that additional signals from the other side, which don’t directly related to work, are not at all understood.

While working on the creation of a joint-venture between an Italian and German company, an Italian manager suggests that both sides could go skiing in the winter. No one on the German side takes any real notice of the suggestion. Three months later the Italian company calls the secretariat of the German management board and informs them that the skiing week-end can take place in two weeks. The Italians have made all the arrangements for a beautiful hotel in the Italian Alps and they wish to know how many people from the German side will be coming. The German Board of directors are very surprised (they had completely forgotten the proposal), but feel obliged to accept the invitation. They send a memo to all departments and asks who might be interested in this ski week-end with the Italians. The company’s “Skifahrer” club say they wish to participate. The result is a bus loaded with employees from all parts of the company. Upon arrival at the hotel, there is complete surprise and embarrassment on both sides. The complete top management of the Italian company is there to greet the Germans, but they are astonished that everyone that comes out of the German bus is nobody they know except the personnel manager. Despite their disappointment, the Italians remain sovereign as a host. A beautiful sky run has been reserved for the week-end and a ski contest has been organized. The dinner for the medal winners is outstanding.

The Germans didn’t want to hurt the Italians, but it didn’t really occur to them that the success of a joint venture also meant a personal relationship between the managers could (or *had to* from the Italian side) be considered.

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\*) This article is based in part on the chapter ‘Sachorientierung’ from the book *Die Deutschen - Wir Deutsche* by Sylvia Schroll-Machl. The three examples are taken from the book.

## Historical background of German objectivity

That the Germans are particularly “objective oriented” as oppose to other nations can be explained by the following factors:

1. The Protestant movement began in Germany when Luther questioned the Catholic Church’s sovereignty. One of his demands was that the Church be reformed by repressing the emotional and irrational from the sacred acts. A connection to God was to take place more on the rational, intellectual and dialogue level. Emotion feelings and passion were not considered that necessary for one’s faith in God. Lutheranism became the church of words and rationality, whereas Catholicism continued to appeal to the senses (and beauty) of the sacraments and liturgy. After many generations, an objective and rational attitude toward God became gradually secularized and widespread in German states, especially those that were Protestant.

Furthermore, Lutheranism teaches that to obtain God’s salvation, it wasn’t enough just to be religious — each individual had to follow a *Berufung* (calling) in life. To prove one’s worth (*Bewährung*) to God, one had to display above all an attitude of responsibility and duty to one’s work. Emotions and feelings were seen as secondary.

2. The founding of the second Reich (1871) by the Prussian state reinforced this attitude of responsibility and duty. The Prussian government had been heavily influenced by Calvinism, which taught that all God-fearing people had to render service and obedience to the State. It stated: “Each person is to fulfill daily tasks impersonally, objectively and correctly”. Because of its efficiency and having won the Franco-Prussian war, the values of the Prussian state were admired and copied by the rest of Germany.

3. After the fall of the Nazi regime and becoming conscious of the horrors that their government had done, Germans couldn’t avoid feelings of self-guilt and self-hate. This lead to a collective avoidance of all forms of extremes — from false enthusiasm to pathos. Replacing it was a down-to-earth sobriety (*Nüchternheit*) and objectivity, a tame and non-controversial behavior. Basically, this route of perfectionism and objectivity can be interpreted as a manner for the nation to escape feelings of worthlessness. With this in mind, it explains partially why Germans channeled their feelings and enthusiasm into the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the non-controversial rebuilding of the nation.