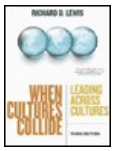

When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures, Third Edition

by Richard D. Lewis

Chapter 13: Britain

Overview

For decades the British film industry, enriched by the talents of such actors as Alec Guinness, Peter O'Toole, John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Alastair Sim, George Cole and Charles Laughton, has put the typical Englishman on the screen for the world to see. The BBC, in such admirable programs as *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Yes, Minister,* has reinforced the image.

The Englishman dresses in tweeds or a three-piece pin-striped suit and a Burberry raincoat on rainy days. He wears a bowler hat, carries a tightly furled, black umbrella with a cane handle and has a pink newspaper tucked under his left armpit. He goes to church on Sunday mornings and eats roast beef with Yorkshire pudding for Sunday lunch. He is a man of principle, insists on fair play for underdogs, does things in a proper manner and shows more affection for horses, cats and dogs than for children, foxes and grouse. He probably went to Eton and Oxford (Cambridge?) and frequents Ascot, Wimbledon, Twickenham, Lord's and Wentworth. He believes in the Monarchy, the Empire and the Conservative Party. When not in his Club (no ladies allowed), he sits in the local pub with gardeners and game wardens, with whom he sips warm beer called *real ale*. Often he has tea with the vicar, with whom he discusses the Church of England, farming, poaching, the village fête and his years with the Guards.

Englishmen are fond of cricket, croquet, rugby, sheepdog trials, detective stories and queuing (getting in lines). When lines are slow, you do not complain, as English people must never make a scene, not even if they have a double-barreled name. The same applies to poor service in restaurants, railway stations and that place where you get your passport.

The antidote to such frustrating situations is the stiff upper lip. When standing in line or sitting in a train one does not enter into conversation with others— that is the reason for carrying a newspaper everywhere. When a train was derailed in a tunnel in the London Underground a few years ago, an elderly city gentleman walked half a mile down the line to the next station, where he proclaimed: "It's horrible down there in the dark. People are talking to each other!"

This powerful stereotype of the British character has been etched on other nations' minds by several generations of British films. Huge populations abroad, including the Japanese, Indians, Southeast Asians and Africans, still subscribe to it and send their children to Britain to be educated along the same lines.

The majority of British people bear little resemblance to the stereotype. Not only is the image one of an upper-class personage of a former era, but it does not take into account regional differences, which in the U.K. are extremely marked. If you draw a latitudinal line through the city of Oxford, it is questionable if you will find anyone north of it who behaves in the manner of the stereotype. In the first place, nearly 10 million Britons are Celts (Scots, Welsh, Irish, Cornish and Manx). These people are essentially romantic, poetic and emotional. They, like millions of midland and Northern English people in the "wilds" beyond Oxford, are extremely critical of the archetypal Englishman existing in foreign minds. There is a type of English person who roughly corresponds to the projected image, but he is southern, upper class and almost extinct! Even in the south, we are talking about a tiny, although often highly visible (and audible) fraction of society. Foreigners, often laughing at the eccentric English stereotype, are unaware that 50-odd million Britons laugh at him too. Northern, midland and Celtic Britons feel much more affinity with some Europeans (Norwegians, Danes, Swedes, Finns, Dutch, Belgians, Germans, Swiss) than they do with the braying figure in tweeds. Britons are supposed to be poor at learning languages—this is a myth (it applies only to the Southern English). Scots, Welsh, Irish and most people north of Watford learn foreign languages well and often with a good accent.

What are real English people like? The "world image" bears some resemblance to the reality, but not much. The class system is still in evidence in Britain—an unfortunate anachronism which North America and most of Europe have dispensed with—but in fact most British people could be called middle class. They do not have a strong political party to represent them, although both Conservatives and Labour eagerly pretend to do so. The absence of a moderate centrist party contributes, sadly, to the continuing polarization of British society.

Polarized or not, how do British people behave? Whatever the status, a pattern can be observed. Yes, we are a nation of queuers, and probably the only time British people complain vociferously is when someone jumps ahead in the queue. But the stiff upper lip can move—British people today hold nothing sacred. While royalty is respected, the Royal Family is often ridiculed, both in the press and on TV. If the British can laugh at themselves, so can the monarchs—what could be more democratic than that?

Humor is a saving factor in British life—some say it is a product of a fickle climate—and many English people feel that as long as there is humor, there can never be utter despair. It is no accident that the BBC—the most humorous television service in the world—is highly popular in most countries fortunate enough to be able to receive it.

It is true that British people love detective stories. Agatha Christie is the world's most translated novelist and the British easily lead the world in library book loans. Sherlock Holmes is one of the most famous and popular Englishmen of all time. The fact is, the British have a strong conspiratorial streak—they love plotting. The most beloved characters in the extensive British theatrical literature are villains. Guy Fawkes, who was hung after failing to blow up Parliament, became an instant hero and the nation still celebrates his anniversary every November 5th. The biggest heroes of British naval history were Francis Drake and John Hawkins—both pirates. Apparently polished and sophisticated in diplomacy, the British are masters of intelligence gathering and political blackmail.

And yet British people regard themselves as honest, reasonable, caring and considerate. Their originality often borders on the eccentric, but it is true that throughout history they have been lateral thinkers with great powers of invention. Often academic and woolly, they can excel in science and technology. Portrayed as a nation of amateurs who "muddle through" crises, they have shown their visceral strength in the worst adversity.

Their insularity is incurable. Each evening on television British weather forecasters routinely end their message with the prognosis of the next day's temperature: "The high will be 22 degrees Celsius—that is 72 degrees Fahrenheit." That after three decades of metric systems!

Don't ask the British to change their double-decker buses or red mailboxes, or to drive on the right. Even when they venture abroad, they take their cocoon of insularity with them. It used to be five o'clock tea in long dresses in the heat of the African jungle; now it's fish and chips and bacon and eggs eagerly provided by Spanish hoteliers on the Costa del Sol.

Fixed habits, fixed ideas, slow to change, unprofessional. How do these characteristics apply to the British way of doing business? How should these eccentrics be handled? (For illustrations of the British communication pattern and listening habits, see Figures 5.5 and 5.13.)

How to Empathize with the British

The British feel at home with other English-speaking nationalities, with whom they have little difficulty in establishing an easy-going but effective relationship. They also feel comfortable with Nordics, the Dutch and (when they get to know them) the Japanese. They think that they strike the golden mean between excessive formality (French, German tendencies) and premature familiarity (American, Australian traits).

Britons, of course, belong to different classes, and you should always bear this in mind. When dealing with the wealthier, more class-conscious Southern English, stress your civilized, educated side; when dealing with the more hard- headed northern English, Scots or Welsh, you should lay more emphasis on sincerity and straight, uncomplicated dealing.

At business meetings, the British are rather formal at first, using first names only after two or three encounters. After that they become very informal (jackets off, sleeves rolled up) and first names will be used and maintained from then on. British people like to show themselves as family oriented (though less than the Latins) and it is normal for you to discuss children, vacations and reminiscences during and between meetings. Humor is important in business sessions in the U.K., and it is advisable for you to arrive well stocked with jokes and anecdotes. People who are good at this should use their talent to the full.

British people expect you to match story with story and an atmosphere conducive to doing business will result. A word of warning: British executives can use humor (especially irony or sarcasm) as a weapon in ridiculing an opponent or showing disagreement or even contempt. Sarcasm is rarely used against Nordics, however, since their modesty and restraint hardly ever deserve it. The British can use humor cruelly against some Latins and overly demonstrative people.

One can learn a lot about the British by observing how they use humor against themselves or their own colleagues. The following uses are common:

- self-deprecation
- to break up tension in a situation which is developing intransigence
- to speed up discussion when excessive formality is slowing it down
- to direct criticism toward a superior without getting fired
- to introduce a new, possibly wild idea to unimaginative colleagues (the "trial balloon")
- to introduce the unexpected in over-rigid negotiation

- to laugh at overly elaborate or "mysterious" management priorities and perspective in solemn corporate planning

In short, humor is regarded as one of the most effective weapons in the British manager's arsenal, and some people can gain the confidence of the British by showing that they can be a match for them in this area. (A Swiss, Austrian, Turk or German has difficulty in doing this.)

British executives try to show during meetings that they are guided by reasonableness, compromise and common sense. You may find, however, that the British, even in the absence of disagreement, will rarely make a final decision at the first meeting. They do not like to be hurried. With them you should suggest, "Could we have a final decision at our next meeting?"

The British rarely disagree openly with proposals from the other side. They agree whenever possible, but qualify their agreement ("Hmm, that's a very interesting idea."). Other nationals are more open in this respect. You must watch for hidden signs of disagreement, for example,

- "Well, we quite like that, however . . . ,"
- vagueness in reply,
- understatement indicating, in fact, opposition ("That might be a bit tricky"),
- humor.

Some nationalities understand the use of understatement and humor well, but can be irritated by British vagueness. They use it to stall, confuse opponents, or delay the business. Ask them for a decision and they are likely to reply, "Let me tell you a story." You listen to the story with interest, for it will probably be a good one. When it ends you will say "Fine, but what about a decision?" "I already told you," the Briton will say. You would do well to show you understand the relevance of the story, or tell one back.

Using charm, vagueness, humor, understatement and apparent reasonableness, British negotiators can be smiling but quite tough for lengthy periods. They always have a fallback position which they disguise for as long as possible. You should attempt to discover this position by being equally reasonable, smiling, modest and tenacious. In the end you may find it is similar to your own fallback plan in most circumstances. The area for bargaining may be somewhat greater with the British (remember that they have hundreds of years of experience with India, the Middle East and the Far East).

Representatives of a British company will make normal use of their firm's reputation, size and wealth in their negotiating hand, and you can do likewise in dealing with them. What they do not reveal so readily is the strength of their behind-the-scenes connections. The "old school tie," or the "old-boys' network," is very much a reality in British executive life and should not be underestimated. It is particularly active in the City, the ministries and in legal circles, and nationals from a small country should always bear in mind that they may be dealing with greater influences than are apparent on the surface.

Finally, there is the question of British insularity. Brits generally have a feeling that "foreigners" intend to outsmart them.

Motivation

Key	At meetings, don't rock the boat
Cross-century mood	▪ A liking for consultative managing style is growing. ▪ Becoming more aware of the need for cross-cultural instruction. ▪ Hard-nosed U.S. concepts on the wane. ▪ Access to the latest technology increasingly desired.

Motivating Factors

- Your strongest weapon is dry humor, supported by a cool, laid-back approach.
- Business and making money is a serious matter, but you should always try to look casual about it.
- Brits accept career challenge.
- Be competitive, but don't tread openly on others' toes. There are unwritten rules about fair play.

- Statements and actions should be low key. Everything should seem to be under control: Let's keep it jolly nice, chaps.
- Open debate is okay, as long as you make it clear that people's opinions are separate from their integrity.
- When you wish to criticize, disagree or even praise, do it obliquely (using understatement and coded speech).
- On-the-dot punctuality may sometimes be seen as overdone. You may arrive a few minutes late at a meeting as long as you are well-prepared. Most meetings begin with a few minutes of small talk.
- Managers usually want to be considered one of the team but maintain a slight (power) distance.
- English like orders to be given in the form of suggestions and hints ("Perhaps we might try this . . ."). They hate regimentation and see it as unwelcome in a twenty-first-century context.
- In discussion Brits accept occasional ambiguities and are prepared to read between the lines.
- It is good policy to use self-disparagement with English people and laugh at yourself.
- It is good form to be entrepreneurial. You should also admire another's success.
- Put things in writing, generally after some oral discussion. The English like confirmation of agreements, minutes of meetings, thank-you notes and friendly or informative memos. They keep thick files. Don't forget Christmas cards, either.
- Tell English colleagues about yourself and your family, but don't reveal many private details.
- Common sense, as in the Nordic countries, is a major factor with the English.
- Appeals to tradition and attractive precedents are usually successful.
- Remember that Brits are basically more interested in long-term relationships than in quick deals. They are very interested in profits, but often show great patience in waiting for them.
- Be prepared to accept some idiosyncratic or even eccentric behavior. This is often seen as a sign of originality leading to inventiveness. Teachers, professors, engineers, scientists and computer programmers are often dressed far from smartly.
- Remember that there are many types of Brits. Most of the above applies to the Southern English. People north of Birmingham, as well as Celtic Brits, tend to be more focused and hardheaded, show more openness and warmth, have less respect for class distinctions, resemble Nordics in many ways and often get on well with Americans. You should take these factors into account and modify your own stance accordingly.

Avoid

- Being sentimental, emotional and openly critical in public.
- Boasting about your connections or indulging in name-dropping.
- Talking too much; on the other hand, don't lapse into silence too often.
- Taking sides in class questions.
- Pushing logic too much; the English pride themselves on their intuition.
- Putting forward too many strong opinions; it may jeopardize future compromise.
- Looking too serious or always taking things literally. The English like leg-pulling.
- Pressing them if they become (suddenly) vague; they are probably stalling, so take another tack.