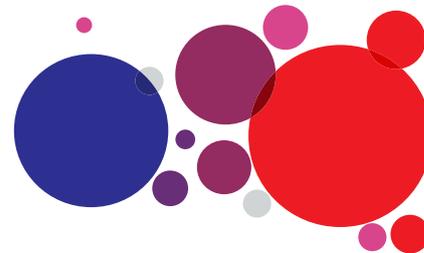


Our Thinking Series

Is Australia still annoying the French?



by Norman Buckley
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Picture this: It's 26 January 1788 and a small British fleet under the command of Captain John Hunter was in what is now called Botany Bay, south of Sydney. That day a pair of French ships commanded by Jean-François de Galaup, comte de Lapérouse sailed into the bay.

The British and French groups met and seemed to get on well. The French supplied food and drink and the British supplied ... well the British ate it. A great spirit of bonhomie.

This may have been the last time a bunch neo-Australians got on so well with a group of French. Move forward to the present day. In the intervening centuries the British established themselves in Australia conveniently ignoring any claim from the existing owners of the land. And over the next few hundred years they encouraged others to join them, mostly to do the actual work.

Meanwhile the French had sauntered off to find other lands. Not very successfully for poor Lapérouse. He and his ships were lost in the Pacific. But at least they had provided a decent multi-cultural lunch.

Roll forward to the present day. France advanced and through revolution and democracy became a European powerhouse. Sort of. And they became very good at many things. Food and drink are still top of the list but they also became quite good at making ships. Especially submarines. Australia became good at sheep and digging stuff out of the ground. And so when we decided we needed A\$50 Bn worth of new submarines, we struck a deal with French company, Naval Group, for 12 new submarines. And so it started. It was soon discovered that 'an Australian doesn't think like a French person'. We have different values. We do things differently.

Does this matter? Surely we can just be grownups. Well. 18 months in it already seems to be an issue. And this is a 10 year project at least. Naval Group CEO Hervé Guillou was recently quoted¹ explaining that there are things Australians need to understand when working with the French. For example, about meetings. To an Australian a 10 o'clock meeting should start at 10. And should finish at 11 which is what the diary says. The French are more relaxed about such things. They believe in the 'diplomatic 15 minutes'. You're not late if you're only 15 minutes late. And lunch is sacrosanct for a Frenchman. None of this "let's work through" or just have a sandwich at your desk to get it done. This really comes to the fore with *la rentree*. French companies shut down for August. Imagine Australians posted to France turning up at work on 1 August and wondering where everybody's gone.

But it's not one way. As Jean-Michel Billig of NG said, "everybody must understand that an Australian does not think like a French person, and that it's not better or worse, it's just Australian.

"This is a key factor for success. It is not for us to be Australian, for them to become French. We keep our roots. We learn the culture of the other."

But should this be a surprise? Facet5 is a global model of behaviour. It is used worldwide and has a strong history. One result of this is our National Character research. We have solid data from more than 40 countries that show there are cultural differences. Culture – the way we do things round here – is very important. It defines who we are. It is at the core of multi-cultural work places. Sometimes these differences match well known stereotypes (Germans really are quite stubborn) and sometimes they don't. Frequently they match other independent measures. According to the European Social Survey (ESS) Norwegians are the most optimistic people in Europe and Facet5 supports this. There are many more examples.

This is a lot of fun when you compare countries. How does Denmark compare to Netherlands? Or Thailand to China. Or Australia to France? But is it anything more than a dinner party discussion? Well it looks like these genuine differences in behaviour and expectations can confuse and limit teamworking. For global organisations this is critical.

And everything NG and the Australian Navy are discovering is perfectly reflected in the Facet5 National Character differences. We could'a told them.

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1 <https://sldinfo.com/2019/04/french-naval-group-and-the-australians-working-the-cultural-challenges/>



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