



France

France is known around the world for its cuisine, fashion, culture and language. But when you are running a meeting with French partners or colleagues, what different approaches need to be taken into consideration? Is everyone as comfortable as you at brainstorming ideas, challenging issues and making decisions? Here are some tips for your next French meeting.

When preparing for meetings, circulate any reports for pre-reading and study. Your French colleagues usually prepare quite thoroughly and will read background information and analysis for important meetings. Whilst an agenda is produced, they may depart from it as the discussions develop.

You'll notice a greater use of formal titles and respect of hierarchy in France. It is normal for colleagues of the same level to use the informal form of 'you' (tu). However, if you are a new employee in France, wait until people ask for you to address them in a more casual manner. In the beginning, address your managers starting with 'Monsieur' or 'Madame' followed by the person's last name. If it does not seem awkward, you can call people by their first names, but continue to address them by the formal form of 'you' (vous) until invited to use the informal form. Nevertheless, if your manager is in the presence of his/her boss or another important person, revert to formal language (using Monsieur/Madame and the person's last name, as well as 'vous').

Unlike the UK, latecomers do not just slip in quietly and sit in the nearest seat – rather they shake hands with everyone present and then sit down. In France, the formal meeting is not always the place to debate ideas, rather it's to agree on what has already been decided in pre-meetings. In formal meetings it is uncommon to contradict the boss openly – this may have been done elsewhere, prior to the meeting, in more informal lobbying sessions. In such an environment, it is important to be actively involved in the pre-meeting lobbying if you want any influence on the outcome.

Having a logical, rational and well-reasoned argument is valued in France. Rhetoric, wit and debate are all respected. Each participant should offer a distinctive point of view. It is important to decide not necessarily how or whether something will work, but rather why it might not, and if an existing approach is indeed best. It leads to comments such as 'Yes, this might work, but...'; 'What happens if we do/don't do it this way?' and 'How about this instead of that—or something else entirely?'

Solutions will eventually be built up in rational steps and flaws in your logic will be pointed out! This approach contrasts with other cultures such as the British who generally come up with an objective, devise a way forward, and change course if necessary or the Germans who develop, and follow, a structured approach. This approach does mean however it may take more time to get things agreed or changed in France than in many other cultures. Be prepared to have flexible time lines.

Business meetings may also involve eating out and socialising afterwards which is an excellent way to establish a rapport with the person you are doing business with. Always accept these invitations.

Upon meeting a friend or someone in a social context, the French give 'la bise' which is a kiss on each cheek. Women greet both men and women this way, although men generally only greet women this way unless they are close friends or related to the man. When you come upon a group of friends or acquaintances in a social meeting, it is important to greet each person in the group with 'the bise' and it is considered rude if you fail to do so. However, in a work setting, you generally do not greet your co-workers or managers in this way, unless it is a very informal office.