1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

This case presented a situation where two primary cultural problems existed between the German expatriates and the Americans who worked at BSS. The first issue presented was a lack of cultural understanding between the Germans and the Americans. The second issue is the negative effect that culture shock that the two Germans experienced.

The events portrayed in this case illustrate numerous ways in which foreign workers and their native counterparts can struggle to understand each other when their value systems are different. Typically, American society favors a certain degree of informality in the work environment whereas the Germans tend to value formal, professional interactions with their coworkers. Additionally, Germans place considerably greater emphasis on maintaining their personal space than their American counterparts. Also, America can best be described as a meritocracy where someone is appointed to a position of power based on their ability and not necessarily because of their age. The hierarchical structure of German society tends to create a business environment where managers are older and possess greater experience. The Americans and Germans also struggle to effectively communicate the differing cultural sensibilities and sensitivities to each other.

Hans and Wolfgang’s experience in America raises illustrates the problem of culture shock that foreign workers typically face when being employed in a foreign country. These foreign workers typically face considerable stress, irritation, and confusion in coping with values systems which do not reflect the ones to which they are accustomed. This problem can be made increasingly acute if the foreign workers are not sufficiently familiarized with the social rules and expectations to which they have become subject.

2. PROBLEM ANALYSIS

The first significant cultural barrier that existed between the Germans and Americans is the level of formality present in the German language. While the American’s egalitarian culture tends to favor informal speech patterns, the more hierarchical German culture favors certain degree of verbal formality in business situations. The conflict between the cultures’ speaking patterns presented itself during a couple of incidents that occurred while the Germans were working in America. Many Americans typically attempt to be friendly, especially with foreigners. This friendly, relaxed atmosphere is even more prevalent in Midwestern states such as Kentucky. The BSS employees attempted to create a friendlier atmosphere for the Germans by

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2 Ferraro 92.
3 Ferraro 191.
4 Ferraro 109.
nicknaming Hans “Hands” and Wolfgang “Wolfie.” While these nicknames were intended to decrease the formal, distant perception of the two Germans, such informality in how a coworker is addressed made Hans and Wolfgang uncomfortable.

Additionally, the Americans experienced problems understanding the German need for personal space and misinterpreted Hans and Wolfgang’s actions as being cold and impersonal. German people place significant value on maintaining their personal space since they view it as an extension of their egos. One of the chief complaints made by the BSS employees was that they did not understand or like the fact that the two German men kept their office doors closed while working. This action was interpreted by several Americans as being unfriendly and antisocial. Typically, many Americans only close their office doors when they are having a private conversation or are conducting a business meeting. However, in the German business environment, it is considered unprofessional to leave the office door open. These conflicting ideas of what is considered appropriate in the office led to the Americans’ misinterpretation of the Germans’ actions as being antisocial when they were in fact conducting themselves, by German standards, in a professional manner.

One significant source of cultural conflict between the Americans and Germans was the difference in experiential levels between team leader Colin Corum and Hans and Wolfgang. German managers tend to be older than their American counterparts. As a result, it proved difficult for the Germans to fully respect the younger American manager. In this situation, Colin had only recently graduated from college. While Colin may possess considerable potential, it does not change the fact that he is only in his early twenties and lacks any considerable amount of technical or managerial experience. However, Hans and Wolfgang possess a high degree of education, having graduated from a prestigious German technical school in addition to attaining advanced degrees in information systems and management. Both men also completed extensive internships with the internationally respected corporation Cisco Systems. This experience was in addition to the time that each man has spent in the employ of ABBA Deutschland. In comparison to Colin, both men possess considerably more relevant experience.

An additional problem likely caused by Colin’s relative youth was that he did not yet appreciate the importance of how he conducted himself in front of his subordinates or understand that they expect to be treated with a certain degree of respect. The German culture, where one’s personal space is seen as an extension of the individual, places considerable emphasis on how one’s office space is organized. All of the sports memorabilia and additional clutter in Colin’s office would likely be negatively interpreted by the Germans as a sign of his immaturity and lack of organizational and leadership ability. Additionally, Colin’s penchant for making inappropriate remarks, such as ignoring the Germans’ cultural sensitivity toward the atrocities committed by the

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5 Ferraro 92.
6 Ferraro 92.
7 Ferraro 92.
8 Ferraro 191.
9 Ferraro 92.
Nazis during World War II, would likely reinforce the more mature and professional
Germans’ perceptions that Colin was too young and immature to operate as the team
leader. Despite Colin’s apparent natural ability, it would be difficult for the more
experienced Germans to respect a team leader who is younger and less experienced than
them.

The other significant issue that the Germans faced while living in the United
States was the culture shock they experienced as a result of the conflicting cultural
values. In the United States, achieving the business’ goals tends to take priority over
personal time. It is not unusual for employees to reschedule or forego their vacation
plans because of an important business deadline. However, many European societies
tend place greater emphasis on their vacation time than do Americans. Like many New
York stockbrokers, it is not unusual for Europeans to take considerable vacation time
during the summer months. However, when Hans and Wolfgang attempted to take some
vacation time during the summer in order to go to Florida, Colin rejected the idea and
emphasized the importance of completing the project over an employee’s vacation time.
The Germans were forced to talk to the American supervisor Sam in order to receive any
vacation time. However, even then, the Germans were only permitted to take off one
business day.

Additionally, the Germans probably fully comprehend the size of the United
States as compared to Germany. Germany is roughly the size of one of America’s larger
states so that travel within the country would only take a few hours. However, since the
United States is roughly the size of Europe, it takes considerably more time to visit a city
in another state. Hans and Wolfgang probably did not appreciate the time and distance
involved in driving from Kentucky to Florida. Considering the approximately twenty-
four hour round-trip drive time, it was unrealistic to expect the Florida vacation to be
relaxing and enjoyable.

Besides the travel time involved in driving to Florida, the two Germans
apparently did not understand or appreciate that American roads have speed limits.
Germany is famous for its Autobahn where there is no speed limit imposed on drivers.
As compared to the Germans’ driving experience in their native country, they may have
found it difficult to understand why they were being detained by police and ticketed for
speeding. These unexpected encounters with law enforcement likely proved to be a
source of consternation and irritation to the German drivers.

The Germans culture shock also manifested itself in their physical and emotional
health. Expatriates may demonstrate a variety of negative symptoms which indicate that
they are struggling to adjust to their host country. Examples of culture shock symptoms
include physical ailment, stereotyping and hostile activity towards members of the host
country, and emotional tenseness or irritability.\textsuperscript{10} As the Germans’ American tenure
progressed these types of symptoms became increasingly manifest. Wolfgang started to
sporadically miss work claiming that he was bothered by allergies and headaches.
Additionally, he became increasingly hostile toward Americans as evidenced by drunken

\textsuperscript{10} Ferraro 153
negative stereotyping of American people. Towards the end of their American tenure, both Germans became increasingly irritable as was demonstrated by incidents surrounding their proposed vacation and Colin’s late arrival at a meeting.

3. ALTERNATIVE COURSES OF ACTION

One of the principle ways to successfully address workplace problems involving a cultural conflict between native and foreign workers is to implement procedures to minimize the impact of any such clash. ABBA Deutschland might want to consider implementing a program, or associating with an organization, which prepares its employees for living and working in foreign countries. Additionally, Hans and Wolfgang should have conducted some research and spoken to some Americans living in Germany in order to learn about what types of interactions, in their professional and personal lives, they could expect while working at an American firm.

Alternately, BSS has presumably worked with foreign employees prior to Hans and Wolfgang joining the company. Even if the company did not have prior experience with foreign workers, someone in the organization should have considered that there might be some cultural incompatibilities between the Americans and Germans. BSS should have implemented a program designed to introduce foreign workers to American culture, explain what expectations would be placed on them, and learn what values and expectations the foreign workers were bringing to the company.

By establishing a basic understanding of American society and expectations, at least some of the problems raised by the German’s experience could have been minimized or eliminated. The Germans should have been apprised beforehand that they could expect considerably shorter vacations in summer. Additionally, they could have been informed of the American speed limits and the potential fines that could be incurred for violating them.

However, even if these programs were implemented, it is likely that some of the cultural conflict that happened would still occur. Each problem presented in this case raises a specific issue which may occur during foreign – native employee interaction. As a result, each problem may require a specific solution to resolve the issue.

The problem of cultural miscommunication between the Germans and the BSS employees could have been addressed by encouraging an open dialogue. When the Germans first arrived, management could have arranged an information session between the American and German workers in which they discussed the different societal expectations of each culture in the business arena. While some conflicting cultural issues would not have become apparent at this early stage, once management recognized that the American workers perceived the Germans as cold and distant, it should have arranged a meeting whereby cultural information was provided to employees so that they could resolve the misunderstanding.
As the overall supervisor of the Germans and Colin, Sam should have been aware that the Germans could find it difficult to work directly under someone who was inexperienced and emotionally immature. At the very least, Sam should have noticed the potential conflict brewing earlier than he did. Additionally, when there is the subtext of antagonism between a project leader and his subordinates, the introduction of alcohol, and the decreased inhibitions, would only serve to exacerbate the situation. If Sam could not resolve the conflict between Colin and the Germans, he should have considered reassigning one of the two parties.

BSS could also have chosen to make some accommodations for the German employees in order to improve their effectiveness and decrease the stress of living in a foreign country. As Wolfgang began to miss an increasing amount of work as a result of illness, it should have become obvious that the German’s health was deteriorating as a result of stress. When the two Germans asked for some vacation time, Sam could have allowed them to have a more extended vacation. It is not unusual for American workers to take off at least one week during the summer. While it is not as much time as Hans and Wolfgang could expect in their native Germany, nine consecutive vacation days would be considered greatly preferable to a three day weekend.

4. FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary course of action which should have been implemented in this situation would have been the creation of a program designed to inform and acclimate Hans and Wolfgang to life in America. A substantial portion of the problems which occurred were the result of the two Germans unfamiliarity with the American value system. If Hans and Wolfgang had a firmer grasp on the ways that Americans work and interact, in their personal and professional lives, they would have been better equipped to handle the alien behaviors that many foreign workers struggle to comprehend.

Additionally, management and the BSS employees should have implemented a program designed to increase their own German cultural awareness. The miscommunication problems and issues involving Colin might have been avoided if those working at BSS understood the basics of German values and attitudes.

These steps could have addressed many of the problems that Hans and Wolfgang faced. If both parties had been made aware of the differing cultural values that they possessed, miscommunication problems would have decreased and the Germans would not have been placed in numerous uncomfortable situations. With this decrease in tension, it is considerably more likely that Hans and Wolfgang would have remained for the duration of their expected American tenure.