

JACQUES PATEAU

Understanding each other is the key to success

In order to ensure right from the start that V&M TUBES has every possible chance for success on its side, Vallourec and Mannesmann have called upon the services of Jacques Pateau, a professor at the Technological University of Compiègne, to organise a new type of seminar, whose objective is to improve intercultural understanding and to encourage the creation of franco-german working teams.



Vallourec Informations: How does a university professor become an intercultural training specialist and a consultant to industrial enterprises undergoing mergers?

Jacques Pateau: My first intercultural experiences date back to my student days when, between 1972 and 1976, I was an interpreter and mediator for groups of French and Germans who were representing their respective twinned towns. It was this activity that really triggered my passion for the subject. At the time I was studying at the university and subsequently I qualified as a German professor. As a professor at the Technological University of Compiègne, I decided to compile a thesis on the comparative elements between the French and German cultures. This subject aroused the interest of the Robert Bosch Foundation who sponsored the project. The objective of my work was to study approximately 50 companies from both countries and to establish the differences in working practices, and to identify the origins of these differences. In order to do this, I collected together an enormous amount of information which I analysed with the help of historians, sociologists and communications specialists. At the end of the 1980s certain groups such as Aérospatiale and Usinor, who were experiencing serious problems with various subsidiaries that had been merged with German companies, were highly interested in my findings. I therefore decided to design a specific seminar on mergers between French and German companies.

V.I.: What is the aim of such a seminar?

J.P.: The objective is to make participants understand the intelligence and coherence of both systems, and to supply both French and German participants with the tools they need to work together and avoid pitfalls. This is, however, only possible once each person has understood how the other works. Everyone has a stereotyped idea of a French or German person. One part of the seminar is given over to discovering that behind these images, which are often caricatural and negative, there are often specific characteristics which have been shaped by different histories, religion, family structures

and educational systems. The aim is not for a French person to think like a German person, or vice versa, but for each to be able to put him/herself in the shoes of the other, and thereby understand each other's reactions.

V.I.: How is the seminar structured?

J.P.: The seminar is held over a period of two and a half days in towns which are half-way between France and Germany, such as Aix-la-Chapelle or Reims. Both towns have a certain symbolic value thanks to the memory of Charlemagne and the famous handshake between De Gaulle and

Adenauer. The seminar groups together 12 to 16 persons, half of whom are German and half of whom are French. We make sure that each person sits opposite to his or her counterpart from the other company. For example the quality manager from the tube plant at Saint-Saulve sits with his equivalent from Mülheim. This is very important as these people will always be called upon to work together within the framework of their jobs. Bringing the teams closer together and creating personal links are an important aim of the seminar. This exercise begins at the end of the first afternoon, each participant gets to know his/her counterpart and, then,



3 November 1997 at Maastricht, determination of objectives and the first meeting between French and German executives.

in front of everyone recounts the information he/she has retained about that person. We often find that, even at this point, people have several points in common and the ice is therefore broken as of the first evening. Simulation exercises also help considerably. The next day we present the findings of the study carried out for the Robert Bosch Foundation which highlight the differences between France and Germany, not only within the context of meetings, but also in the field of communications, management style, work organisation. As each subject is tackled the participants are invited to react and give concrete suggestions for the joint-venture. During the afternoon, we tackle the explanations for these differences i.e. historical roots, religion, family and educational systems. We go very far in our explanations, without of course forgetting the important role played by the corporate culture of Vallourec and Mannesmann. At the end of the afternoon, various directors come and explain the policies and objectives of V&M TUBES within the fields which are of interest to the participants. The last morning is given over to practical exercises, such as how to improve communications, how to transfer an order, how to guide a franco-german meeting etc. The results of this work are then presented to the directors who are present.

V.I.: To date, what are your views on this seminar?

J.P.: To this day, more than one hundred people have taken part in the seminar and this attendance should continue to grow. According to participants' evaluations and what I have heard myself through firsthand accounts, it appears that a large majority of the participants have benefited from the seminar. Some have even said that they tremble to think that they may not have been able to take part in the seminar. Companies often call upon our services once problems have already reared their head, however, in the case of V&M TUBES the directors of the joint venture were the first to take part in the seminar and were quite adamant about the seminar taking place before Brussels had given its final approval on the joint-venture. The concern shown for the success of the joint-venture proves the willingness of the two parties involved, and the seminars have served to confirm this fact." ●

** In January, Cîrac will publish Jacques Pateau's book, "Une étrange alchimie, la dimension interculturelle dans la coopération franco-allemande" (A strange alchemy, the intercultural dimension of franco-german cooperation).*