

How criticism at work is handled by different cultures

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Cultural differences in communication and dealing with conflict lead to significant challenges in international working environments, finds new research from the Vienna University of Economics and Business.

This research conducted by Professors Nadine Thielemann, Regina Göke and Zlatoslava, investigated how complaints are communicated in the workplace.

The study was carried out using an online survey of academic staff at universities in Russia, Poland, Germany, Austria and France.

The research discovered that how criticism is communicated in the workplace is particularly influenced by the balance of power between the people involved. In addition, the gravity of the misconduct plays an important role in the complaint.

The way in which complaints were communicated to team members by supervisors were very solution-oriented. However, differences were observed in the way the proposed solution was presented.

In France, failures are addressed directly and blame is assigned before a solution, whereas in Germany and Austria, this wasn't of great importance.

The Germans took a more analytical approach, offering support in working towards a solution. In Russia and Poland, the proposed solution was expressed as a call to action.

German test subjects were observed to be the most likely to complain, followed closely by the Austrian, Polish and Russian subjects. In the data on French speakers, just over half opted to avoid conflict.

Where there is no power imbalance, the risk of confrontation is avoided.

"Once employees understand that behavioural strategies that may be different from their own are culture- and language-specific conventions, these behaviours may be less of a source of irritation. These employees are then better prepared for working abroad or in a linguistically and culturally diverse workplace," says Professor Thielemann.

Thielemann, Nadine; Göke, Regina; Savych, Zlatoslava. 2021. Motzen und Moral. Eine kontrastiv pragmatische Pilotstudie zur Unzufriedenheitskommunikation am universitären Arbeitsplatz (FR - DE - AT - PL - RU). Zeitschrift für Slawistik. 66 (1), 140-173.

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