

Book reviews

Reviewer Patrick Schmidt, SIETAR member

Author John Otto Magee

Title *Verstehen sich Deutsche und Amerikaner?*
Von den kommunikativen Hürden im transatlantischen Business

Publisher Cornelsen Scriptor

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Written in the thriller genre, this compact book zeroes in on the different types of behavior that make for major clashes when a German multinational takes over an American competitor. What emerges is a surprisingly tense roller-coaster ride: a real page-turner!

Two CEOs--one from Philadelphia, the other from Düsseldorf--secretly meet in New York to decide the fate of a merger that went bad from the start. Might it not be easier for all concerned to simply walk away?

Their own discussions, however, lead them to see that the cultural factor was almost completely overlooked. What seem to be unsolvable problems of substance may only be roadblocks of style. They still have a chance at making things work...and being proved right after all.

They bring in a hired gun, a German intercultural facilitator living in Philadelphia, who puts together a three-day workshop at Georgetown University in Washington. Department leaders from both companies have to deal with ten separate disciplines (finance, development, personnel, etc.).

Each subject kicks off with a logical, albeit leading, question and a case study. Participants are asked to react--viscerally. After which they're told what their cross-cultural counterparts said and are given a white paper explaining cultural differences.

The ensuing discussion, guided by a man who understands the way both sides see and think and feel, is proof of the solution itself: only when each group understands the motivations and fundamental approaches of the other can there be progress.

Although not available in English, the book is a must for all German-American intercultural trainers. It distills, in detective-story detail, how a post-merger workshop should be run and it's an entertaining read whether you're in the *biz* or not.

John Magee was educated at the Jesuit University, Georgetown and combines rigorous thinking and persistent inquiry to throw equal light on opposite players in what can only be called a "potentially unified divide". He does so by making readers *feel* as well as *think*.

Then again, not only has Magee lived in Germany for 20 years, his choice to write in German is unique in itself. Kafka may have done so but few Americans ever would. Small wonder that his protagonist makes sure the workshop participants get it and get it right.