

Case study: An American in Paris

Crossing avenue de Villiers in Paris on the way to his apartment, Dan Stansen, the American expat, was thinking about the past four months with Sysecor. Sysecor is a SME with headquarters in Paris and specializing in softwares. While Dan's background was in key accounts management, he was now in charge of developing the US market for the rapidly growing French company. It was his first work experience abroad, and he was discovering a quite different environment. As he could speak French fairly well, he was wondering why the relationships with his French colleagues had been so complicated, even before he arrived to France.

When Philippe Dumont, his future French boss, had called him in California, Dan immediately accepted the job offer. Dan was at the time just out of a job. When Philippe suggested Dan should start his position on October 1st in Paris, that is eighth months after their phone conversation, Dan was extremely surprised. The inactivity period seemed very long, too long. When you are used to work full time, it takes only a few weeks to feel out of the system. But Philippe insisted: «You will need time to move out and and get everything ready. And then comes the month of August. The company's activity will slow down.» Dan thought: «What! A company that slows down just before September when it's the activity peak time. It's really weird. I never heard such a thing». But in the end, Dan was delighted to have obtained the job and have a little time off to get prepared.

An administrative conundrum

The next day, Dan called the French consulate in Los Angeles to get informed about the administrative steps to get a Long Stay visa to work. He was told that he should first obtain a work contract agreed by the French Work Department to be able to get a Long Stay visa. All these administrative steps had to be accomplished before he could leave for France. He understood why Philippe had given him this much time to get ready.

Dan did all what was necessary and then patiently waited till the end of June thinking that the company needed time to solve the administrative issues. But by mid-July he still had not heard anything neither from Sysecor nor from the French consulate. So he finally called the French consulate. He was told that his file was ready and his passport had arrived, but that Sysecor had not yet turned in the necessary paperwork. Dan stressed out and called Philippe to find out what was going on. Philippe confirmed that authorization had been sent to the Human Resources department which was in charge of his case. «These type of things can take of long time», he mentioned before wishing him a nice vacation time. August had been very hectic as he had to move out. Dan and his wife had planned to move out to Paris mid-September. As Dan's passport was still in the hands of the French consulate, he decided to call them up to find out how advanced things were. He was stunned: after four weeks, the Consulate had still not received the work contract from his company, and Sysecor was still silent. He decided to call once more his future boss, who confirmed that the HR department was taking care of his situation. As Dan did not want to appear as a trouble-maker, he very politely asked the possibility to talk directly to one of the supervisors at the HR department.

Annie immediately picked up the phone and stated upfront that she was aware of Dan's situation. What a relief! She started explaining that everything was under control. Dan doubled checked and explained he had already talked several times with the French consulate. Annie did not seem worried. «I will see what I can do», did she reply in an very aloof way. Dan was starting losing patience. Even though his documents had been sent the very same day, he was still not in a position to collect his passport and leaving on time as planned. He tried to explained Annie this point. But he was overwhelmed with his

emotions and could not express himself clearly enough in French. Annie did not make much effort to try to understand his situation and did not give him any answer. As Dan hung up, he was completely in a stir. He had received no explanation, no excuse! Why was this company so badly organized? Thanks God he thought about calling the company, otherwise where would he be today?

Dan developed a clear understanding that he had to follow up things closely. For a month, he called the company regularly to check how advanced things were. He never understood where the problem came from, but the case was eventually solved at the end of October. Although he was worried and frustrated, he had no choice but to leave later than planned. The worst thing for him was to start working late in the year. He perfectly knew that in his field it was key to be visible and active. Four months without working were a real waste of time! He kept on wondering: «How can these people work there?»

Dan officially started his job on November 10th. He had received his visa and passport on the first week of November and immediately joined his wife who was already in France. The «carte de séjour» or residence permit issue had been a nightmare. To be able to deliver the document, the prefecture needed a permanent address. To be able to rent an apartment, the real estate agency needed a bank account, but to this end the bank required a residence permit! What an administrative conundrum! Only when Sophie, Dan's secretary-to-be, jumped in things finally got sorted out. nicely

Management difficulties

Cars honking outside took Dan back to present and his own apartment. The charming cafés, the nice Haussmanian-looking buildings all this really appealed to him, but did not alleviate his professional difficulties. Working with his secretary had only been the beginning of another issue. Dan felt lost and confused when started his job as a Sales Representative. He was indeed hired because of his expertise to enter the international market. But he could not figure out how this company was working. He perfectly knew how to manage a customer portfolio in the United States, but now information was processed in a different way now. Nobody had been able to tell him what the work procedures were like, where to find the necessary documents, and nobody had introduced him to the key people in the top management. He knew that it was a very busy period for the company and that everybody was running around to deal with urgent issues. But as a result, it was difficult for him to get straight answers or even answers at all. Moreover, he quickly picked up that people were struggling to understand his French, which did not help either. The company did not have any integration program nor any new comers guide, which is a standard procedure in the US. He therefore turned to Sophie for all sorts of questions, such as holidays, private additional insurance or taxes.

He remembered perfectly his first day at work. He had arrived early to the office, which had proved to be difficult with the public transportation, the complex subway maps, and the crowds at peak hours. His boss, a cheerful man, greeted him warmly. They shook hands, and Philippe invited him for a cup of coffee. They chatted about Dan's relocation and the heat in summer time in Paris. Dan got to know colleagues who happened to stop by the coffee machine. Conversation was very relaxed, they did not touch on business topics that Dan was eager to discuss. When back to the office, Dan had been quite direct: «What is your business strategy to corner the market?» Dan asked Philippe. «What?!?» did he reply with a quizzical look. It seemed that he had been taken aback by the question. Dan rephrased it noticing he certainly had been too direct: «I mean, what are the key success factors for this job?». Philippe fidgeted on his chair and awkwardly suggested: «What about going to see your office?». Apparently this type of questions did not suit this particular company. In fact, Dan did not actually manage to obtain full information. Although Philippe kept his friendly demeanor, he was making efforts to answer Dan's questions and rarely came to see him.

As a result, Dan counted a lot on his assistant Sophie to get familiarized with how the company was organized, things such as: how were the databases structured, how to select a supplier etc. Even after he had mastered the system, Dan kept on asking Sophie's opinion on different topics as a way to develop her skills. But Sophie got ever more distant, which intrigued Dan a lot. In the beginning, she seemed enthusiastic about helping him whatever surprised she felt by his questions. As an experienced manager, he first mistook her astonishment for a compliment. He imagined that his management style differed widely from that of his predecessor. Sophie however started distancing herself from Dan. To break the ice, Dan put even more efforts into including Sophie in his decisions: he regularly asked her opinion and advice. The more he was trying to include her the more she distanced herself from him. About a month after Dan's arrival, Sophie started taking longer cigarette breaks, arriving late, and keeping less and less the deadlines. It was as if Sophie had lost any kind of respect for him, and he could not figure out why. When he asked her if everything was OK, she simply stared at him with an angry look stating that everything was fine. He almost arrived to a point that he was reluctant to go to work and having to face her complacent attitude.

Questioning what to do next

Dan's moral was at low ebb for another reason: the very same morning his boss, who had always been so friendly with him, had started criticizing him in front of other Sales Representatives. Dan had been so shocked on the spot that he did not even know what to say. Philippe had explained that Dan's was doing an OK job (« Pas trop mal » did he say) but that he should have used the company's templates when writing reports. He should have also included specific company data that Philippe had expected to read. «Not too bad, no too bad !?!». Dan was furious. He had been fighting hard in the last past months to face numerous obstacles and finally be able to come up with an intelligent proposal. He deserved a medal no a 'not-too-bad' evaluation! The worst for him was that Philippe brought up this topic in a meeting in front of all the managers, and Sophie was there too.

Dan finally arrived to his home and walked up the stairs to his apartment on the second floor. He was stuck in a world where rules and social behaviors had no meaning to him. Friends of his wife had warned him about the cultural shock, But back then he thought that France was not far away culturally speaking from the United States. What type of cultural shock could he experience? The two countries had a common history, from the French Revolution to World War II. He was convinced it was a personality issue. Sophie was a bad employee and Philippe a hypocrite. He wished his wife was home so that he could talk these things through with her. She too had her problems, but she had a calm and positive approach. Maybe she could help him to figure out what had happened in the last four months and why he ended up in such a bad situation.

Questions

- 1. Explain how cultural differences can lead to the difficulties Dan is experiencing when immersing himself in the French workstyle.**
- 2. Explain how the tensions between Dan and Sophie are due to cultural differences.**
- 3. Explain how the communication issues between Dan and Philippe are due to cultural differences.**
- 4. What piece of advice can you give to solve or even prevent the cross-cultural issues experienced by expats such as Dan?**

Methodology

Use the 6 dimensions that we studied in class to analyze the case study. More specifically :

- a. Take each dimension individually and position roughly Dan, Sophie, and Philippe on each dimension.**
- b. Give evidence from the case study to sustain your statements.**
- c. Then keep the dimensions that are relevant to the case study to make a diagnosis.**
- d. Then make the appropriate recommendations linked to questions 1, 2, 3, and 4.**