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Lego, the Danish toy company, found instant success with their interlocking blocks in the German market, while sales foundered in the U.S. Why?

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The following is an excerpt from the book The Culture Code
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The German Code for Germany is perhaps best illustrated in a story.

Lego, the Danish toy company, found instant success with their interlocking blocks in the German market, while sales foundered in the U.S. Why?

The company's management believed that one of the primary reasons for their success was the quality of the instructions they provided inside each box that helped children build the specific item (a car, a spaceship) that a particular box of blocks was meant to build. The instructions were quite a breakthrough in the field: precise, colorful, and refreshingly self-explanatory. They made construction with Lego blocks not only simple, but in some ways magical. If one followed the path through the instructions, tiny plastic pieces methodically turned into something grander.

American children could not have cared less. They would tear into the boxes, glance fleetingly at the instructions (if they glanced at them at all), and immediately set to a construction project on their own. They seemed to be having a wonderful time, but they were as likely to build, say, a fort, as they were to build the automobile for which the blocks were intended. And when they were done, they would tear their fort apart and start over from scratch. Once purchased, to Lego's dismay, a single box of Lego could last for years.

In Germany, however, Lego's strategy worked exactly as intended. German children opened a box of Legos, sought out the instructions, read them carefully, and then sorted the pieces by color. They set to building, comparing their assembly progress to the crisp, helpful illustrations in the instruction booklet. When they were finished, they had an exact duplicate of the product shown on the cover of the box. They showed it to Mother who clapped approvingly and put the model on a shelf. Now the children needed another box.

Without even knowing it, Lego had tapped into the Culture Code for Germany itself: ORDER. Over many generations, Germans perfected bureaucracy in an effort to stave off the chaos that came to them in wave after wave, and Germans are imprinted early on with this most powerful of codes. It is that imprint which makes children reach dutifully for the instructions, and it is that code which prevents them from immediately destroying their neat construction in order to build it anew. Lego's elegant, full-color instructions had tapped into the German code in a way that assured repeat sales.

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Dr. Clotaire Rapaille is the chairman of Archetype Discoveries Worldwide and has used this decoding approach for thirty years.. He is the personal adviser to ten high-ranking CEOs and is kept on retainer by fifty Fortune 100 companies. He has been profiled in many national media outlets, including 60 Minutes II and on the front page of the New York Times Sunday Styles section. He lives in Tuxedo Park, New York.