



“Une bise” is not a kiss! *The intricacies of greeting in France*

Newcomers to France often feel stumped from the very first introduction. But the good news/bad news scenario is that the French are themselves often unclear on the intricacies of French greetings. But here Nathalie Nowak, a trainer from Global'Ease intercultural training and consulting services, gives some guidelines to minimise those awkward moments.

Janine is the wife of an executive originally based in Toulouse. At social functions, she greeted his colleagues' wives with 'la bise', a cheek to cheek air-kiss, repeated twice, once on each cheek. He was transferred to the headquarters in Paris and she remembers her first formal corporate soirée with a sigh: "As I was introduced to the CEO's wife, whom I had already met a couple of times and already greeted with 'la bise', I leaned forward to do the same while she put out her hand to shake mine. I felt so humiliated — a foreigner in this cold social environment."

The twist to this anecdote is that Janine is French—and yet she too found herself caught in the confusion of the implicit French codes of interpersonal interaction. It's not surprising that so many foreigners arriving to France find themselves stumped from the first introduction.

They ask:

"So, do you kiss once, twice, three or four times?"

"When should I shake hands?"

"Which rules apply when it comes to greeting men or women? Superiors or subordinates? Colleagues or clients?"

Good news, bad news

The bad news is that their own French colleagues don't agree on a clear set of dos and definitely don'ts. So much depends on context that an easy guide is impossible.

The good news is that their own French colleagues don't agree on a clear set of rules... and that means that foreigners to France can feel right at home in this grey territory instead of feeling uneasy!

We need to accept that the non-verbal facets of communication are among the most difficult to decode in any new country. We've had a lifetime to learn the subtleties of social norms in our own country. We may not even be aware of how much of what we consider 'normal behaviour' is in fact learned.

For example, have you ever thought about how long you actually hold a person's hand when shaking it? Probably not. And yet, you could find yourself feeling very uncomfortable if a person didn't let go of your hand after a few seconds.

In a sense, we've been 'programmed' to behave in a certain way. Unexpected behaviour therefore can trigger stress which can appear in red cheeks and sweaty palms. It's therefore perfectly understandable that we seek specific answers to our questions about behavioural expectations. And yet totally unrealistic. There are just too many variables to codify behaviour in a definitive way.

So, when it comes to greeting the French, forget trying to find the 'correct' information. Use this as an opportunity for cultivating your observation skills and adaptability!

Guidelines for saying hello

So, with this big warning already posted, here are some guidelines (not rules!) for getting off to a good start.

First, don't be surprised if a physical greeting of some kind, either la bise or a handshake, is routine in your French workplaces, not just on first introduction but every morning upon arrival at work, even

though this ritual may take up several minutes. Watch how your colleagues in your immediate surroundings treat each other and follow suit; it's an important way to integrate into the corporate culture.

Look for the cues: slight leaning means that a kiss might follow. Let the French person lead the movement: don't force the extra kiss!

Shoulder movement indicates that a handshake will probably follow. Accept it with a smile. Do not crush the fingers in a Texan grip. Do not shake wildly. Look the person in the eyes as you say Bonjour.

Two kisses are the norm in Paris in most social contexts or with colleagues with whom you are friendly.

Three kisses are not as common. French from the West and French from the East both like to claim exclusivity on the three-kiss variant, but just be aware that this more common outside of Paris.

Four kisses are for teenagers and family members as well as in some upper-crust areas of Paris. Family members usually kiss twice in the morning to say hello and twice in the evening to say good-bye (so as to arrive at a four-kiss quota per day).

A single kiss in France is considered more intimate and reserved for your spouse or lover.

Five kisses means you're probably in trouble!

Most important of all, if you have an awkward moment: don't worry about it! This happens even among the French, and, as a foreigner, you won't be judged on it, so drop the judgments yourself.

The gender question

Most co-workers ususally shake hands; if there is one woman among men in a group, it's up to her to decide if the men shake her hand or do la bise. (Note: always singular, even though multiple kisses are involved.)

A few years back, in the South of France, in the research centre of a multinational, an HR director I'll call Denis, greeted 40 women in his office with a daily bise. I was with two of his counterparts, Wulf, a German, and George, an American.

As they watched him perform his daily ritual, Wulf commented: "How can he kiss them in the morning and criticize their work in the afternoon?" George just shook his head in disbelief: "If I did that in the States, I'd get sued for sexual harassment!"

Denis overhead and turned to explain, "I'm NOT kissing them. I'm just saying hello!"

And therein lays the real issue. Our misinterpretation of a gesture or habit and the ensuing feeling of unease we can feel when we're just not sure about what is being communicated.

Over time we learn to put behaviours in context and decode their intended meaning. We might even adopt certain habits as our own...

In the meantime, keep in mind that la bise is NOT a kiss. It's just a hello or a good-bye. And more and more, it's being replaced with a friendly handshake. As a guest in France, let your French hosts take the lead!

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