

High Context vs. Low Context Communication

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Good communication unites, rather than divides

In today's business relations, it's a small world after all. As more companies turn towards global markets, professionals are finding themselves in foreign locales, wheeling and dealing like never before. However, the key to effective communication between countries is an understanding of each other's culture, especially a working knowledge of how each society conveys meaning.

First used by author Edward Hall, the expressions "high context" and "low context" are labels denoting inherent cultural differences between societies. High-context and low-context communication refers to how much speakers rely on things other than words to convey meaning. Hall states that in communication, individuals face many more sensory cues than they are able to fully process. In each culture, members have been supplied with specific "filters" that allow them to focus only on what society has deemed important. In general, cultures that favor low-context communication will pay more attention to the literal meanings of words than to the context surrounding them.

It is important to remember that every individual uses both high-context and low context communication; it is not simply a matter of choosing one over the other. Often, the types of relationships we have with others and our circumstances will dictate the extent to which we rely more on literal or implied meanings.

To better understand high-context and low-context communication, ask the following:

- Do I recognize implied messages from others, and am I aware of the verbal *and* nonverbal cues that let me understand the speaker's meaning? (High-Context)
- Do I "let my words speak for themselves?" Do I prefer to be more direct, relying on what is explicitly stated in my speech? (Low-Context)

Novelist Amy Tan describes the differences in cultural communication this way: "An American business executive may say, 'Let's make a deal,' and the Chinese manager may reply, 'Is your son interested in learning about your widget business?' Each to his or her own purpose, each with his or her own linguistic path."

When individuals from high-context and low-context cultures collaborate, there are often difficulties that occur during the exchange of information. These problems can be separated into differences concerning "direction", "quantity" and "quality." For example, employees from high-context cultures like China and France share very specific and extensive information with their "in-group members" (good friends, families, close coworkers, etc). In comparison, low-context cultures like the United States and Germany prefer to limit communication to smaller, more select groups of people, sharing only that information which is necessary.

High-Context Communication

Hall: "Most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person."

- Knowledge is situational, relational
- Less is verbally explicit or written or formally expressed
- More internalized understandings of what is communicated (ex: "in-jokes")
- Often used in long term, well-established relationships
- Decisions and activities focus around personal face-to-face communication, often around a central, authoritative figure
- Strong awareness of who is accepted/belongs vs. "outsiders"

Association

- Relationships depend on trust, build up slowly, and are stable.
- How things get done depends on relationships with people and attention to group process.
- One's identity is rooted in groups (family, culture, work).

Interaction

- High use of nonverbal elements; voice tone, facial expression, gestures, and eye movement carry significant parts of conversation.
- Verbal message is indirect; one talks around the point and embellishes it.
- Communication is seen as an art form—a way of engaging someone.
- Disagreement is personalized. One is sensitive to conflict expressed in another's nonverbal communication. Conflict either must be solved before work can progress or must be avoided.

Learning

- Multiple sources of information are used. Thinking is deductive, proceeds from general to specific.
- Learning occurs by first observing others as they model or demonstrate and then practicing.
- Groups are preferred for learning and problem solving.
- Accuracy is valued. How well something is learned is important.

High context cultures are more common in the eastern nations than in western, and in countries with low racial diversity. Cultures where the group is valued over the individual promote group reliance. High context cultures have a strong sense of tradition and history, and change little over time, such as tribal and native societies. For instance, the French assume that the listener knows everything. Therefore, they may think that Americans think they are stupid because Americans will habitually explain everything to their counterparts.

Former president Jimmy Carter understood the importance of high-context communication with his colleagues from Israel and Egypt during the peace talks at Camp David. When Prime Minister Begin was about to leave the unsatisfactory

negotiations, Carter presented him with pictures of the three heads of state, with the names of each of Begin's grandchildren written on the photographs. The prime minister repeated the names of his grandchildren out loud as he looked at the pictures, reflecting on the importance of the peace negotiations to his grandchildren's futures. Carter recognized that a high-context reference to future generations would induce the prime minister to return to the negotiations.

Low Context Communication

Hall: "The mass of information is vested in the explicit code [message]."

- Rule oriented
- More knowledge is public, external, and accessible.
- Shorter duration of communications
- Knowledge is transferable
- Task-centered. Decisions and activities focus around what needs to be done and the division of responsibilities.

Association

- Relationships begin and end quickly. Many people can be inside one's circle; circle's boundary is not clear.
- Things get done by following procedures and paying attention to the goal.
- One's identity is rooted in oneself and one's accomplishments.
- Social structure is decentralized; responsibility goes further down (is not concentrated at the top).

Interaction

- Message is carried more by words than by nonverbal means.
- Verbal message is direct; one spells things out exactly.
- Communication is seen as a way of exchanging information, ideas, and opinions.
- Disagreement is depersonalized. One withdraws from conflict with another and gets on with the task. Focus is on rational solutions, not personal ones.

Learning

- One source of information is used to develop knowledge.
- Thinking is inductive, proceeds from specific to general. Focus is on detail.
- Learning occurs by following explicit directions and explanations of others.
- An individual orientation is preferred for learning and problem solving.
- Speed is valued. How efficiently something is learned is important.

An individual from a high context culture has to adapt, and/or be accommodated when shifting to a low context culture. High context cultures expect small close-knit groups, where professional and personal life is interrelated. Therefore, a high context individual is more likely to ask questions than attempt to work out a solution independently.

Remember that in business; communication is everything, so make sure you know not only *what* to say, but also *how* to say it.