

# **HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW-CONTEXT COMMUNICATION STYLES**

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Differences in high-context and low-context communication styles across cultures influence the way people perceive information.

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## 1. Introduction

Communication is an important part of everyday life and, as such, present at all times. However, its perpetual presence often implies simplicity and mutual understanding. Such forgone conclusions have put businessmen around the world into numerous delicate situations. Many of these situations have provided the basis for, more or less helpful, books on cultural etiquette. After having read various guidebooks on how to behave on a business trip to a foreign country, one question still remains: What is the source of cultural misunderstandings?

The anthropologists Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede conducted most of the research on cultural differences in communication. As it is a vast topic, this seminar paper will focus on the differences in high-context and low-context communication styles across cultures and their influence on the way people perceive information. In order to create a common understanding, the first part of the seminar paper will deal with the definition of used terms. The second part will provide information on the role of culture in communication. At this point, culturally affected areas of communication will be identified. Furthermore, the differences in communication styles, as well as the perception of information across cultures will be described. The last chapter will be dedicated to the main causes for intercultural misunderstandings.

## 2. Definition of used terms

In order to create a common understanding of the terms used in this paper, a short definition of each term will be given.

### 2.1. Communication

According to Craig Storti (1999, p. 87), “communication...is one of the most common of all human behaviors....” The perpetual presence of communication in everyday life, justifies a deeper look into its actual meaning. What does the

term “communication” signify? The authors Nancy Adler (1997, p. 68) and Robert Gibson (2000, p. 18) both define communication as “the exchange of meaning”. Contrary to its simple definition, the process of communication is highly complex, multilayered and dynamic (Adler 1997, p. 68). This is due to the fact that communication is always dependent on the perception, interpretation and evaluation of a person’s behavior which includes verbal versus non-verbal as well as consciously versus unconsciously sent messages (Adler 1997, p. 68). In other words, the message sent by the message sender never corresponds with the message received by the message receiver. However, this problem and its causes will be looked at in more detail in due course.

## **2.2. Culture**

Various authors have reflected on the meaning of the term “culture” in the past. Now there are hundreds of definitions. In most cases, culture is described as a “shared system of attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior” (Gibson 2000, p. 16). The author Martin Soley (2003, p. 206) chooses a similar definition and defines culture as “a shared system of perceptions”. The latter indicates that culture plays a highly significant role in communication.

## **2.3. Intercultural communication**

The terms “intercultural communication” or “cross-cultural communication” apply when the sender and the receiver of a message are from different cultures (Adler 1997, p. 70).

# **3. The role of culture in communication**

As already indicated earlier, culture plays a significant role in communication. The following chapter will explain this matter in more detail.

### 3.1. Culturally affected areas of communication

There are two areas of communication which are highly affected by a person's cultural background. At the beginning, it was said that communication describes a person's behavior to exchange meaning. In order to communicate, a person has to convert meaning into behavior. In other words, the message sender has to translate his information, his ideas or his feelings into words, facial expressions or gestures. Otherwise, the message receiver will not understand the message. After meaning has been encoded into behavior, the message receiver has to decode the behavior back into meaning. This is why communication is always dependent on the perception, interpretation and evaluation of a person's behavior. This process is referred to as the process of encoding and decoding (Adler 1997, p. 68). It is highly dependent on a person's cultural background which "determines the meanings attached to particular words and behavior" (Adler 1997, p. 69).

### 3.2. Communication styles across cultures

Differences in communication styles, as will be shown below, determine how much of the meaning people encode into actual words.

#### 3.2.1. Low-context communication

What has been missing so far is the role of context. According to Edward Hall (1979, p. 86) "context carries varying proportions of the meaning." In other words, meaning that is not encoded into words by the message sender is supplied by context.

In so-called "low-context" communication systems, people translate a large part of the meaning into explicit code (Hall 1979, p. 91). As a result, "the spoken word carries most of the meaning" (Storti 1999, p. 92). People explicitly say what they want to convey without beating around the bush. Their goal is to get and give information when communicating with other people. However, with less regard to context, low-context systems tend to be more complex as the



spoken word has to make up for what is missing in the context. As a result, low-context communication styles show less intuitive understanding, which makes them slow and less efficient (Hall 1979, p. 101). Cultures like the United States and Germany are considered low-context cultures, for instance. However, these are just tendencies. No culture uses low-context communication styles exclusively.

### 3.2.2. High-context communication

High-context communication systems are the extreme opposite of low-context communication systems. The author Edward Hall (1979, p. 91) points out that in high-context communication a large part of the meaning lies in the physical context, which includes facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures. As a result, the message itself carries less information. People do not explicitly say what they want to convey. Instead, they beat around the bush until their interlocutor decodes the message correctly. The reason for this is that their primary goal is to preserve and strengthen relationships by saving face and ensuring harmony. Nevertheless, Edward Hall (1979, p. 101) characterises high-context communication styles as being faster and more efficient as they rely on intuitive understanding. However, they are slow to change and need time in order to create a common understanding between sender and receiver. China and Japan are model examples of high-context cultures. A Japanese and a German will never communicate alike. At the same time, they will never experience a situation in the same way as the following paragraph will show.

### 3.3. Perception of information across cultures

At the beginning, the term “culture” was defined as “a shared system of perceptions (Soley 2003, p. 206)”. This definition implies that each culture has its own way to “see” the world. The reason for this lies in the differences of how and what people perceive. To quote from Nancy Adler (1997, p. 71), “perception is the process by which individuals select, organize, and evaluate stimuli from the environment to provide meaningful experiences for

themselves.” In other words, perception determines how and what we take in from our environment. *How* we perceive our environment, whether we rely on explicit code or on the context, has already been covered above. *What* we take in from our environment, however, is determined differently. Nancy Adler (1997, p. 71) firstly characterises perceptual patterns as being selective. If there is too much to observe, people automatically screen out unnecessary information. As a result, only selected information is allowed to reach a person’s conscious mind. This statement is supported by Edward Hall (1979, p. 87), who claims that perception “protects the nervous system from information overload.” Secondly, “perceptual patterns are learned” (Adler 1997, p. 72), which means that a person’s experience teaches him or her what to perceive and what to screen out. Moreover, “perceptual patterns are consistent” (Adler 1997, p. 72), meaning that they are very slow to change. Furthermore, “perceptual patterns are inaccurate” (Adler 1997, p. 72). This implies that a person’s perception of his or her environment need not reflect reality. Most importantly however, “the way we perceive is culturally determined” (Gibson 2000, p. 20). To quote from Edward Hall (1979, p. 85), who came to the same conclusion, “...culture... designates what we pay attention to and what we ignore.” This is why a Japanese and a German will not only communicate in different ways but also experience a situation differently. According to the author Terri Morrison (1994, p. 204), the Japanese are generally closed-minded to outside information and will only accept ideas from within their group. In addition, they are highly subjective and tend to focus on the specific rather than on the general. Most importantly, a Japanese anticipates others’ needs. He or she is able to do so by paying much more attention to the context than to the explicit message conveyed by their interlocutor. To put it differently, a Japanese perceives facial expressions, behavior and gestures rather than verbal messages. A German, however, is not able to anticipate others’ needs as he relies more on the verbal message than on body language. Moreover, Germans only accept objective facts as truth (Morrison 1994, p. 128). As a result, they will screen out all emotional statements or feelings of their interlocutor in a negotiation. These differences, however obvious they may seem now, are hardly recognized in

reality. This is why intercultural communication is oftentimes accompanied by intercultural misunderstandings.

## **4. Problems in intercultural communication**

Cross-cultural communication usually involves misunderstandings. There are three main causes for problems that might arise in intercultural communication.

### **4.1. Misperception**

Earlier it was described that “perceptual patterns are culturally determined and inaccurate” (Adler 1997, p. 72), meaning that what we perceive is firstly influenced by a person’s cultural background and secondly need not reflect reality. This indicates that perception is highly susceptible to cultural misunderstandings.

### **4.2. Misinterpretation**

The second cause for intercultural misunderstandings is misinterpretation. According to Nancy Adler (1997, p. 74), interpretation occurs “when an individual gives meaning to observations...” In other words, interpretation describes the process of decoding, which was described earlier. The author (Adler 1997, p. 78) claims that “culture strongly influences...our interpretations.” and gives (Adler 1997, p. 78) a demonstrative example: a North American businessman meets his Austrian client for the sixth time in as many months. As usual the Austrian addresses the North American businessman as “Herr Smith”. The latter then assumes that the Austrian does not like or trust him because North Americans tend to be more informal when they want to develop a closer relationship. In fact, the American has misinterpreted the behavior of the Austrian businessman who followed the norm for Austria, which is more formal. This example will help with the understanding of the last cause for intercultural misunderstandings.



### 4.3. Misevaluation

According to Nancy Adler (1997, p. 87), evaluation is the process of judging whether something is good or bad. People usually use their own culture as a basis when it comes to deciding. In the example given above, Austrians will, without thinking, tend to approve of the formal Austrian norm rather than the informal American norm.

## 5. Conclusion

The primary aim of this seminar paper was to show how a person's cultural background affects communication. What was found was that the process of communication involves the perception, interpretation and evaluation of a person's behavior. All three are dependent on a person's cultural background, which determines the meanings attached to a specific behavior.

In addition, the seminar paper intended to investigate the differences in perception of information across cultures. Firstly, the differences of *how* people across cultures perceive information were described. In low-context cultures people tend to rely heavily on the spoken word whereas in high-context cultures people focus strongly on context. Germany and Japan were mentioned as model example for low-context and high-context cultures. With regard to *what* people perceive, it was shown that perceptual patterns are selective, learned, consistent, inaccurate and, most importantly, culturally determined. The information on communication styles across cultures lead to the conclusion that two people from different cultures will not only communicate in different ways but also experience a situation differently.

A quotation from Nancy Adler (1997, p. 67) shall end this seminar paper and explain the value of its outcome for a business man, "All business activity involves communication."

**No. of words 1970**

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