High and Low Context Cultures

Anthropologist **Edward T. Hall's theory** of high - and low - context culture helps us better understand the powerful effect culture has on communication and engagement. A key factor in his theory is context. This relates to the framework, background, and surrounding circumstances in which communication or an event takes place.

High-Context Cultures

These are said to include much of the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America, and are described as relational, collectivist, intuitive, and contemplative. This means that people in these cultures emphasize interpersonal relationships. Developing trust is an important first step to any business transaction. According to Hall, these cultures are collectivist, preferring group harmony and consensus to individual achievement. And people in these cultures are less governed by reason than by intuition or feelings. Words are not so important as context, which might include the speaker's tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture—and even the person's family history and status. A Japanese manager explained his culture's communication style to an American: "We are a homogeneous people and don't have to speak as much as you do here. When we say one word, we understand ten, but here you have to say ten to understand one." High-context communication tends to be more indirect and more formal.

Relationships

- The centrepiece of these cultures
- Develop and maintain a number of significant relationships
- Maximize the use of people networks
- Reflect a visible hierarchy based on these factors: age, gender, education, social heritage, position in the firm, position in the community
- Value relationships much more than tasks

Time

- Its use is based on the importance of the relationship you are dealing with at the time
- Are long-term in perspective
- View time as fluid
- Are polychromic

Communications

- Are implicit
- Reflect hierarchical differences
- Tends to be more aesthetic in expression than functional and direct

Low-Context Cultures

These are said to include North America and much of Western Europe, and are described as logical, linear, individualistic, and action-oriented. People from low-context cultures value logic, facts, and directness. Solving a problem means lining up the facts and evaluating one after another. Decisions are based on fact rather than intuition. Discussions end with actions. And communicators are expected to be straightforward, concise, and efficient in telling what action is expected. To be absolutely clear, they strive to use precise words and intend them to be taken literally. Explicit contracts conclude negotiations. This is very different from communicators in high-context cultures who depend less on language precision and legal documents. High-context business people may even distrust contracts and be offended by the lack of trust they suggest.

Relationships/Tasks

- Relationships are more superficial and easily started and broken (because your relationships are based on what tasks you are presently engaged in)
- People networks are used if available, but your ability is more important in getting you what you want
- Relationships are more egalitarian
- Tasks are relatively more important than relationships

Time

- View life more in shorter-term
- View time as mechanistic (manageable, organisable, under your control)
- View time as monochromic (things done sequentially not in parallel)

Communications

- Are more explicit (so there's clarity about what to do, when to do it, etc.)
- Reflect an egalitarian spirit
- Tends to be functional

Summary comparison

Factor	High-context culture	Low-context culture
Overtness of messages	Many covert and implicit messages, with use of metaphor and reading between the lines	Many overt and explicit messages that are simple and clear
Locus of control and attribution for failure	Inner locus of control and personal acceptance for failure	Outer locus of control and blame of others for failure
Use of non-verbal communication	Much nonverbal communication	More focus on verbal communication than body language
Expression of reaction	Reserved, inward reactions	Visible, external, outward reaction
Cohesion and separation of groups	Strong distinction between in-group and out-group. Strong sense of family	Flexible and open grouping patterns, changing as needed
People bonds	Strong people bonds with affiliation to family and community	Fragile bonds between people with little sense of loyalty
Level of commitment to relationships	High commitment to long-term relationships. Relationship more important than task.	Low commitment to relationship. Task more important than relationships.
Flexibility of time	Time is open and flexible. Process is more important than product	Time is highly organized. Product is more important than process

Summary comparison

Factor	Polychromic action/time	Monochromic action/time
Actions	Do many things at once	Do one thing at a time
Focus	Are easily distracted	Concentrate on the job at hand
Attention to time	Think about what will be achieved	Think about when things must be achieved
Priority	Put relationships first	Put the job first
Respect for property	Borrow and lend things often and easily	Seldom borrow or lend things
Timeliness	Base promptness relationship factors	Emphasize promptness