

TUTORIAL
4.10

Styles of Communication: 1

This tutorial examines different styles of communication. It will help you to identify the style of communication that is most common in your culture. The focus will be on two of the most important differences in communication style: *direct* and *indirect* communication.

Introduction

Every country has its own way of saying things. The important thing is that which lies behind people's words.

- Freya Stark, *The Journey's Echo*

Communication - the sending and receiving of messages - is an integral part of culture. Some people go so far as to say that culture *is* communication. What they probably mean is that since culture is such an important ingredient in all behavior, and so much of behavior is spent in one type of communicating or another, then it's hard to tell where one ends and the other takes over. In any case, whether or not they are one and the same, culture and communication certainly go hand in hand.

In a cross-cultural context, communication, like everything else, is more complicated. It's almost impossible to send a message that does not have at least some cultural content, whether it's in the words themselves, in the way they are said, or in the non-verbal signals that accompany them. And even if it was possible to *send* a message without any cultural content, it's not possible to receive one without passing it through the filter of your own cultural background. All of which means that people may not interpret everything you say the way you meant it. And vice versa.

Communication problems, especially misunderstanding and misinterpretation, are one of the most common frustrations experienced by people in any cultural setting, particularly where cross-cultural communication is taking place. Different *styles* of communication mean an increased possibility of misunderstanding.

Styles of communication: indirect and direct

There are quite a few differences in communication style between cultures. The two most important for us to look at are the *indirect (high context)* style, and the *direct (low context)* style.

‘Context’ refers to the amount of understanding a person can be expected to bring to a particular communication setting. This understanding is often innate and largely unconscious, and cultures vary greatly in how much understanding a person generally brings to a situation.

If a culture is less individualistic, and more collectivist, then everyone knows how people are most likely to behave in a given situation. The shared information level is higher because people know what to expect. This is called a *high context* culture because the shared information level about the context is higher. In high context cultures, people are able to communicate more subtly, or more indirectly. In a low context culture the opposite is true, and so people commonly use more direct communication. Both communication styles are described below:

Indirect (High Context) -

In high context cultures, such as Thailand, China, Japan, France and Saudi Arabia, which tend to be homogenous and collectivist, people have a highly developed and refined idea of how most interactions will unfold, of how they and the other person will behave in a particular situation. Because people in high context cultures already know and understand each other quite well, they have a more indirect style of communication. They have less need to be explicit and rely less on words to convey meaning - and especially on the literal meaning of the spoken word - and more on non-verbal communication. People often convey meaning or send messages by manipulating the context rather than using words. Because these cultures tend to be collectivist, people work closely together and know what everyone else knows. Most cultural knowledge is *implicit* (not directly stated) through a myriad of tightly connected, long-term relationships. Information is contained in the context, so it doesn't need to be verbalised directly - conversation often goes around the point. The overriding goal of the communication exchange is maintaining harmony and saving face.

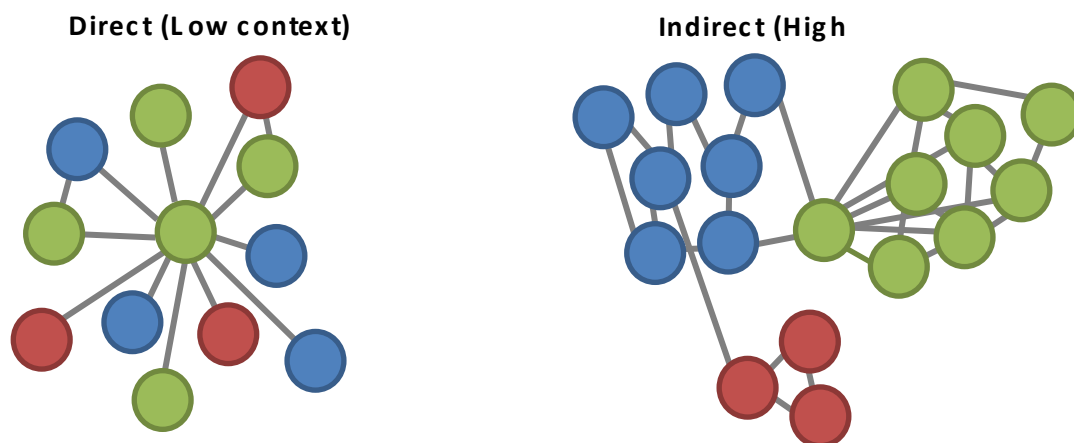
Direct (Low Context) -

Direct, or Low Context cultures, such as the US, UK, Canada and Germany are individualistic, logical and task-oriented, tend to be more heterogeneous and accordingly have developed a more direct communication style. Less can be assumed about the other person in a heterogeneous society, and less is known about others in a culture where people prefer independence, self-reliance, and a greater emotional distance from each other and mostly have diverse, discrete, short-term relationships. They can't depend on manipulating

context - not doing or not saying something that is always done or said in that situation - or communicating non-verbally to make themselves understood: they must rely more on words, and on those words being interpreted literally. Getting or giving information is the goal of most communication exchanges, so topics are handled straightforwardly.

Relationships are foundational

The structure of how relationships develop and are maintained in different cultures is the foundation for how communication takes place. Relationships in a high-context culture with an indirect communication style will be more group-oriented, because the structure of relationships dictates the communication style. Whereas in a culture where relationships are more individualistic, it will be by nature a low context culture with a direct communication style. Relationships in both types of culture could be diagrammed like this:



It is important to note that the defining characteristics of cultures are not independent from one another. So cultures that display certain characteristics will also inherently display others that are related. For example, cultures with an individualistic view of self tend to be universalist, low context and use direct communication. A good place to start when trying to understand a culture is to build relationships with local people and to take time to learn from the inside how relationships work.

Associated behaviours

To help you to define more clearly the differences between the direct and indirect styles of communication, we will describe some of the behaviours associated with each.

The following behaviours are commonly associated with **high context, indirect** cultures:

- Communication is like it would be between siblings, where there is a kind of instinctive common understanding.

- People are reluctant to say no because a refusal threatens harmony, which is key in high context cultures.
- You have to read between the lines to understand the real message. What is overtly stated is whatever saves face.
- Use of intermediaries or third parties is frequent, because it avoids direct confrontation.
- Use of understatement is frequent because it is more indirect.
- “Yes” means ‘I hear you’, not necessarily ‘I agree with you’. Where it’s difficult to say no, yes has a less definitive meaning.
- People engage in small talk and catching up before getting down to business, because relationships are more important in high context cultures, and small talk cements relationships.
- A seemingly small issue in the context could have a significant meaning in what is being communicated. For example, someone not showing respect by sending an underling to a meeting, or by not providing a refreshment, might mean that all is not well. The message is often not in the words in high context cultures, and these other contextual signals are understood clearly by people in those cultures.
- People are already up to date on what is going on because close-knit networks are common in more collectivist, high context cultures.
- The rank and status of the messenger is as important as the message, because the message is not just in the words.
- People tell you what they think you want to hear so you won’t be upset, because face must be saved and outward harmony must be maintained.

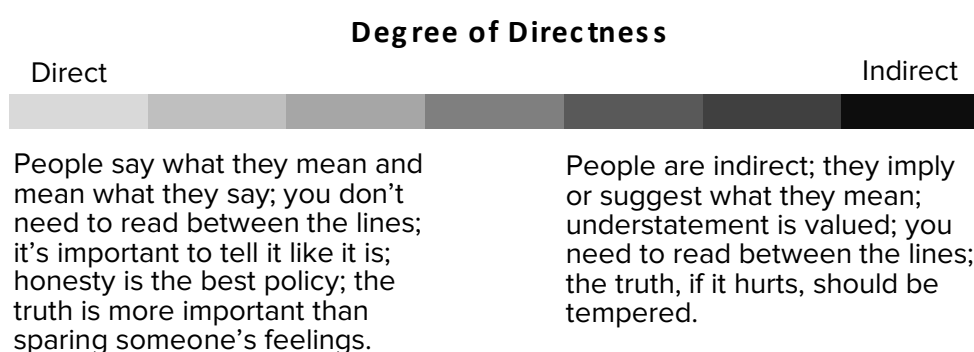
The following behaviours are commonly associated with **low context, direct** cultures:

- It’s best to tell it like it is, directness is preferred
- It’s okay to disagree with your boss at a meeting. To be able to disagree is expected in low context cultures, where people can speak their mind, no matter who they are speaking to.
- “Yes” means ‘I agree with you’. Words are taken more literally - on face value - rather than there being other unspoken communication accompanying the meaning of the words.
- Communication is like it would be between two casual acquaintances who have to spell things out because they do not instinctively understand each other.
- It’s not necessary to read between the lines, because the meaning is in the words.

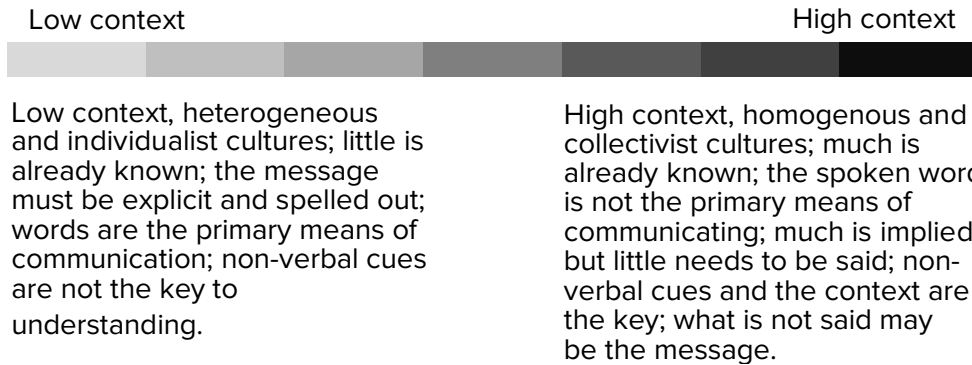
- Business is done first, then small talk can take place after the task is completed - if there is time. The task is more important than personal relationships in low context cultures.
- There is rarely any message in the context in low context cultures, so an issue with the context is seen on face value rather than having a significant meaning. For example, someone not providing a refreshment might simply mean they forgot to plan it, rather than that they are trying to tell you they don't want to make a business deal.
- People need to be brought up to date at a meeting because networks are less common, and it would not be expected that everyone had spent time with everyone else.
- The message is what counts, not who the messenger is, because the words carry the meaning, not the context.

Some defining characteristics of direct and indirect cultures

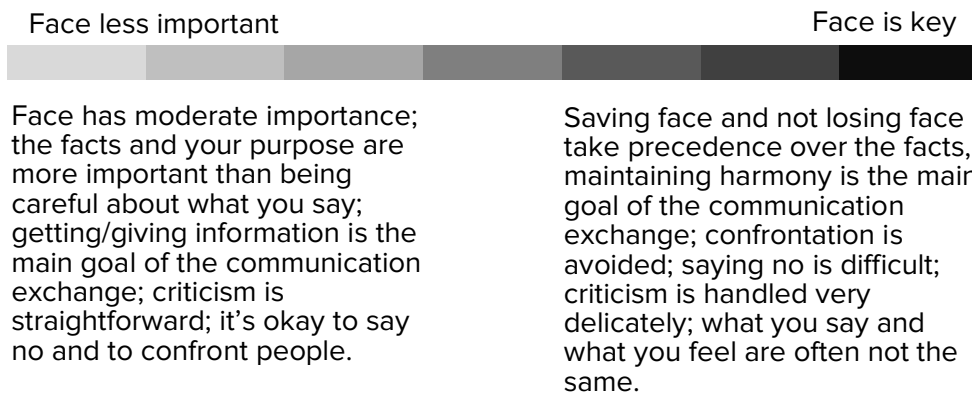
We noted before that the defining characteristics of cultures are not independent and that certain characteristics are related to others. So cultures that tend toward one end of the spectrum in one area will also tend toward that end in other areas too. Below are four continuums representing four areas related to communication - *degree of directness*, *role of context*, *importance of face* and *task or person orientation*. A continuum is a line with opposite views or positions presented at each end. Indirect cultures are represented on the right side of each continuum, and direct cultures on the left.



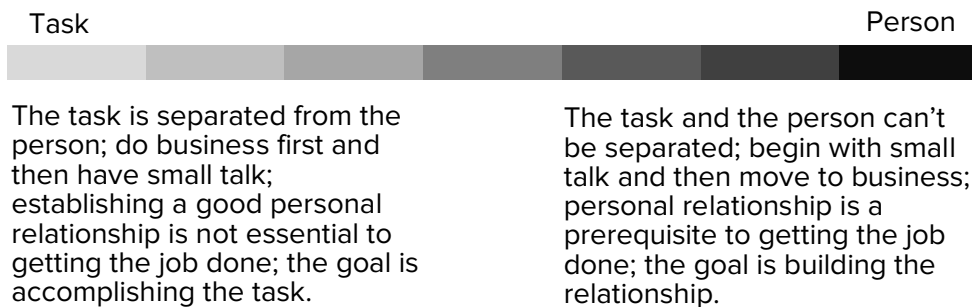
The Role of Context



The importance of Face



The Task or the Person



Most people who have studied this topic place Australian culture somewhere near the centre, but slightly on the direct (low context) side, as in the diagram below:





DISCUSSION POINTS

Styles of Communication: 1

1. What are some of the cultural aspects we have discussed so far that are common in a culture that is a *collectivist* culture? What kind of view of self would be common, what communication style would be prevalent and how would relationships tend to be structured, etc.?
2. Imagine that a Swiss-German person is working on a building project with a Chinese person. Assuming they have a language in common, but considering the differences between their cultures in communication style, what might be some of the communication challenges they could encounter?
3. Think about people that you naturally 'get on with' and those you find more difficult to be around - do you think it has anything to do with differences in communication style?



ACTIVITIES

Styles of Communication: 1

1. Find five real examples of behaviours associated with the prevalent communication style in your local community. Use the list of behaviours given in this tutorial as a guide, but give real examples that you have seen. In general, do you think your community culture is a *direct* or *indirect* culture in terms of communication style?
2. Watch at least one TV documentary showing people of another culture interacting together. Carefully observe how they communicate with one another, and make a note of any behaviours that point toward their communication style being either direct or indirect.
3. If you have friends from another culture, talk to them about where they fit on the four continuums given at the end of the tutorial. Find out if they have experienced any challenges or misunderstandings related to the area of communication style.