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How Culture Controls Communication

[Business leaders](#) know that intercultural savvy is vitally important – not just because they have to deal increasingly with globalization, but also because the work force within their own national borders is growing more and more diverse.

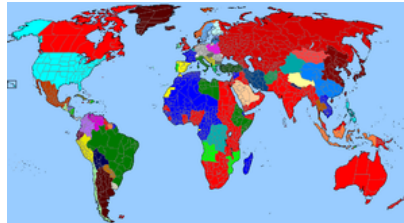


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Culture is, basically, a set of shared values that a group of people holds. Such values affect how you think and act and, more importantly, the kind of criteria by which you judge others. Cultural meanings render some behaviors as *normal* and *right* and others *strange* or *wrong*. ([The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language Can Help – or Hurt – How You Lead](#) devotes two chapters to the nonverbal aspects of cross-cultural communication, and in my next blog I'll cover some of the body language nuances of global business meetings.)

Every culture has rules that its members take for granted. Few of us are aware of our own biases because cultural imprinting is begun at a very early age. And while some of culture's knowledge, rules, beliefs, values, phobias and anxieties are taught explicitly, most is absorbed subconsciously.

Of course, we are all individuals, and no two people belonging to the same culture are guaranteed to respond in exactly the same way. However, generalizations are valid to the extent that they provide clues on what you will *most likely* encounter – and how those differences impact communication. Here are three such generalizations.

Cultures are either high-context or low-context



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Every aspect of global communication is influenced by cultural differences. Even the choice of medium used to communicate may have cultural overtones. For example, it has been noted that industrialized nations rely heavily on electronic technology and emphasize written messages over oral or face-to-face communication. Certainly the United States, Canada, the UK and Germany exemplify this trend. But Japan, which has access to the latest technologies, still relies more on face-to-face communications than on the written mode. The determining factor in medium preference may not be the degree of industrialization, but rather whether the country falls into a *high-context* or *low-context* culture.

In some cultures, personal bonds and informal agreements are far more binding than any formal contract. In others, the meticulous wording of legal documents is viewed as paramount. High-context cultures (Mediterranean, Slav, Central European, Latin American, African, Arab, Asian, American-Indian) leave much of the message unspecified – to be understood through context, nonverbal cues, and between-the-lines interpretation of what is actually said. By contrast, low-context cultures (most of the Germanic and English-speaking countries) expect messages to be explicit and specific. The former are looking for meaning and understanding in what is *not* said – in body language, in silences and pauses, and in relationships and empathy. The latter place emphasis on sending and receiving accurate messages directly, and by being precise with spoken or written words.

One communication trap that U.S. business leaders may fall into is a (costly) disregard for the importance of building and maintaining personal relationships when dealing with individuals from high-context cultures.

Cultures are either sequential or synchronic

Some cultures think of time sequentially – as a linear commodity to “spend,” “save,” or “waste.” Other cultures view time synchronically – as a constant flow to be experienced in the moment, and as a force that cannot be contained or controlled.

In *sequential cultures* (like North American, English, German, Swedish, and Dutch), businesspeople give full attention to one agenda item after another. In many other parts of the world, professionals regularly do several things at the same time. I once cashed a traveler’s check at a Panamanian bank where the teller was counting my money, talking to a customer on the phone, and admiring the baby in the arms of the woman behind me. To her, it was all business as usual.

The American commoditization of time not only serves as the basis for a “time is money” mentality, it can lead to a fixation on timelines that plays right into the hands of savvy negotiators from other cultures. A Chinese executive explained: “All we need to do is find out when you are scheduled to leave the country and we wait until right before your flight to present our offer. By then, you are so anxious to stay on schedule, you’ll give away the whole deal.”

In *synchronic cultures* (including South America, southern Europe and Asia) the flow of time is viewed as a sort of circle – with the past, present, and future all inter-related. This viewpoint influences how organizations in those cultures approach deadlines, strategic thinking, investments, developing talent from within, and the concept of “long-term” planning.

Whether time is perceived as a commodity or a constant determines the meaning and value of being “on time.” Think of the misunderstandings that can occur when one culture views arriving late for a meeting as bad planning or a sign of disrespect, while another culture views an insistence on timeliness as childish impatience.

Orientation to the past, present, and future is another aspect of time in which cultures disagree. Americans believe that the individual can influence the future by personal effort, but since there are too many variables in the distant future, we favor a short-term view. This gives us an international reputation of “going for the quick buck” and being interested only in the next quarterly return. Even our relationships seem to be based on a “what have you done for me lately?” pragmatism.

Synchronic cultures have an entirely different perspective. The past becomes a context in which to understand the present and prepare for the future. Any important relationship is a durable bond that goes back and forward in time, and it is often viewed as grossly disloyal *not* to favor friends and relatives in business dealings.

Cultures are either affective or neutral

With much angry gesturing, an Italian manager referred to the idea of his Dutch counterpart as “crazy.” The Dutch manager replied. “What do you mean, crazy? I’ve considered all the factors, and I think this is a viable approach. And calm down! We need to analyze this, not get sidetracked by emotional theatrics.” At that point, the Italian walked out of the meeting.

In international business dealings, reason and emotion both play a role. Which of these dominates depends upon whether we are *affective* (readily showing emotions) or emotionally *neutral* in our approach. Members of neutral cultures do not telegraph their feelings, but keep them carefully controlled and subdued. In cultures with high affect, people show their feelings plainly by laughing, smiling, grimacing, scowling – and sometimes crying, shouting, or walking out of the room.

This doesn’t mean that people in neutral cultures are cold or unfeeling. But in the course of normal business activities, neutral cultures are more careful to monitor the amount of emotion they display. Research conducted with people who were upset about something at work, noted that only some cultures supported expressing those feelings openly. Emotional reactions were found to be *least* acceptable in Japan, Indonesia, the U.K., Norway and the Netherlands – and *most* accepted in Italy, France, the U.S. and Singapore.

It's easy for people from neutral cultures to sympathize with the Dutch manager and his frustration over trying to reason with "that excitable Italian." After all, an idea either works or it doesn't work – and the way to test the validity of an idea is through trial and observation. That just makes sense – doesn't it? Well, not necessarily to the Italian who felt the issue was deeply personal, and who viewed any "rational argument" as totally irrelevant!

In today's global business community, there is no single best approach to communicating with one another. The key to cross-cultural success is to develop an understanding of, and a deep respect for, the differences.

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