



The Silent Language

We are going to look at the work of the best-known experts in cross-cultural studies starting with Edward T Hall. The following is a brief summary of his work, which gives different parameters between cultures and provides an insight into understanding more about the different cultures we work with.

Edward T Hall

In Hall's "The Silent Language", there are two key concepts: High Context v Low Context, and Polychronic v Monochronic.

High context communicators suppose that the people they are talking to are wise to the context in which the message is set: my listeners have a good idea what this is all about, and if they don't know they can guess. So, in high context cultures ideas are not spelled out in detail. People depend on each other to piece together the whole message within the context they both understand, and try not to bore each other with step-by-step explanations. Communication depends to a great extent on facial expressions, body language, inflexions of the voice, eye contact. Those raised in such an atmosphere can get impatient with low context communicators.

High context cultures include: China, Japan, the Arab world, France, Russia, Mexico, Brazil and India. If you are dealing with these countries, ensure that you build up a good, interpersonal relationship first. This is the foundation where it is possible to find the right level of context. Place great importance on the ambience and decorum of your meeting and the relative status of the participants. Consider the manner of your delivery.

Low context communicators like to spell things out, and to have things spelt out to them. Sentences are completed. Only one person speaks at a time. Telephone agreements are confirmed by e-mail. These people sometimes think that high context communicators are chaotic, secretive, unreliable and emotional.

Low context cultures include: USA, Switzerland, Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Finland and the UK. If you are dealing with these countries be aware that they will argue about each other's opinion within the decision-making process and take discussions in their own hands to come to an agreement. Low-context cultures tend to be precise and they need to know what is going on and have to be provided with detailed background information. Information is freely available.

Monochronic v Polychronic

In **polychronic** cultures, people answer the phone, drink coffee, transmit sign language to their colleagues, listen to your presentation, and think about lunch all at the same time. They get bored and restless if only one thing is happening.

In **monochronic** cultures, timetables are respected and activities are carefully compartmentalised. Agendas are popular, and people feel comfortable dealing with one project or task at a time before moving onto the next.

If you are dealing with highly *monochronic* cultures (Anglo-Saxon USA and Canada, Australia, Scandinavia, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, UK):

- **Fix appointments weeks ahead** - to indicate you consider the subject is important, and you are in control of your time.
- **Send meeting agendas in advance and reconfirm the meeting 48 hours before.**
- **Arrive on time.**
- **Start meetings at the agreed time** - don't keep visitors waiting at Reception. They will think you are disorganised or playing games with them. If there is an unavoidable delay, send apologies and an explanation.
- **Keep to agendas, schedules and deadlines.**
- **Interrupt if you do not understand something** - otherwise they will think you are a timewaster if you wait until the end.
- When dealing with *polychronic* cultures(Latin, African, Asian):
- **Fix appointments at short notice** - and be prepared if they are changed at the last minute
- **Allow plenty of time between appointments**
- **Be prepared to be kept waiting** - take some work with you, chat to the receptionist, or use the time to take a break in your schedule
- **Try to fix an agenda at the start of the meeting** - avoid being too pedantic about it. Steer your partner gently towards the points you wish to discuss, and be prepared for asides, stories, and other interruptions during the meeting
- **Avoid rushed meetings** - present your case in stages, be prepared for distractions, ask and answer questions; use silences, parallel meetings to plan the next steps.
- **Finally, don't restrict yourself to self-imposed deadlines** - you will undermine your position if you stick too closely to targets and deadlines. Build in flexibility where you can.