

High and Low Context

 culture-at-work.com/highlow.html



Culture at Work

Communicating Across Cultures

The general terms "high context" and "low context" (popularized by Edward Hall) are used to describe broad-brush cultural differences between societies.

High context refers to societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behavior are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other. Your family is probably an example of a high context environment.

Low context refers to societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave.

High Context

- Less verbally explicit communication, less written/formal information
- More internalized understandings of what is communicated
- Multiple cross-cutting ties and intersections with others
- Long term relationships
- Strong boundaries- who is accepted as belonging vs who is considered an "outsider"
- Knowledge is situational, relational.
- Decisions and activities focus around personal face-to-face relationships, often around a central person who has authority.



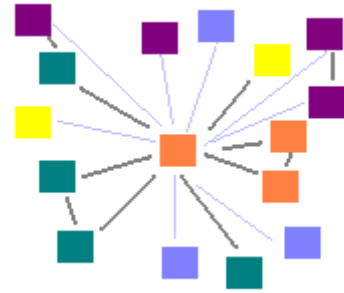
Examples:

Small religious congregations, a party with friends, family gatherings, expensive gourmet restaurants and neighborhood restaurants with a regular clientele, undergraduate on-campus friendships, regular pick-up games, hosting a friend in your home overnight.

Low Context

- Rule oriented, people play by external rules
- More knowledge is codified, public, external, and accessible.
- Sequencing, separation--of time, of space, of activities, of relationships

- More interpersonal connections of shorter duration
- Knowledge is more often transferable
- Task-centered. Decisions and activities focus around what needs to be done, division of responsibilities.



Examples:

large US airports, a chain supermarket, a cafeteria, a convenience store, sports where rules are clearly laid out, a motel.

While these terms are sometimes useful in describing some aspects of a culture, one can never say a culture is "high" or "low" because societies all contain both modes. "High" and "low" are therefore less relevant as a description of a whole people, and more useful to describe and understand particular situations and environments.

Ways that High and Low Context Differ

1. The Structure of Relationships

- High:

Dense, intersecting networks and longterm relationships, strong boundaries, relationship more important than task
- Low:

Loose, wide networks, shorter term, compartmentalized relationships, task more important than relationship

2. Main Type of Cultural Knowledge

- High:

More knowledge is below the waterline--implicit, patterns that are not fully conscious, hard to explain even if you are a member of that culture
- Low:

More knowledge is above the waterline--explicit, consciously organized

Entering High and Low Context Situations

High contexts can be difficult to enter if you are an outsider (because you don't carry the context information internally, and because you can't instantly create close relationships).

Low contexts are relatively easy to enter if you are an outsider (because the environment contains much of the information you need to participate, and because you can form relationships fairly soon, and because the important thing is accomplishing a task rather than feeling your way into a relationship).



Remember that every culture and every situation has its high and low aspects. Often one situation will contain an inner high context core and an outer low context ring for those who are less involved.

For instance, a PTA is usually a low context situation: any parent can join, the dates of the meetings, who is president, what will be discussed, etc. are all explicitly available information, and it is usually fairly clear how to participate in the meetings.

However, if this is a small town, perhaps the people who run the PTA all know each other very well and have many overlapping interests. They may "agree" on what should be discussed or what should happen without ever really talking about it, they have unconscious, unexpressed values that influence their decisions. Other parents from outside may not understand how decisions are actually being made. So the PTA is still low context, but it has a high context subgroup that is in turn part of a high context small town society.

NOTE:

When you enter a high context situation, it doesn't immediately become a low context culture just because you came in the door! It is still a high context culture and you are just (alas), ignorant. Also, even low context cultures can be difficult to learn: religious dietary laws, medical training, written language all take years to understand. The point is that that information has been made conscious, systematic, and available to those who have the resources to learn it.

»» High and Low Context



<http://www.culture-at-work.com/highlow.html>