

# High-Context & Low-Context Culture Styles

---

[com.marin.edu/buscom/index\\_files/Page605.htm](http://com.marin.edu/buscom/index_files/Page605.htm)

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall's theory of high- and low-context culture helps us better understand the powerful effect culture has on communication. 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. The following summary highlights the problems facing low-context North Americans when they interact with people from high-context cultures.

High-context cultures (including much of the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America) are 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. Flowery language, humility, and elaborate apologies are typical.

Low-context cultures (including North America and much of Western Europe) are 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.

Discussion: Do you believe Hall is correct in his assumptions? If so, what examples can you give that demonstrate high- and low-context cultures? How would context help explain instances of miscommunication between North Americans and Japanese? How

could you become a better international communicator?

“ Tip: Employees from all nations are represented in American business. As you write for this international audience, be aware that levels of English speaking and writing proficiency vary. Review the cross-cultural suggestions on beginning on page 15.