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Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

Germany

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Direct and indirect communication

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Direct and indirect communication

Introduction

When conflicts arise at work that are triggered not only by intergenerational collaboration but also by cultural differences, Edward T. Hall's concepts of 'high-context' and 'low-context' communication styles may become relevant. In this context, the terms can be understood as 'indirect' and 'direct' forms of communication.

Considering communication styles is important for understanding generations and cultures in the workplace, as they shape how people interact with and perceive one another. The degree of directness or indirectness preferred in communication may vary both between cultures and between generations within the same culture. A clearer understanding of these cultural and intergenerational factors can help prevent misunderstandings and conflicts, and foster more effective cooperation in intercultural and intergenerational teams.

Direct and indirect forms of communication

Indirect communication (*high context* according to Edward T. Hall) is a form of communication in which part of the message is not conveyed exclusively verbally, but also through the situational context – e.g. through **body language, facial expressions, tone of voice or through word choice** that allows further interpretation of the literal meaning. Much is understood "between the lines".

Direct communication (*low context* according to Edward T. Hall) is a form of communication in which the **message** is expressed **explicitly and directly** in words. Meanings are to be understood literally, and double meanings or room for interpretation are rather rare.

Indirect forms of communication are typically found in more traditional cultures with close social ties and a high level of shared knowledge, taking into account country-specific characteristics. Hall considers the following regions to be areas where indirect communication is used:

Indirect communication ('high context' by Edward T. Hall) is a style in which part of the message is conveyed not only through words but also through the surrounding non-verbal context – for example, **body language, facial expressions, tone of voice or word choice** that invites interpretation beyond the literal meaning. Much is understood 'between the lines'.

Direct communication ('low context' by Edward T. Hall) is a style in which the message is conveyed **explicitly in words**. Meanings are intended to be **taken literally**, with little room for ambiguity or double interpretation.

Indirect forms of communication are most often found in more traditional cultures with strong social ties and a high degree of shared knowledge, though the specifics vary from country to country. Hall identifies the following regions as relying on indirect communication:

- East Asia: Japan, China, Korea
- Arab countries
- Latin America
- Southern Europe (e.g. Italy, Spain, Portugal)
- Parts of Africa

Direct forms of communication are typically associated with cultures that have more individualistic lifestyles, frequently changing social groups and less shared background knowledge, although this varies between countries. Hall identifies the following regions as those where direct communication is common:

- Northern Europe: Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia
- North America: USA, Canada
- Australia, New Zealand
- Part of Great Britain

The graph below illustrates Hall's direct–indirect communication scale, showing how countries are ranked according to their degree of indirectness:

High context

Japan
Arab countries
China
India
Mediterranean countries: France, Italy, Spain
Great Britain
North America
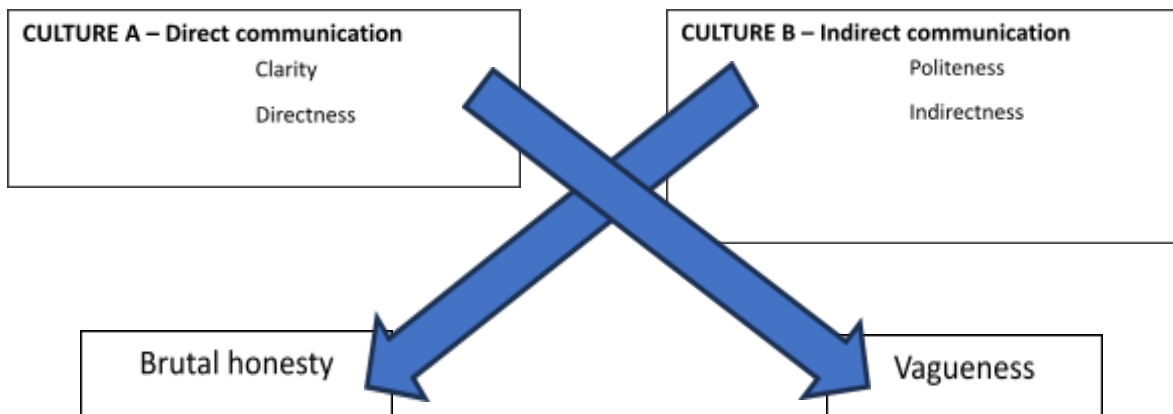Scandinavian countries
Germany

Low context

The survey conducted by the partnership in the participating countries shows that in all countries, the cultural factor of direct/indirect communication plays a role in intergenerational conflicts.

Regardless of country-specific characteristics, all generations recognised that different communication styles can cause friction. Older generations in particular appear to prefer a more formal style, with greater emphasis on status and hierarchy. In high-context countries, this formal style is very likely to be accompanied by indirect patterns of communication.

This was reflected in the project partnership survey, which included examples such as Millennials from Ireland reporting that their email tone was often misunderstood as aggressive. What was perhaps missing here was an element of indirect communication, which is frequently perceived as more polite.

While participants acknowledged intergenerational differences in communication, the direct–indirect factor did not appear to be interpreted as culture-specific. This underlines the importance of raising awareness of the issue.

How do intergenerational conflicts manifest themselves in the workplace when those involved come from cultures with direct or indirect communication habits?

When communication difficulties arise due to the directness or indirectness of a statement, members of Culture A, with a direct style, may accuse representatives of Culture B, with an indirect style, of being vague or unclear ('Can't you express yourself more clearly?!'). Conversely, members of Culture B may accuse representatives of Culture A of being blunt ('Can't you say that a little more politely?!').

When such situations occur at work, it is important for those involved to recognise that neither communication style – direct nor indirect – is inherently better or worse. What matters is developing an understanding of one another's style.

Results from the survey

The project's survey suggests that in Germany, Ireland and Poland, younger generations place greater emphasis on direct forms of communication, while older generations value more formal styles. A similar trend appears in Portugal and Italy, where older people expect even greater respect in communication.

In summary, culture-specific communication styles can often be a source of misunderstanding between generations at work. However, other cultural factors must also be considered. For example, silence – whether perceived as a pause in verbal communication or as response time in written communication – can be significant not only in relation to

indirect communication but can also indicate the time needed to reflect on the information received. A shorter or longer response time may therefore also be interpreted culturally through the lens of uncertainty avoidance: the longer the delay, the higher the level of uncertainty avoidance.

Generational Cards

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Communication
Generation: **Gen Z**

Informal

Generation Z has an informal tone.

Research Findings

In all countries analysed, Generation Z communicates very informally. This can seem almost inappropriate to others. Written messages (messenger, emails) are concise and direct, sometimes even giving the impression of being inappropriate.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Do not view the brevity and conciseness of messages as disrespectful, but rather as an adaptation of style to the medium of communication (e.g. messenger service), which requires clarity and conciseness.

See the informal tone of Generation Z as an opportunity to foster a greater sense of community in the workplace.

Inform employees of all generations about the company's official communication rules for the various communication channels (email, messenger, meetings, etc.).

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Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view
Communication
Generation: **Millenials**

Laid-back

Millennials have a laid-back tone.

Research Findings

In all countries considered, Millennials tend towards direct, explicit communication with country-specific characteristics that may be more or less oriented towards direct or indirect communication.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Bear in mind that Millennials expect direct feedback and transparent communication.
Consider the brevity of Millennials' messages as digital literacy.
Try to provide opportunities for intergenerational exchange (within teams, on collaborative platforms) to create a common understanding of individual preferences.

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Communication
Generation: **Gen X**

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Over-polite

Generation X has an over-polite tone.

Research Findings

In most of the countries surveyed, Generation X expects formal language and respectful forms of address. This is often accompanied by more indirect, implicit communication patterns. Nevertheless, Generation X is not set in its ways when it comes to communication habits and is quite open to innovation.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Consider Generation X's preference for politeness as a balancing and conciliatory element in your team, which can be helpful in resolving tensions and friction within the team.
Provide opportunities for respectful, open exchange (café bar, joint lunch) in the workplace. This creates trust and promotes a common understanding of communication strategies.

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Communication
Generation: **Babyboomers**

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Formal

Baby Boomers are formal.

Research Findings

In most of the countries surveyed, Baby Boomers expect to be addressed with respect. This makes them feel valued. They may use collaborative tools and messenger services less than younger generations, but that does not mean they would not be open to them if introduced.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Communicate with Baby Boomers in person. This can be a brief personal conversation across your desk, on the telephone, or online.

Use clear but polite language when communicating with Baby Boomers. Use titles or other forms of respectful address.

Be prepared for the fact that Baby Boomers may prefer to use e-mails rather than messenger services. This can have the advantage of clearer documentation and verifiability.

Key Takeaways

- Misunderstandings – and sometimes conflicts – between generations are often rooted in differences of values.
- When addressing intergenerational misunderstandings and conflicts, it is important to take into account not only the values of different generations but also those of different cultures.
- Each generation brings its own cultural values, which may vary from one country to another.
- Younger generations (Generation Z, Millennials) across cultures tend to favour flatter hierarchies, greater pragmatism and more direct communication, while older generations (Generation X, Baby Boomers) are generally more conscious of hierarchy, place greater value on security, and adopt a more formal style.
- A respectful exchange of values is beneficial in overcoming intergenerational and intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts.

Sources

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