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MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

Germany

Assist GmbH

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Introduction

The following section deals with different generations and cultures in the workplace and the challenges that can arise in the workplace.

Generational conflicts have always existed. Since ancient times, there have been reports of older generations complaining about disrespect shown to them by younger generations (Kollewe 2016: 188). However, ethnological research shows that across cultures, age alone does not determine attitudes to respect. Comparisons between different cultures seem to show that respect for older and elderly people is closely linked to their status in society. Due to their life experience, older people often have greater knowledge (factual, historical, magical), more material goods and, as a result, enjoy a better position in the group or society (Kollewe 2016: 189). Strictly speaking, the factor of "age" is therefore only an observable physical characteristic. It is not biological age itself that has a higher social value. Rather, it seems that societies associate certain factors with "age" that have positive connotations and are therefore reason enough to be valued.

When do value conflicts between generations arise?

We often hear about generational conflicts in the workplace. As in other areas and situations, conflicts between generations often arise when values are not shared.

A conflict of values between individuals arises when people in a shared situation hold different values, norms or moral principles to be correct, yet these cannot all be achieved at the same time. Since values underpin decisions, actions and judgements, differing orientations are bound to clash. These values are equally valid in themselves, so there is no single objectively right or wrong position. Where a common solution cannot be reached, the unresolved situation may give rise to misunderstandings, tensions or conflicts.

Observations from the project survey

This was also reflected in the results of the survey conducted by the project partnership. Across all participating countries (Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland and Portugal), **value conflicts** were most evident in relation to **differences in communication style**, **approaches to leadership, and attitudes towards time and work**. A cross-country comparison suggests that older generations tend to be more hierarchical and rule-oriented – or are at least perceived in this way – and identify more closely with their work. Younger generations, by contrast, seem more flexible, digitally minded and egalitarian, placing greater emphasis on work–life balance. However, this may be viewed by older generations as a sign of unreliability, selfishness or even laziness.

How can a conflict of values be better understood?

Schulz von Thun's **value and development quadrant** can help in understanding value conflicts, both within individuals and between them. The model illustrates how values are balanced both between people and within a person. Each value has a **positive counterforce** –

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a '**countervalue**' – that complements it and prevents it from sliding into extremes. A single value, if not balanced by its countervalue, can become exaggerated or 'one-sided'. Thus, every value can take on an extreme form, for example: directness versus bluntness, or verbal politeness versus vagueness. Conflicts often emerge when a value is expressed in its negative form, or what Schulz von Thun terms a '**devaluing exaggeration**', or when it is perceived as such by others

How can a value conflict be resolved?

According to Schulz von Thun, the value and development model can be applied both to conflict situations and personal growth. Individuals can become aware of the negative expression of a value and actively move away from it. For example, if someone is too direct or overly domineering, they can consciously work towards its positive counterpart, such as indirectness or tolerance.

The value and development square offers a useful approach that can also be applied to interpreting and resolving generational conflicts. What often stands out negatively in such conflicts – and what generations frequently accuse one another of – is the '**devalued exaggeration**' of a value. Resolving the conflict would therefore involve moving towards the alternative positive counterpart.

What happens when not only different generations but also people from different cultures work together?

Nowadays, it has become very common for people from different backgrounds and cultures to work together.

Alexander Thomas describes culture as **an orientation system** inherent to all people, though expressed in different forms. Culture shapes the field of action of a population and encompasses objects, institutions, **ideas and values**. It manifests itself in a system of orientation typical of a society or group, incorporating specific symbols such as language, gestures and rituals. This system influences people's perceptions, thoughts and actions, and is passed on to **subsequent generations**. In doing so, it creates **identity and a sense of belonging** (Alexander Thomas, 2005, p. 21).

Cultures therefore embody certain values that are characteristic of their members in a **culture-specific** way. Intercultural conflicts frequently arise from the differing cultural expressions of these values.

For our purposes, it is useful to consider what challenges arise in the workplace when both **'generation' and 'culture'** are taken into account. Naturally, cultural differences cannot be cited as the cause of every difficulty. Some challenges are independent of culture and stem solely from generational differences. Likewise, the extent to which personality influences difficult situations is independent of both generation and culture, yet remains a decisive factor in how such situations unfold.

Value conflicts in intercultural communication can also be illustrated using Schulz von Thun's **value and development quadrant**. For example, imagine a person from Culture B, who

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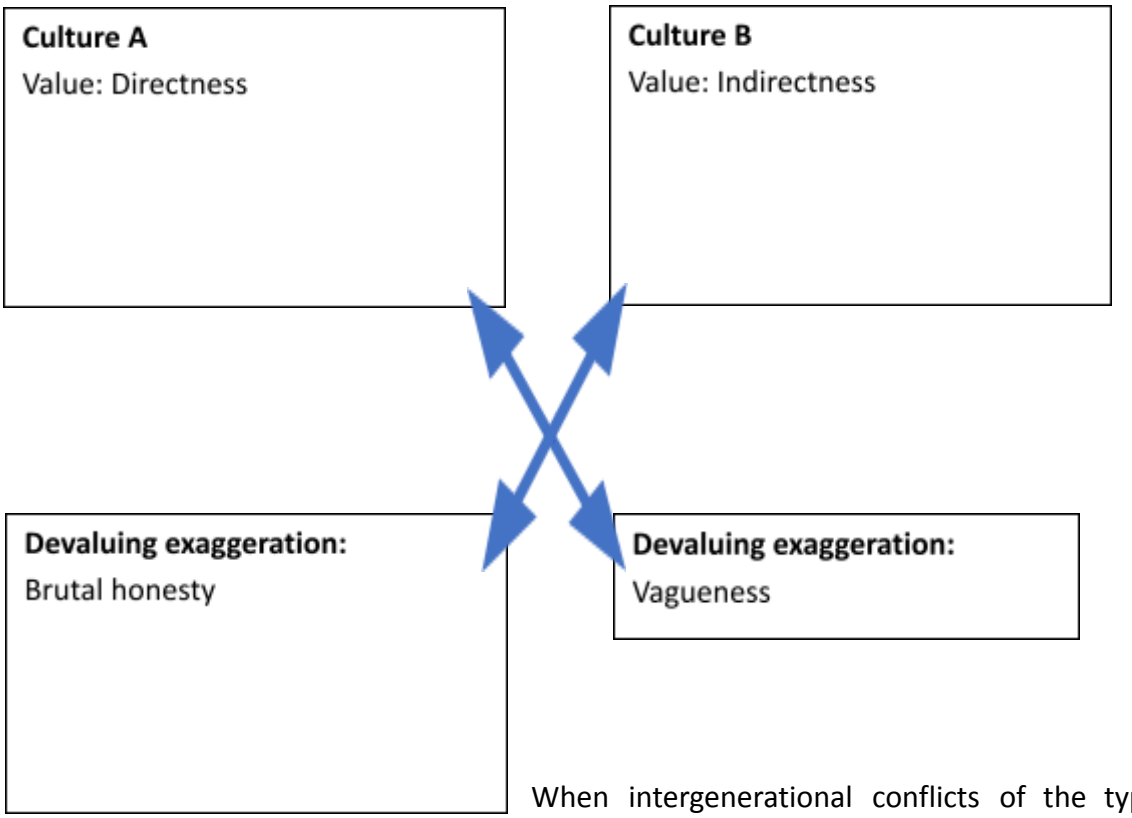
places high importance on indirect communication, feeling attacked by a statement from someone in Culture A and accusing them of being rude or hurtful. The individual from Culture B perceives and interprets the value of 'directness' in Culture A, when taken to excess, as 'communicative ruthlessness'.

The individual from Culture A may simply have wished to express their opinion openly and clearly. In some cases, however, this may – whether consciously or unconsciously – go too far and, according to Schulz von Thun, result in a '**devaluing exaggeration**' of the original value, or at least be perceived as such, particularly when that value carries a different meaning in Culture B.



When intergenerational conflicts of the type described above arise, it may helpful if members of the cultures and generations involved recognise both the disparaging exaggerations they apply to one another and the related positive counter values. A solution is more likely if the parties concerned move towards appreciating the positive values of the other culture or generation. In this case, for example, members of a culture that favours direct communication might attempt to express themselves a little less bluntly – instead of saying 'Bring me the report by 5 p.m. today,' they might say 'Could you bring me the report by 5 p.m. today?'

What has been outlined here only briefly as a possible solution is, of course, in reality a longer process of raising awareness and fostering an understanding of cultures and their values.

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Hierarchy

Introduction

When conflicts arise at work that are not only triggered by different generations but are also shaped by cultural background, hierarchy and power differences can play an important role.

Hierarchy and power differences are important for understanding generations and cultures because they strongly influence how people perceive authority, decision-making and social roles. These perceptions may differ not only between cultures but also between generations within the same culture.

What is hierarchy?

What we refer to as hierarchy and power differences is defined by Geert Hofstede as *power distance*. Hofstede understands *power distance (*according to Geert Hofstede) as "the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions (such as the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally." https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/

It is therefore a matter of the extent to which societies regard hierarchies and power differences as **normal and expected**. Power distance may be expressed, for instance, through verbal and non-verbal communication habits, such as the use of polite forms and titles or gestures of respect like bowing and curtsying. It can also be observed in the way societies organise their social structures and processes, with top-down decision-making more common in those with higher power distance.

Cultures with **high power distance** (for example, many Asian, Arab or Latin American countries) accept clear hierarchies, expect top-down decisions and regard explicit rules of rank and respect for authority as self-evident. In these cultures, high power distance is viewed as natural and stabilising.

By contrast, cultures with **low power distance** (for example, Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Australia) favour flat hierarchies and prefer decision-making by consensus. Leaders are defined more by their role than by their hierarchical status, resulting in flatter structures and more equal treatment.

The graphic below illustrates the power distance factor as defined by Hofstede, comparing how the partner countries involved in the MYCo project are positioned in relation to one another.

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The survey conducted by the partnership in the participating countries indicates that hierarchy plays a role in intergenerational conflicts across all contexts. The German country report shows that participants were well aware of the differences between Germany and countries such as Italy and Portugal, even among younger generations: *'In some interactions with people from Mediterranean regions, hierarchical structures and attitudes are more pronounced. Younger people show more verbal respect towards older people when they come from these regions.'*

A cross-country comparison further reveals that, in all participating countries, younger generations are generally less supportive of hierarchical structures and favour flatter hierarchies and more egalitarian interactions. Older generations, by contrast, continue to expect authority, duty and hierarchical structures both of themselves and of others.

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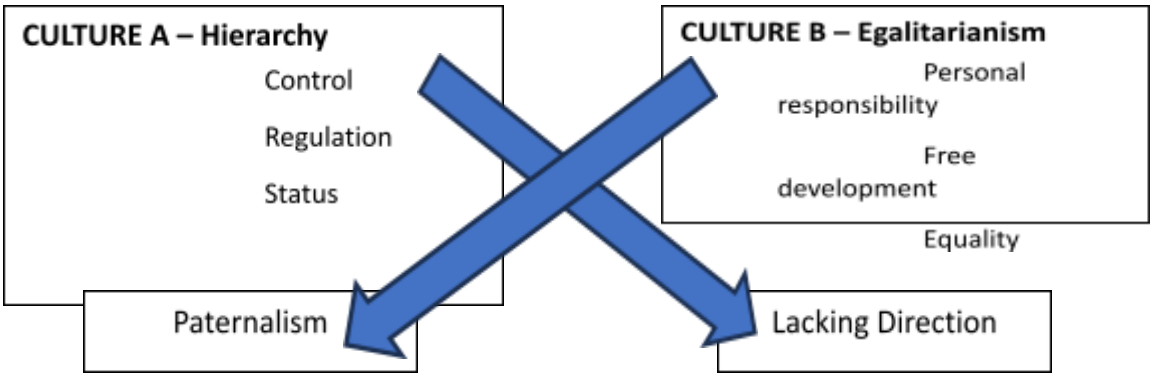
How do intergenerational conflicts manifest themselves in the workplace when those involved come from cultures with different views on hierarchy?



In a conflict of values concerning hierarchy, members of Culture A, who place importance on hierarchy, may accuse representatives of Culture B, who favour egalitarian structures, of being disoriented (*'You don't know how to do that! Do it the way I tell you!'*). Conversely, members of Culture B may accuse representatives of Culture A, with their preference for hierarchical structures, of paternalism (*'Let me try it and see if it works!'*).

When such situations arise at work, it is important for those involved to recognise that neither the values of Culture A nor those of Culture B are inherently better or worse. What matters is developing an understanding of one another's values.

Results from the survey

Reports from Germany and Poland indicate that younger generations are less comfortable with authoritarian leadership styles and top-down decision-making than their older counterparts. In these countries, conflicts often centre on adherence to hierarchical structures, respect and seniority – particularly when young people come from strongly egalitarian cultures. One example from Germany noted: *'We had a young intern from a different cultural background who struggled with the hierarchical structures of a professional kitchen. Some older team members were frustrated, but we eventually managed to resolve the issue.'*

In Italy and Portugal, which score more highly on the power distance index, the research examples appear to confirm that older people tend to favour controlling hierarchies and loyalty, while younger people seek greater autonomy and a stronger voice in decision-making. Even here, however, a trend towards change is evident. It could also be argued that, despite this trend, tensions are heightened when older employees from Portugal and Italy work alongside younger employees from Germany or Poland, who prefer more egalitarian workplace structures.

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Nevertheless, the research suggests that misunderstandings and conflicts in the workplace, where cultural differences are a decisive factor, occur only occasionally. In most cases, participants expressed considerable openness towards other cultures.

Summary

In summary, conflicts tend to arise when older employees in particular – regardless of their country specific cultural background – demand hierarchy, status and respect for experience. Such demands may give rise to interpersonal tensions of varying intensity, depending on how closely or distantly colleagues from other cultures relate to these principles.

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Uncertainty avoidance

Introduction

When conflicts arise at work that are triggered not only by collaboration between different generations but also by cultural background, the concept of '**uncertainty avoidance**', as defined by Geert Hofstede, may come into play.

Uncertainty avoidance is important for understanding generations and cultures in the workplace because it shapes how people perceive and respond to **predictability, routine and structures that provide security**. The degree of uncertainty avoidance required can vary both between cultures and between generations within the same culture. A clearer understanding of this factor can help prevent misunderstandings and conflicts, and foster better cooperation in intercultural and intergenerational teams.

What is uncertainty avoidance?

According to Geert Hofstede, *uncertainty avoidance* refers to "a society's tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity. Uncertainty avoidance is not related to risk-taking or following rules. Rather, it has to do with fears and mistrust of the unknown and, conversely, with the desire for fixed habits and rituals and the need to know the truth." https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/

The uncertainty avoidance factor describes the extent to which people in a society feel **threatened by unclear, unfamiliar or uncertain situations** – and the ways in which they seek to manage them through rules, structures or habits. It becomes evident in workplace practices such as documenting and recording workflows and meetings. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance generally favour greater structure and precision in these areas.

Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance (for example, Germany, Greece, Portugal and Japan) prefer clear rules, detailed processes and predictability. Change is often stressful, as familiar procedures must be restructured, which in turn means that innovations are frequently introduced more slowly.

By contrast, **cultures with low uncertainty avoidance** (for example, the USA, Sweden and Singapore) are more receptive to new ideas and adapt more readily to changes in established processes. Rules are regarded more as guidelines than as strict requirements. Such cultures are generally characterised by a belief that people learn through action and practical experience, with mistakes viewed as opportunities for learning.

The graph below illustrates the uncertainty avoidance factor as defined by Hofstede, showing how the partner countries involved in the MYCo project rank in relation to one another.

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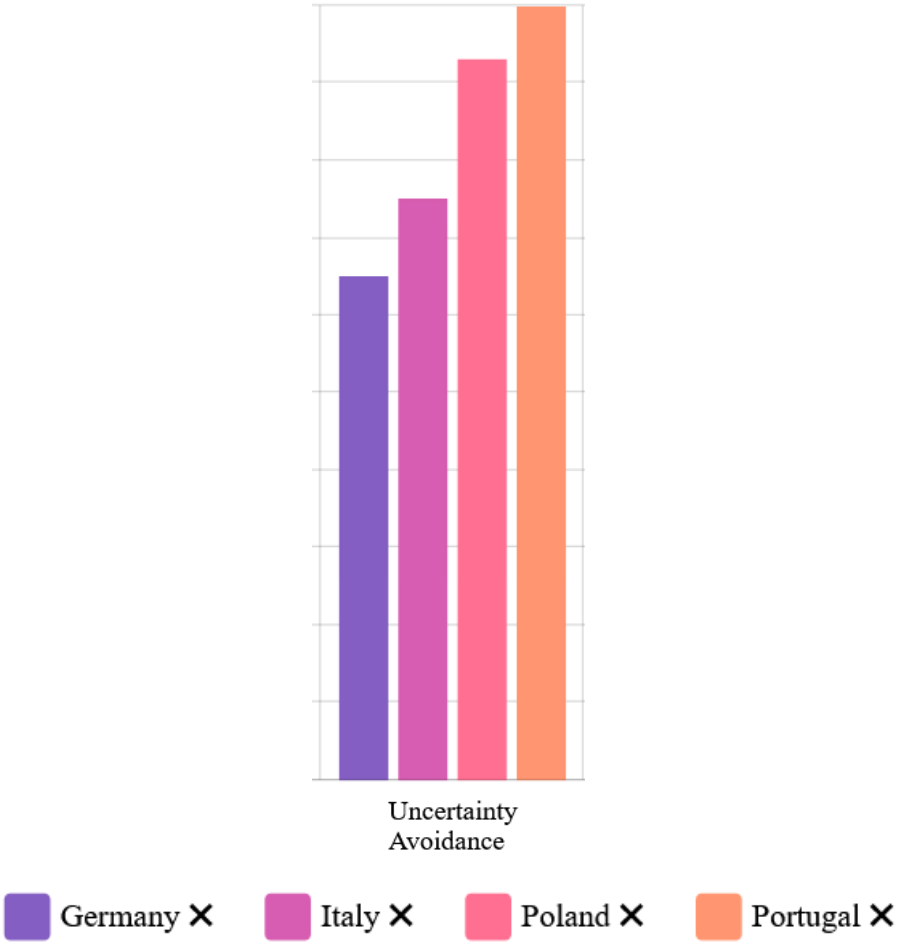

https://geerthofstede.com/country-comparison-bar-charts/

The survey conducted by the partnership across the participating countries shows that the cultural factor of uncertainty avoidance plays a role in intergenerational conflicts in all involved cultures. Irrespective of country-specific characteristics, older generations appear to value security more highly and to be less tolerant of ambiguity in the workplace. This was reflected in the German survey responses, which included comments such as: *'Sometimes younger colleagues are more informal and more flexible with deadlines, while older generations are more structured. This can lead to tensions regarding project schedules and expectations.'*

While there seems to be recognition in all countries that uncertainty avoidance is experienced differently across generations, the same cannot be said for cultural variations in this factor. Our survey results suggest that uncertainty avoidance is not generally interpreted as culture-specific. This makes raising awareness of the issue all the more important.

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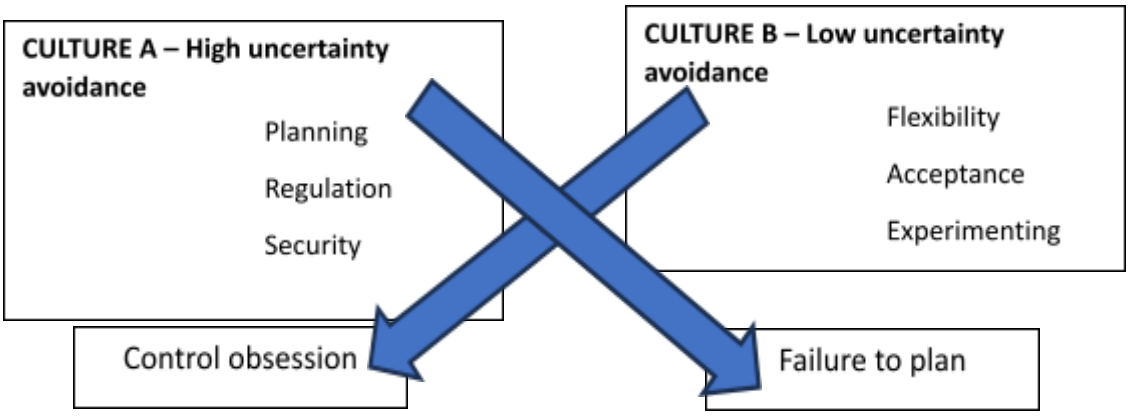
How do intergenerational conflicts manifest themselves in the workplace when those involved come from cultures with different levels of uncertainty avoidance?



In a value conflict involving uncertainty avoidance, members of Culture A, with high uncertainty avoidance, may accuse representatives of Culture B, with low uncertainty avoidance, of poor planning (*'You can't just try that! We have to plan the test phase step by step first!'*). Conversely, members of Culture B may accuse representatives of Culture A of being overly controlling (*'No one needs minutes for the meeting! If there are any questions afterwards, everyone can check their own notes.'*).

When such situations occur in the workplace, it is important for those involved to recognise that neither the values of Culture A nor those of Culture B are inherently superior. What matters is developing an understanding of each other's values.

Results from the survey

Overall, younger generations in all countries participating in the survey appear to show greater tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, regardless of whether their culture has a high or low tendency towards uncertainty avoidance.

One example of how this plays out in practice comes from Germany, where the survey clearly illustrates that a shift towards lower uncertainty avoidance is evident even in cultures that traditionally valued it highly. In terms of working style, younger employees place more emphasis on speed, efficiency and digital tools (e.g. AI, digital diagnostics), whereas older employees stress thoroughness, manual methods and practical experience. Conflicts arise when speed is prioritised over accuracy.

A further example from Portugal supports this trend, revealing that the demand for precision – which requires more time and effort – is giving way to a preference for speed and immediacy. There are reports of a drive for 'immediacy' and the pursuit of results without fully considering the implications.

Conflict is particularly likely when high uncertainty avoidance coincides with high power distance, which tends to reinforce status- or hierarchy-based thinking. In such cases, 'playing

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it safe' may also be interpreted as a way of maintaining power. Conversely, low uncertainty avoidance, combined with a strong willingness to embrace change among younger people, may be seen by older generations as a lack of respect for experience.

Summary

In summary, uncertainty avoidance appears to be an intergenerational factor, but it cannot be clearly identified as culture specific.

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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.

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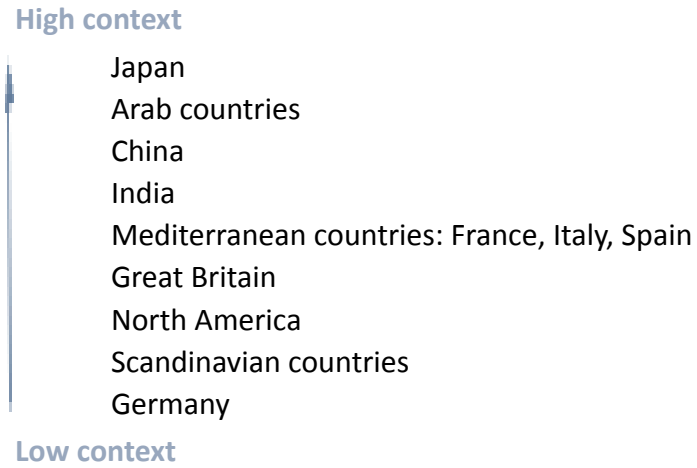
Indirect forms of communication are most often found in more traditional cultures with strong social ties and a high degree of shared knowledge, though the specifics vary from country to country. Hall identifies the following regions as relying on indirect communication:

- 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:



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.

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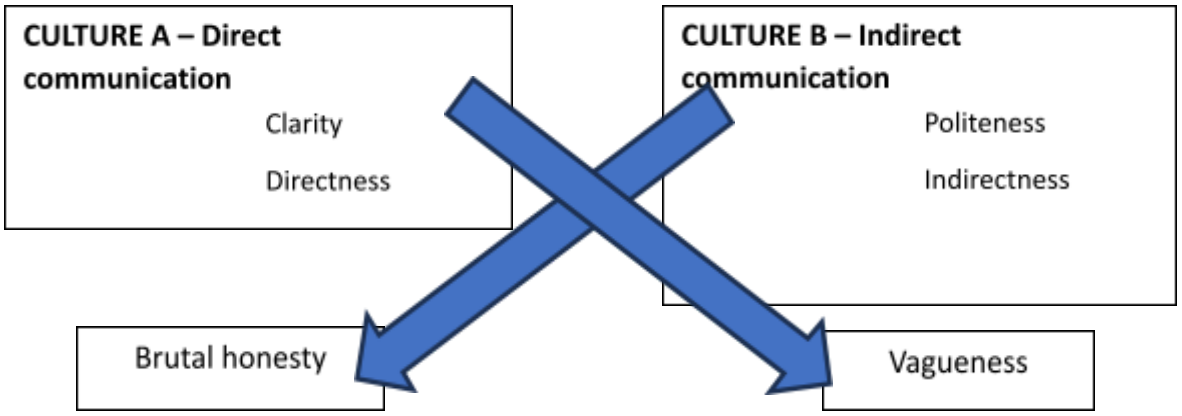
This was reflected in the project partnership survey, which included examples such as Millennials from Ireland reporting that their email tone was often misunderstood as aggressive. What was perhaps missing here was an element of indirect communication, which is frequently perceived as more polite.

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

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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.

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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.

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