

LOW AND HIGH CONTEXT

Context surrounds all interactions. People in different cultures rely on context to varying degrees in order to help them understand what others mean.

There's a broad spectrum between those who prefer low context communication and those who prefer high context communication.

Low Context

Specific words and descriptions, as well as facts, diagrams, and examples, transmit the majority of the message.

**High Context**

Suggestions, relationships, and shared experiences carry the weight of the message, with words and facts playing a supporting role.

This divide between relying very little on context and relying heavily on context is one of the more difficult things to navigate when communicating cross-culturally and dealing with difficult questions.

By being able to identify the differences between people's innate preferences, you'll be better equipped to deal with different approaches to communication.

DIMENSIONS AFFECTED BY CONTEXT

Low and high context communication preferences play out across a number of the dimensions of culture that are associated with communication.

Another way to think about this concept is to consider this divide as an umbrella that stretches over a few other cultural dimensions that are attached to communication.



Direct Communication

The goal is to send and receive a specific message, and information is conveyed explicitly. Feedback and debate are encouraged. People do not avoid conflict. "Yes" is a promise or commitment.

Egalitarianism

All people are equal and have equal rights and responsibilities. People at all organizational levels are encouraged to participate in discussions and decision making. Dress and speech tend to be more informal.

Monochronic Time

Time is precise, fixed, scarce, and linear. People tend to focus on one thing at a time. Punctuality is universally observed.

Indirect Communication

The goal is to build relationships, and information is conveyed implicitly. Meaning is hinted at. Feedback is softened and conflict is avoided. "Yes" may be a signal that the listener is still engaged or that hierarchy dictates a positive answer.

Hierarchy

There is an acceptance and expectations that different people have different levels of power and influence and deserve different treatment. Often only the more superior people will contribute their opinions or ideas. Dress and speech tend to be more formal.

Polychronic Time

Time is estimated, fluid, and abundant and moves in many directions. People tend to focus on multiple things simultaneously. Punctuality is conditional depending on the other parties and circumstances.