

Cultural Differences in Approaching Criticism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about different cultural responses to and perspectives on criticism. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Cultural Groups Approach Criticism with Different Styles
2. Verbal Style in Low and High Context Cultures
3. Responsibility for Effectively Conveying a Message
4. Collectivism and Individualism
5. Face
6. Eye Contact

1. Cultural Groups Approach Criticism with Different Styles

A **culture** is a system of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that form distinctive ways of life. Different cultural groups have different ways of communicating both verbally and non-verbally.

While globalization and media have moderated many of the traditional differences for younger audiences, it is wise to consider five important areas where cultural differences could play a role when giving and receiving criticism:

- Verbal style in low and high context cultures
- Instrumental versus affective message responsibility
- Collectivism and individualism in cultures
- Face
- Eye contact



TERM TO KNOW

Culture

The beliefs, values, behavior and material objects that constitute a people's way of life; the arts, customs, and

habits that characterize a particular society or nation.

2. Verbal Style in Low and High Context Cultures

In low context cultures such as in the United States and Germany, there is an expectation that people will say what is on their mind directly; they will not "beat around the bush. "

In high context cultures, such as in Japan and China, people are more likely to use indirect speech, hints, and subtle suggestions to convey meaning.

3. Responsibility for Effectively Conveying a Message

Is the speaker responsible for conveying a message, or the audience? The *instrumental* style of speaking is sender-orientated; the burden is on the speaker to make him or herself understood.

The *affective* style is receiver-orientated and places more responsibility on the listener. With this style, the listener must pay attention to verbal, nonverbal, and relationship clues in order to understand the message.

Chinese, Japanese, and many Native American cultures are affective cultures, whereas the American culture is more instrumental.

IN CONTEXT

Think about sitting in your college classroom listening to a lecturer. If you do not understand the material, where does the responsibility lie? In the United States, students believe that it is up to the professor to communicate the material to the students. However, when posing this question to a group of Chinese students, you may encounter a different sense of responsibility. Listeners who were raised in a more affective environment respond with "no, it's not you; it is our job to try harder. " These kinds of students accept responsibility as listeners who work to understand the speaker.

4. Collectivism and Individualism

Are the speaker and listeners from **collectivist** or individualistic cultures? When a person or culture has a collective orientation they place the needs and interests of the group above individual desires or motivations.

In contrast, cultures with individualistic orientations view the self as most important. Each person is viewed as responsible for his or her own success or failure in life.

When you provide feedback or criticism if you are from an individualistic culture, you may speak directly to one individual and that individual will be responsible. However, if you are speaking with someone from a culture which is more collectivist, your feedback may be viewed as shared by all the members of the same

group, who may assume responsibility for the actions of each other.



TERM TO KNOW

Collectivism

Philosophic, political, religious, economic, or social outlook that stresses the priority of group goals over individual goals and the importance of cohesion within social groups.

5. Face

Face is usually thought of as a sense of self-worth, especially in the eyes of others. Research with Chinese university students showed that they view a loss of face as a failure to measure up to one's sense of self-esteem or what is expected by others.

In more individualistic cultures, speakers and listeners are concerned with maintaining their own face and not so much focused on that of others.

However, in an intercultural situation involving collectivist cultures, the speaker should not only be concerned with maintaining his or her own face, but also that of the listeners.



TERM TO KNOW

Face

A sense of self-worth or self-esteem, especially in the eyes of others.

6. Eye Contact

Rules about maintaining eye contact vary from culture to culture and influence how we approach feedback, questioning, and criticism.

In many cultures, it is a sign of respect to not look someone in the eye directly— the exact opposite of what most North Americans expect.

 **EXAMPLE** In many traditional Arab cultures, it is inappropriate for a woman to maintain eye contact with a man. Additionally, in many African American and Latin American communities, it is considered respectful for a child not to look directly at an adult who is speaking to them.

It is important not to construe lack of eye contact as a sign of indifference or disrespect.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **different cultures approach communication differently**. A **low context culture** such as the United States people will say what is on their minds directly; they will not "beat around the bush." In **high context cultures** such as in Japan and China, people use indirect speech, hints, and subtle suggestions to convey messages. The instrumental style is sender-orientated; the burden is on the speaker to make him or herself understood. The affective style is more receiver-

orientated and places more **responsibility for conveying a message** on the listener. **Collectivist** orientation places the needs and interests of the group above individual desires or motivations. In contrast, cultures with **individualistic** orientations view the self as most important. **Face** is often thought of as a sense of self-worth that we want others to have of us. Rules about maintaining **eye contact** vary from culture to culture and influence how we approach feedback, questioning, and criticism.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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