

High and Low Context Communication

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the ways in which cultures vary when it comes to direct communication.

The particular areas of focus include:

1. Degrees of Directness in Communication
 - a. Low Context Communication
 - b. High Context Communication
2. Low and High Context Communication in Conflict

1. Degrees of Directness in Communication

If you've grown up in the United States or lived here for a while, you know that this culture values direct communication.

However, not all cultures value direct communication in this way; cultures vary in their directness when it comes to verbal communication.

We can divide cultures into two broad groups based on this:

- Low context communication
- High context communication

1a. Low Context Communication

The United States falls into the **low context communication** category because this culture values directness. Low context communication cultures are very direct, so the meaning of what people say is mostly carried verbally. People in these cultures don't rely a lot on context or nonverbals for the real message to get across.

While all cultures use nonverbal context, low context communication cultures tend not to rely on it as much as high context communication cultures.

In other words, people in these cultures want others to get to the point; they believe the primary purpose of language is to transmit information.



TERM TO KNOW

Low Context Communication

A communication style in which the majority of a message is carried directly and overtly through a code requiring minimal contextual interpretation on the part of the receiver; also known as a direct communication style.

1b. High Context Communication

In contrast, **high context communication** cultures interpret much of a message via context and more subtle nonverbal cues.

This is known as an indirect communication style; the meaning is in the context and nonverbals. The real focus is on courtesy and respect, rather than on simply getting to the point.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Say you are writing a document for a business situation in a low context communication culture. You would open the document with some courtesies and statements of respect instead of getting right to the point like you might if you were communicating in the United States.

In high context communication cultures, language is not only about transmitting information, but also about preserving social interests and harmony.



TERM TO KNOW

High Context Communication

A communication style in which the listener or receiver of communication is expected to interpret much of a message via context; also known as an indirect communication style.

2. Low and High Context Communication in Conflict

When people with two different degrees of directness in communication interact, there can sometimes be misunderstanding or even conflict.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Two men are standing in a room and having a conversation. One man is younger, and he's wearing a hat. The other man is older, and of higher status and rank. The older man, without the hat, looks at the younger man and says, "Nice hat." If the younger man is from a low context communication culture, he might take what the older man said at face value; the younger man would probably say, "Thank you."

However, if the younger man comes from a high context communication culture, he's going to read into the contextual cues. He may think, "This man is really telling me that I shouldn't be wearing a hat because we're indoors. He is my senior, and he's letting me know that I shouldn't have this hat on." So the younger man might take off the hat and say, "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have been wearing the hat."

Those are two totally different responses coming from two totally different ways of hearing the message.

Because communication is about both transmitting information and preserving social harmony and interests, people in high context communication cultures are very sensitive to the effect their words have on others. They can thus be very uncomfortable coming right out and being direct.

IN CONTEXT

Let's say there is a business person from the United States, a low context communication culture, doing business in a country that has a high context communication culture. The business person arrives at the planned time, ready to get to work immediately. This person maybe exchanges a few niceties, but then wants to be direct, efficient, and get the job done.

Conversely, the people from the high context communication culture approach this differently. Because the project they're working on is important, there is preliminary socializing to set the tone and get to know people; they might discuss things that have nothing to do with the project, such as sports, the weather, or family. All of this involves reading cues and understanding the context.

This situation could easily cause a misunderstanding. The person from the low context communication culture could be thinking, "They're not really serious about this project. Why aren't we getting to work?" Meanwhile, the people from the high context communication culture may be feeling as though this business person from the United States is rushing work, and is insensitive about family and other topics that are being discussed.

This person might also be seen as insensitive to feelings, because when they ask the team, "Are there any disagreements here?" and expects a direct yes or no answer, they might not interpret a question response such as "Do you think we could consider...?" as disagreement. They might just keep moving forward because there was no direct objection to the plan.

Because indirect communication can feel like hinting or not being clear to someone from a low context communication culture, a person from a high context communication culture might not feel heard.



BIG IDEA

This difference between directness and indirectness in communication, or low context communication and high context communication, is a fundamental concept to understand in order to avoid miscommunication and conflict.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that cultures vary in their **degree of directness in communication**. In particular, cultures either value low context communication, which is very direct, or high context communication, which is more indirect with a focus on contextual cues. You now understand that the differences between **low context and high context communication can lead to conflict**. Therefore, it's important to understand that not all people communicate in the same way; some people are more direct while others are more indirect. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

High Context Communication

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message via context; also known as an indirect communication style.

Low Context Communication

A communication style in which the majority of a message is carried directly and overtly through a code requiring minimal contextual interpretation on the part of the receiver; also known as a direct communication style.