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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: LOW-CONTEXT VS. HIGH-CONTEXT COMUNICATION IN GLOBAL BUSINESS

COMUNICARE INTERCULTURALĂ: COMUNICAREA CU CONTEXT REDUS VS. COMUNICAREA CU CONTEXT RIDICAT

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Abstract: *Comunicarea interculturală reprezintă una dintre competențele esențiale pentru a supraviețui în mediul de afaceri global. Prezentul articol analizează distincția dintre culturile low-context (LC) şi high-context (HC), principiu introdus de antropologul Edward T. Hall în lucrările The Silent Language (1959) şi Beyond Culture (1976) şi extinsă de Erin Meyer în The Culture Map (2014). Pentru a oferi studiului un caracter credibil ,cercetarea utilizează metode de analiză bibliografică, comparație transculturală şi studii de caz din practici internaționale de business. Rezultatele demonstrează că lipsa de cunoștințe în privința diferențelor HC/LC generează eşecuri frecvente în negocieri, evaluări de performanță şi managementul echipelor cu structură multiculturală. Metafora „mării mari şi mării mici" are rolul să ilustreze în mod accesibil aceste diferențe: culturile HC funcționează ca un mediu vast de semnificații de sine înțelese, în timp ce culturile LC funcționează ca un grup restrâns în care mesajul trebuie transmis direct și la subiect. Articolul concluzionează că atât conştientizarea profilului cultural propriu cât şi al interlocutorului reprezintă o condiție fundamentală a comunicării eficace în context global.*
Cuvinte cheie: *comunicare interculturală, low-context, high-context, management intercultural, culturi organizaționale, negociere internațională*
JEL CLASSIFICATION: F23, M14, M16, Z13

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of porous borders, one in which cultures collide daily: in boardrooms when deciding on important matters, in video calls that prove distance does not need to be an obstacle, in classrooms across history and beyond, and even social media feeds that connect us to the farthest corners of the globe. Globalization, has made intercultural competence not only a line in a specialist's portofolio but also a requirement for anyone who aims to operate in a professional environment. Whether you are in the process of closing a much-awaited deal with a Japanese partner, managing your team spread across Amsterdam and Mumbai, or simply about to answer an email from your German colleague, your cultural roots are always showing in the way you: shape, send, receive, and interpret every message.

This article analyses the distinction between low-context (LC) and high-context (HC) cultures, based on the foundational work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1959, 1976) as well as the research of Erin Meyer (2014) and Malcolm Gladwell (2008). The central metaphor used throughout: 'the big sea and the small sea' captures the essential asymmetry: HC communicators operate with a strong assumption of shared context, while LC communicators rely on explicit and clearly stated information.

The objective of this article is to explain this contrast, map its real-world consequences in business settings, and offer practice-oriented guidance for professionals working across cultural borders.

CONTENT

Edward T. Hall was the first to formalize the HC/LC framework (1976, p. 91). His perspective on communication was shaped by an unusual professional path that included fieldwork with Native American communities, training at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute, and long-term applied research in cross-cultural interactions which helped him bridge academic theory with real-world observations.

He defined HC communication as a system in which "*most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite.*"

Hall's earlier work (1959) had already established that culture operates as a silent system of rules, emphasizing the idea that the vast majority of human interaction is not only verbal but also depends on the context, space, and the time it takes place in. He argued that everything we do, from the way we arrange our desks before an important meeting to how close we stand to a stranger in line at the supermarket, carries culturally encoded meaning. To better understand this, the author identified ten primary message systems such as: time, space, work, play, defence, and learning, and began mapping *"the invisible grammar of culture*".

In her 2014 study Erin Meyer, turned Hall's dual system into an eight-scale model that includes: communication, evaluation, persuasion, leadership, decision-making, trust, disagreement, and scheduling. Through her research, grounded in over a decade of data she collected at INSEAD, she demonstrates that the traits we get from our cultural imprint do not always align in predictable ways. For instance, Israel combines high-context patterns with extremely direct negative feedback "*a combination that consistently surprises cross-cultural practitioners"* (Meyer, 2014, p. 38).

Similarly, Geert Hofstede (2001) complements this perspective by introducing dimensions such as power distance and individualism, which are closely related to high-context and low-context communication tendencies.

Meanwhile, Gladwell (2008),argues that agricultural traditions (particularly the cooperative nature of rice farming in East Asian societies) have shaped long-term cultural values such as precision, collective coordination, and sustained attention. People do not only depend on each other, they act as one-unit system. These customs have deeply embedded practices, he suggests, continue to influence contemporary high-context communication styles.

This article uses a qualitative research method combining bibliographic analysis, cross-cultural case study examination, and comparative mapping.

Primary sources include: Hall (1959, 1976), Meyer (2014), and Gladwell (2008), which were analysed for their definitional and illustrative contributions. Secondary sources including Hofstede (2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) and Lewis (2006) have the purpose to ensure consistency across the findings.

The research identified three domains in which HC/LC mismatches generate the most significant and measurable costs in business contexts: negotiation and deal-making, performance feedback, and leadership of multicultural teams.

Table 1. HC vs. LC Analysis

	High-Context (HC)	Low-Context (LC)
Messages	Implicit (meaning in context and relationship)	Explicit (everything stated in words)
Relationships	Deep, long-term (trust built over time)	Short-term (based on tasks and results)
Agreements	Word of honour; personal trust as foundation	Detailed written contracts required
Decisions	Consensus-based,collective	Individual
Time	Flexible,multiple tasks at once (polychronic)	Strict,one task at a time (monochronic)
Feedback	Indirect (via hints or third parties)	Direct,(face-to-face, specific)

Source:Hall (1976) and Meyer (2014)

In HC culture relationships are made based off first impressions, as a result, first meetings become more than just a deal-making opportunity.

In his 2014 publication, Meyer documents cases where American negotiators made premature concessions in response to Japanese silence, silence that, in HC Japan, signals reflection, not necessarily reluctance.

In performance evaluation, Meyer's case of Sabine Dulac (a French finance director relocated to Chicago) illustrates how the American LC formula of three positives framing one negative produced a catastrophic decoding failure. Dulac comes from a culture where negative feedback is more direct and positive feedback more sparse, when she received a severe formal warning she interpreted it as praise (Meyer, 2014, pp. 12–18). This demonstrates that it is not a personality failure, but rather the predictable outcome of two incompatible feedback codes.

Gladwell's (2008) analysis of the 1990 Avianca crash case provides evidence of the real-world cost of HC/LC mismatch. The Colombian co-pilot, operating within a high-context, high-hierarchy culture, used indirect, softened language to communicate fuel emergency to American air traffic controllers. The LC controllers, trained to act only on explicit verbal information, did not register the urgency. Seventy-three passengers died as a direct consequence of this communicative incompatibility.



Figure 1. The HC–LC Cultural Spectrum: from the Big Sea to the Small Sea *Source: Adapted from Meyer (2014) and Hall (1976). (Positions are approximate and relative).*

Meyer's eight-scale model (Table 2) provides a mapping of the HC/LC distinction across the functional domains most relevant to international business management.

Table 2. Meyer's Eight Cultural Scales HC vs. LC

Scale (Meyer, 2014)	High-Context	Low-Context
Communicating	Implicit, between the lines	Explicit, direct, clear
Evaluating	Indirect negative feedback	Direct negative feedback
Persuading	Principles-first (deductive)	Applications-first (inductive)
Leading	Hierarchical - boss decides	Egalitarian - everyone has a voice
Deciding	Consensus-based	Individual, fast
Trusting	Relationship-based	Task and competence-based
Disagreeing	Avoided, handled indirectly	Expressed openly
Scheduling	Flexible, polychronic	Linear, monochronic

Source:Meyer (2014, pp. 22–217)

CONCLUSIONS

Put in practice, the following knowledge supports the idea that the cultural background of the people with whom we, as a business and as managers, interact and work must be given far more importance. As an advantage, we get insights that go beyond personality allowing us to understand patterns.

The following recommendations come as a result:

1. Organisations operating internationally should implement trainings and team-building activities based on the specific topic of understanding multilingual subtleties such as the meaning behind: tone and specific word choice.

2. Leaders of multicultural teams should adopt strategic communication styles meant to fit the cultural past of their employees. This would most likely improve efficiency overall, and contribute positively to the working climate. It would also deepen the employer-employee bond and it would give and advantageous position of respect within the company.
3. Individual professionals should invest in mapping their own cultural communication profile. Understanding yourself and your own involuntary language makes you more aware of how important culture actually is and how indispensable it is in our lives. This way you can be always one step ahead of any potential communication barriers.

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