

Handout 5.1

High-Context and Low-Context Cultures

The concepts of high-context and low-context cultures are terms that were used by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*. The book explored a culture’s tendency to use high-context messages over low-context messages in routine communication.

High-Context

In a higher-context culture, many things are left unspoken. The culture itself, or the circumstances, contribute to the explanation. People in these cultures emphasize interpersonal relationships. Trust is important to any business transaction. Most high-context cultures prefer group harmony and consensus to individual achievement.

High-context communication assumes that the people we speak to are wise to the context in which our message is sent, and ideas are not spelled out in detail. Group members make assumption that they share common meanings, and prefer indirect or covert messaging that relies heavily on nonverbal codes and understanding. Words are not so important as context, which might include the speaker’s tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture—and even the person’s family history and status.

A Japanese manager explained his culture’s communication style to an American: “We are a homogeneous people and don’t have to speak as much as you do here. When we say one word, we understand ten, but here you have to say ten to understand one.” So when someone from a high-context culture speaks to someone from his or her own cultural group, just a few words can carry a complex message very effectively.

Low-Context

When the same message is delivered to someone outside the group from a low-context culture, the message will probably not be as clear. For people from low-context cultures, the value of a single word can be vague. The speaker needs to be much more explicit. The words must convey the message, not the context in which they are spoken.

People from low-context cultures value directness and logic. Decisions are based on fact rather than intuition. When people from low-context cultures communicate, they expect the conversation to be straightforward and intend for their words to be taken literally.

Countries With Low-Context Cultures	Countries With High-Context Cultures
United States	Africa
England	Brazil
Germany	China
Switzerland	Japan
Australia	Italy
Canada	Greece

HANDOUTS
Providing Culturally Competent Services to Victims of Crime
