



INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Direct & Indirect Communication

The dimension of communication on which cultures differ the most and the one affecting more aspects of the communication dynamic is the matter of directness. The differences between the two poles of this dimension, directness and indirectness, probably account for more cross-cultural misunderstanding than any other single factor. These two poles are described below:

Indirect / High Context

People in these cultures tend to infer, suggest, and imply rather than say things directly. At least that is how they appear to people from more direct/low-context cultures – though not, of course, to each other. These cultures tend to be more collectivist, where harmony and saving face are the greatest goods; hence, there is a natural tendency toward indirectness and away from confrontation. In collectivist cultures, in-groups are well established and members have an intuitive understanding of each other, in part because of shared experiences. This means that as a rule people don't need to spell things out or say very much to get their message across. This intuitive understanding is known as context, and in high-context cultures messages often don't even need words to be expressed; nonverbal communication may be enough, or the message may be expressed in terms of what is *not* said or done. The goal of most communication exchanges is preserving and strengthening the relationship with the other person.

Direct/Low Context

Direct cultures tend to be less collectivist and more individualist than indirect cultures, with less well-developed in-groups. People lead more independent lives and have fewer shared experiences; hence, there is less instinctive understanding of others. People need to spell things out and be more explicit, to say exactly what they mean rather than merely suggest or imply. There is less context, less that can be taken for granted. The spoken word carries most of the meaning; you should not read anything into what is not said or done. The goal of most communication exchanges is getting or giving information.

No culture uses the direct or indirect approach exclusively, but most cultures tend to be more one way than the other. Individuals within a given culture, of course, may be anywhere along the scale because of particular personal differences. As a general rule, though, you should expect to find most individuals on the same side of the divide as their culture as a whole.

The following exercise asks you to consider the definitions of indirect/high-context and direct/low-context communication styles as presented above and apply them to specific examples of behaviour. Below you will find a list of twelve items, each of which is more representative of one pole of this dimension than the other. Read each item and put an *I* next to those behaviours more consistent with indirectness and a *D* next to those more consistent with directness.

- _____ 1. This is like the communication between siblings.

- _____ 2. This is like the communication between two casual acquaintances.

- _____ 3. People are reluctant to say no.

- _____ 4. You may have to read between the lines to understand what someone is saying.

- _____ 5. It's best to tell it like it is.

- _____ 6. Yes means yes.

- _____ 7. Yes means I hear you.

- _____ 8. There is no need to read between the lines.

- _____ 9. Who attends your meeting is an indication of how important you or the topic is.

- _____ 10. Who attends your meeting is an indication of who is available to attend.

- _____ 11. Silence may mean disapproval or dissatisfaction.

- _____ 12. People tell you what they think you want to hear.