



Guide to Principles of Culture and Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-cultural Competence

Cross-cultural competence is the ability to adapt to changing cultural situations and achieve mission success. Developing cross-cultural competence (3C) does not require a thorough understanding of all the cultures to which you may be exposed. However, it *does* require that you understand that cultural differences exist and greatly influence the thoughts, beliefs, and behavior of individuals.

Cross-cultural competence entails a combination of two key parts: **knowledge** and **strategies for success**. These can be attained through education, training, and experience. Let's briefly review each of these key parts.

Knowledge

First, you should understand the influence of *your own* culture on the ways you think and act, your beliefs and values, and what you consider normal behavior in everyday situations.

Second, look for patterns in others' cultures that lead you to greater understanding of their beliefs, values, thought processes, and behaviors. As you build your knowledge of other cultures, use the cultural domains, the iceberg model of culture, and different cultural tendencies in behavior and communication (reviewed later in this lesson) to help you make sense of that knowledge.

Third, you should know strategies for avoiding ethnocentrism¹:

- a. Practice suspending judgment: what is normal for you may not be normal for others, so hold off on judgmental attitudes until you know their culture better.
- b. Think about the point of view of the people from the other culture: what makes sense

to them and why? What is normal for them? If you don't know, ask them!

- c. Adjust your behavior or advise your Airmen to adjust their behavior to accommodate different perspectives and still accomplish your mission.

Strategies for Success

In general, all research and lessons learned from the field say that people should do the following in order to be more successful in cross-cultural interactions:

- ❖ **Be flexible**
- ❖ **Be adaptable**
- ❖ **Be open to engagement**
- ❖ **Show interest in other cultures**
- ❖ **Seek others' perspectives**

Moreover, interviews with military personnel indicate that these are their most successful approaches to cross-cultural interactions:

- a. Understand how US culture affects your (and your staff's) preparation, planning, and decision-making
- b. Manage your attitude toward other cultures (see also "avoiding ethnocentrism", above) by presenting yourself neutrally and checking your assumptions about the situation
- c. Be proactive in seeking out knowledge about other people and their cultures
- d. Seek feedback and reflect on cross-cultural encounters
- e. Transfer knowledge to other Airmen as systematically as possible (After Action Reports, Lessons Learned, notes on Key Leader Engagements, unit diaries, effect turnover processes, etc.)

Domains of Culture

Cultural domains are universal categories of human interaction, belief, behavior, and meaning. There are many ways to classify cultural universals; the AF Culture and Language Center developed the model depicted in the image below, which has twelve domains. People in all cultures share these broad domains, even though they have different ways of expressing them. In other words, *every* culture has ways of organizing the family unit and defining who is “family” and who is not, but these definitions vary across different cultures.



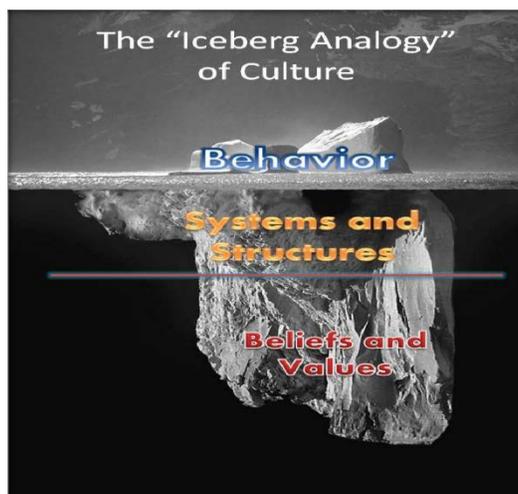
The Iceberg Model of Culture

A common model used to help explain culture is the image of an iceberg. Above the surface of the water, an iceberg may look small, while underneath the surface, it is much larger and goes very deep into the ocean. Culture is much the same.

a. On the “surface,” we see people’s behavior as part of their culture. We might talk about it and wonder at it, but may not understand why people do things a certain way.

b. Just below the “surface”, there are the systems and structures of culture: these are things like family

organization, the educational system, the rank structure of the military, or other ways we have to organize ourselves into groups and hierarchies.



These elements influence our behavior in ways we don’t often notice, although we can “see” them more as we learn more about a culture.

c. At the deepest level of culture are beliefs and values. These are the parts of culture that shape

everything at the middle and the surface level. Beliefs and values are the hardest parts of

culture to “see”, and we may not even be aware of them as beliefs or values. If someone asks, “why do you send your children to school?”, they are asking you about your value for education, your belief in the school system as a way of educating children, and the actual activity of preparing children to learn every day.

Cultural Tendencies and Communication Styles

This section highlights the cultural tendencies toward collectivism or individualism, toward polychronism or monochronism, and high context and low context styles of communicationⁱⁱⁱ.

Collectivism & Individualism

Collectivism and individualism are opposite ends of a spectrum or scale that shows how people relate to the people around them and how much they see themselves as part of a group. No culture is absolutely collectivist or absolutely individualist. Each is somewhere along the scale, so we say that cultures “tend toward” collectivism or individualism. *Collectivism* is the tendency to consider extended family affiliations and being a member of a larger group (ethnic, national, tribal, etc.) as very important throughout a person's life. Apart from the majority cultures of North America and Western Europe, most cultures in the world tend toward collectivism. People in more collectivist cultures usually live with their family until marriage, and even may live in the same household, building, or neighborhood as their parents and extended family after marriage. People tend to remain economically and legally dependent on their family until marriage, and even sometimes after marriage. People also tend to turn more to their extended family network for economic support or labor than to institutions.

Every aspect of culture has these three levels. It's useful to think through these levels when you are trying to understand a situation, problem, or interaction in a cross-cultural context.ⁱⁱ Next, we will look at some cultural tendencies and communication styles.

Individualism is the tendency to consider a person as standing alone in society, with the freedom to determine his or her own destiny, and responsible for his or her own actions. The U.S. and most Western European cultures tend to be more individualistic, though European cultures are more collectivist than the U.S. mainstream culture. This means that extended family ties play a less important role in our lives, and we do not usually consider the influence of larger groups (or the impact on larger groups) when we make decisions about our lives. As a child grows into adolescence, he or she becomes less dependent on family and identifies more strongly with other groups (sports, political, religious, and so forth). When a person becomes independent, he or she assumes economic and legal independence from their family. Typically, adults will turn to financial institutions (government, banks, and money lenders) as well as their family for economic support or assistance (i.e. getting a loan, finding a job, or hiring someone).

Monochronic and Polychronic Cultural Tendencies

Cultures that *tend to* have a more linear sense of time are called *monochronic*. Monochronic cultures tend to view time as something that is earned, saved, spent, or wasted. Cultures with a monochronic orientation typically value punctuality, adhere strictly to schedules and deadlines, and prefer to work in a systematic manner completing one task at a time.

Wasting time is viewed as frivolous. Time is measured by events that happen one after another, in the past, present, and future. Monochronic cultures are more prevalent in northern Europe, the United States, and Canada. These majority cultures were strongly impacted by the Industrial Revolution, which fostered a task-oriented approach to work.

Preoccupation with time management combined with less concern for relationship building is also a characteristic of a *low-context* communication style (see below).

Polychronic cultures, however, have very different ways of thinking about time. In a more polychronic culture, time is treated as cyclical, uncontrollable and/or naturally disorderly. Events overlap and are not seen as progressing through history one after another. Time is viewed as uncontrollable due to the unpredictability of life that may cause a situation to change depending on how events unfold. A common expression in many Middle Eastern cultures, *Inshallah* (God willing), typifies a polychronic approach to time where the individual is given a certain amount of latitude for being late - or not showing up at all for a meeting. In such cultures, allowances are made for unforeseen circumstances (running into an old friend,

e.g.) and delays are viewed as part of life. Actions tend to be spontaneous with relationships being the focus of attention.

While people with a polychronic inclination towards time may strive to meet deadlines and schedules, they tend to be more flexible and relaxed. Interruptions are common and the focus tends to be on doing multiple tasks simultaneously. Moreover, people may have a fatalistic view on how and why events occur, meaning they don't see themselves as having much control over the future, or they simply don't dwell on schedules. There are other factors that contribute to what we see as a *laissez-faire* attitude towards time. Many places we deploy to have limited infrastructure, with unreliable roads and transportation, and being late is frequently regarded as normal or expected. Finally, a personal or family issue could easily take priority over a business issue, understandably causing one to be late. Polychronic cultures tend to be more prevalent in Latin America, the Middle East, the Mediterranean basin, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Placing a high value on relationships and activities with little regard for time is also a characteristic of a *high context* communication style (see below).

High Context and Low Context Communication Styles

Context

A message's **context** consists of its surrounding and influencing factors. Context always reflects:

- the roles of the people communicating and those around them,
- the hierarchy between the people present,
- the speaker's relationship to the group, and
- the history of the people involved, among other factors.

High Context Communication Style.

When listening to someone speak, people in *relatively* high context cultures pay more attention to the message's context and the verbal and nonverbal cues than people in *relatively* low context cultures (no culture completely adheres to high context or low context communication styles; these are preferences).

Many predominantly *collectivist* cultures like those in East Asia (Japan, Korea and

China), the Middle East, Latin America and the Mediterranean tend toward *high context communication styles*. In these cultures, one's relationship to the group is a dominant factor in any interaction; it must be preserved and enhanced at all times. That is why group loyalty, patronage, and hierarchy are so important to people in more collectivist cultures. They are more likely to postpone making decisions, since that would be disrespectful to those in the hierarchy above them. They are also less likely to disagree publicly with someone or openly criticize another person, since that would reflect poorly on the other person's family/reputation, and might bring that person's whole clan down upon the offender.

In cultures that tend toward high context communication, it is usually essential to establish a relationship and trust with your counterpart before you can proceed with business. Therefore, professional engagements are often culturally scripted, and any attempt to accelerate the tempo at the expense of social pleasantries will likely result in deadlock. When interacting with cultures where Western influence and globalization are prominent, you may find the pace has quickened in some areas. However, you should still respect, and be ready to adapt to if possible, the local cultural communication styles and conceptions of time and space.

These many tendencies lead toward communication styles that favor the listener's ability to read between the lines, understand intonation, and slight gestures. Speakers tend to choose words that are ambiguous, knowing that an adept listener will understand based on the context of the interaction. Lessons are taught through analogies, parables, or other stories that illustrate knowledge and wisdom. These are not attempts to be sneaky, disrespectful, or obtuse. They are more indirect than low

context communicators are used to, but their way of communicating is not better or worse than ours. It's just the way people in higher context cultures have grown up communicating, and it seems natural to them. They may even highly respect people who are good at communicating in this way.

In Japan, for example, preserving harmony within the group and saving face are critically important. Communication leans towards nonverbal subtleties and messages that allow the listener to read between the lines of what is actually being said. You would be more likely to hear indirect criticisms or allusions to a person's behavior, rather than outright critiques.

Likewise, people in cultures that tend toward high context communication are not likely to refuse a request outright. Doing so might offend the asker and damage the long-term relationship between the parties. It might not be up to that person to give his or her assent, because of the hierarchical nature of their group relationships. Saying no might also draw undue criticism to a person for making promises that may not be kept. A high context communicator may therefore be vague, using phrases such as "it might be difficult," "it would not be a problem", or "Inshallah" that will not definitely commit them to a course of action.^{iv}

Low Context Communication Style

When listening to someone speak, people in relatively low context cultures pay more attention to the explicit meaning of the verbal message. Low context communicators often stress a lot of details, facts, and statistics with little regard to how the message is delivered. They favor communication that gets directly to the point rather than communicating through analogies and high context hints. It is the sender's responsibility to provide a clear message that can easily be decoded by the receiver.

Many relatively *individualistic* cultures, like those predominant in North America and much of north-western Europe, tend toward *low context communication styles*. This is not to say that group membership and hierarchy are not valued, but people pay deference to their role in the hierarchy by taking responsibility on themselves. They need to prove their point with verifiable information, since they don't rely on the power of their social group to back them up. Since saving face for the group is less of a concern, "saying what you mean and meaning what you say" are more highly valued characteristics in low context communication.

American Military Communication

The American military exercises a low context communication style. We consider direct, concise, and clear language valuable, and we expect people to quickly deliver their message. Anything else is typically

reacted to with impatience, confusion, frustration, and even contempt. Often, low context communicators assume that high context communication is ineffective. This is not true! Any style of communication can be effective when listeners know how to interpret a speaker's message and how to reply in a way that is culturally appropriate.

However, people who have worked closely with coalition forces, local populations, and non-governmental organizations will attest that mission success is often directly linked to their ability to adapt to unique, high context, communication situations. Your counterparts may judge you as more respectful and trustworthy if you can understand, respect, and adjust to their way of communicating. In turn, you should explain your way of communicating to them so that each of you better understands the other's style. The table below summarizes differences between high and low context communication styles.^v

High and Low Context Culture differences¹⁵		
Factor	High-context culture	Low-context culture
Overtness of messages	Many covert and implicit messages, with use of metaphor and reading between the lines.	Many overt and explicit messages that is simple and clear.
Locus of control and attribution for failure	Inner locus of control and personal acceptance for failure	Outer locus of control and blame of others for failure
Use of non-verbal communication	Much nonverbal communication	More focus on verbal communication than body language
Expression of reaction	Reserved, inward reactions	Visible, external, outward reaction
Cohesion and separation of groups	Strong distinction between in-group and out-group. Strong sense of family.	Flexible and open grouping patterns, changing as needed
People bonds	Strong people bonds with affiliation to family and community	Fragile bonds between people with little sense of loyalty.

Summary

The impact of culture cannot be overstated in any discussion about the USAF achieving mission success in its wide array of global commitments. This reading has provided you with a broad overview of foundational knowledge of cultural ideas and principles. You now have a better understanding of the cross-cultural competence model, terms and definitions, and you now have a better understanding of how the domains of culture relate to the iceberg model. The goal has been to help you create new categories for organizing cultural experiences and ways to integrate knowledge with skills, in order to help you improve the quality of your future cross-cultural interactions.

ⁱ Ethnocentrism is the human tendency to negatively judge other cultures, behaviors, values, beliefs, etc., against our own culture. We tend to think of our own cultural beliefs and practices as the best way, or the normal way to do things, and everyone else's are not as good, worse, abnormal, etc. Cultural competence requires fighting against our ethnocentric tendencies.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from: Schein, E. (2010), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp. 23-34; Hall, E. T. (1981 (1959)), *The Silent Language*, New York, NY: Anchor Books, pp. 188-194; Hall, E. T. (1981 (1976)), *Beyond Culture*, New York, NY: Anchor Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Material in the following section is adapted from Hall, E.T. (1981 (1959)); Hall, E. T. (1982 (1966)); Hills, M.D. (2002), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Values Orientation Theory. *Online Readings in Psychology*; Kluckhohn, F.R. and Strodtbeck, F.L. (1961), *Variations in Value Orientations*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson; Hofstede, G., G.J. Hofstede, and M. Minkov (2010), *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill; and Ting-Toomey, S. (1985), *Toward a theory of conflict and culture*. In W. Gudykunst, L. Stewart and S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), *Communication, Culture and Organizational Processes*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

^{iv} Wunderle, W. (2007). *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness: A Primer for U.S. Armed Forces Deploying to Arab and Middle Eastern Countries*. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press.

^v Hall, E.T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. New York: Doubleday.