

NEGOTIATING ACROSS CULTURES (A communication perspective)

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According to the Air Force Culture and Language Center, Cross-Cultural Competence or 3C is defined as “the ability to quickly and accurately comprehend and then act appropriately and effectively in a culturally complex environment.” The idea is to achieve a desired effect, without necessarily having prior exposure to a particular group, region, or language.

NOTE: Key summary is the ability to Comprehend, Act, and Achieve a desired effect – without prior exposure!

Lack of awareness can lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and unintentional insult. For example, if you were walking into a negotiation with a Kenyan host and he grabbed your hand as you entered the room, your initial reaction could result in an unintended offense. You have an opportunity to counter incorrect stereotypes and begin to build trusting relationships. Simply being aware of how culture affects a negotiation can help you achieve mission success.

Worldview

Important to any cross-cultural negotiation is a brief understanding of worldview. Worldview is how people see, assess and judge events around them. This often includes abstract notions about the way the world is and often operates at the subconscious level. In part, this is who we are and can be discussed in a variety of sub categories that include individualistic or low context and collectivistic or high context societies. [1]

When discussing cross-cultural negotiations, individualistic (low context cultures) and collectivistic or (high context cultures) can explain a considerable amount of cultural misunderstandings. In today’s military environment it is not enough to simply focus on negotiation concepts; one must also consider how culture can impact the negotiation process.

Understanding a Low Context Society

Cultures such as the US and Northern European countries tend to be more on the individualistic or low context side.

Individualistic values: [2]

Have an **“I”** orientation

Value **“truth”** over **harmony & face**

Value **task** over **relationships**

The relatively extreme individualistic norm of American mainstream culture is made possible by a relatively high and dependable standard of living that allows self-sufficiency. This self-sufficiency often results in people valuing mastery of certain skills or being able to perform under pressure—by competing with and doing better than others. Personal independence is a virtue and often impacts the way we negotiate. Open debate is valued as a way to meet ones needs.

In a negotiation, low context cultures use direct communication with explicit verbal expressions and use much more factual and background information when speaking. Accuracy, directness, and clarity of speech are valued. Examples of low context cultures include the United States,

Canada, and Australia.

Understanding a High Context Society

Nearly three-fourths of the world's cultures can be described as collectivistic or high context.

Collectivistic values: [3]

Have a **“We”** orientation

Value **harmony & face** over **“truth”**

Value **relationships** over **task**

A person's identity in a high context society tends to be based on one's roles and experiences within the group. For example, people in traditional high context cultures have been described as developing “shared identities.”

In direct contrast to low context behavior, in a negotiation, high context cultures communicate in a less direct manner. They use context and delivery with many implied and non-verbal communications. This method of communication can be very complex, and is normally well understood within a cultural group, but not well understood outside the group. This presents a challenge during a negotiation. Communication may simply be misinterpreted due to cultural uniqueness. Examples of high context cultures include Japan, China, Africa, and the Middle East.

High context cultures use a *high context communication style* and tend to focus on status and context (social roles or positions) as well as the nonverbal channels (pauses, silence, tone of voice, etc.) During a negotiation, if your opposite expects you to pay greater attention to how something is said more so than what is said, confusion can arise. Your opposite may simply be looking for background information and focusing more on the relationship than the verbal message. They may be much less direct than you are used to in order to not offend. In direct contrast to a low context society where directness and clarity are valued, high context societies often allow the listener the opportunity to interpret message meaning. [4] In a high context society, truth is not an excuse to be blunt. Out of respect, one would allow the opposite to come to a conclusion on their own.

Improving Cross Cultural Communication (Listen more than you speak!)

As an American we often enter into a negotiation with barely an understanding of our own worldview let alone an understanding of our opposite's worldview. As mentioned earlier, effective cross-cultural negotiations are often predicated by developing good relationships. Good relationships often start by building trust. Trust-building not only takes time but often looks very different across cultures. For example, checking on an opposite's reputation, observing the opposite's non-verbal communication, and seeing how they deliver on minor items such as punctuality are all *assessments that must be made through the opposite's cultural expectations*. An entire book could not possibly cover all cultural nuisances, but simply understanding that differences exist, and developing better communication skills can go a long way to improving a negotiation.

In a negotiation, developing a friendship is not the goal. You do not have to like your opposite, but you need to respect them, and they need to respect you. Respect helps develop trust, which

helps open communication channels so that interests may be shared and used to develop potential solutions.

Reducing Communication Barriers

As Americans, we have a tendency to be conversational narcissists. This occurs when a person competes for attention by changing the subject in order to favor oneself. [5] The overuse of this practice is an obstacle to effective communication and ultimately detracts from your ability to negotiate. Your counterpart may shutdown, believing that you do not care to listen to what he/she has to say.

In a cross-cultural negotiation, the aim is to reduce communication barriers. We are not talking about a language barrier, but simply misunderstandings generated from all forms of miscommunication. In a cross-cultural environment, something as simple as an interruption can have a lasting impact. Interrupting is a habit in the United States and is often accepted as a normal part of communication, but many high context cultures view this behavior as aggressive and consider it an attempt to dominate the conversation. This *self-oriented* battle for conversational control may go unnoticed, or might even be valued in a low context society, but in a cross-cultural negotiation, this behavior could derail progress and damage trust.

To avoid unnecessary interruptions and to better understand the opposite's interests, try to be an *active listener* by using support responses. The following examples shift the focus from you to your opposite and can immediately improve communication.

Clarify understanding - ask the speaker to paraphrase the message to check Accuracy.

Pose **critical thinking** questions that cannot be answered by a "yes" or a "no." The 5 "Ws" are great critical thinking questions [Who, What, When, Where, Why].

Make **supportive assertions** – "I think that's great" or "I never would have looked at it that way"

Accept responsibility for understanding – good listeners are good because they accept responsibility and take an active approach to ensure understanding. [6] This is key in a collectivistic or high context society where the speaker not only considers, but values the listeners' responsibility for understanding.

Improved communication is valuable to any negotiation, but when the cross-cultural piece is added, the value of improved communication jumps exponentially. Asking questions allows the opposite to respond and frame answers, helps provide feedback, and promotes understanding of the speaker's point of view. This will improve your awareness and understanding of your opposite's values and beliefs while ultimately improving the negotiation.

Non Verbal Communication

Listening goes beyond hearing the spoken word. During a cross-cultural negotiation, to actively manage the relationship, it is important to pay attention to the opposite's nonverbal cues. These cues fall into five categories: *Touch, Space, Time, Body movement/Gestures and how something is said*. Time only permits a brief look at these topics, but even a small amount of awareness can help improve mission success.

How You Say What You Say

How something is said, or *Paralanguage* as the PhD's like to call it, is part of the study of nonverbal communication. "How we say what we say," not the actual spoken words. This aspect of communication is shaped by various elements, often giving the same words very different meanings. [7]

Volume: How loud or softly you are speaking

Rate of speech: Or how fast or slow you're talking

Use of silence/pauses

Imagine entering into a negotiation, unaware of cultural variations related to how something is said. What is your perception of someone who speaks loudly as opposed to a whisper, sincere as opposed to a sarcastic tone? Clearly, how you say something has an important impact on communication and ultimately the negotiation process.

For example, when Arabic speakers (such as in Morocco) ask information-seeking questions in English, how they speak can often be perceived by Americans as accusatory or aggressive. For Moroccan Arabs, loud volume and passionate tone communicate sincerity. [8] A simple misinterpretation can create a very uncomfortable situation.

Touch

Next, what experts call "*haptics*" involves the functions, perceptions, and meaning of *touch*. When we think about touch from a cross-cultural perspective, who touches whom, when, where, and how are all connected to our cultural upbringing.

At the beginning of a negotiation, Americans may shake hands while a Kenyan may embrace their visitors. An embrace may be extremely uncomfortable to many Americans, but for many high context cultures, this is a sign of respect. In the United States, holding hands and physical closeness is typically reserved for family or those who know each other very well. Touching between members of the same sex, especially men, is even less common.

If the Air Force sends you to a high context society, the use of touch may be used very differently than you are used to. For example, during a negotiation, if after several meetings, your opposite shakes hands when greeting you, you most likely failed to establish rapport. The amount of touch and closeness (discussed next) may be an indication of the amount of rapport you have developed.

Space and Distance

Proxemics is another fancy word for a rather simple topic, how *space or distance* affects the communication process. Most Americans live their lives utilizing space and distance in a similar fashion and as such do not pay much attention to it. We are used to a handshake that sets a standard for maintaining space and distance. When in Africa, where space is used very differently, suddenly you will notice (and may be uncomfortable with) how others use space and distance.

In the book *Hidden Dimension*, Hall (1966) discusses an intimate zone (contact to 18 inches) that is commonly used in many high context cultures as a sign of admiration. In fact, in some Arab countries there is a derogatory saying that someone is "withholding his breath," meaning they are

not able to get close enough to smell the person. This can lead to cultural misunderstanding as your counterpart attempts to move closer and you inadvertently keep backing away.

Time

Chronemics simply means the study of how people perceive time and how they structure time in their relationships. Your use of time sends a message without using a single word. In our society what is our view of time? We manage it and we assume time is limited. Arriving early is a sign of respect, we do not like to waste time, and time is valuable. Some of our expressions reveal our culture's preoccupation with time. Phrases such as "time is money," and "out of time," are indicators that we place a good deal of emphasis on time.

Many high context cultures put more emphasis on people and relationships rather than set schedules. Now, imagine your first meeting to negotiate the movement of supplies in Kenya. You arrive at 0900 as instructed by your hosts. Your hosts arrive at 0930. What is a typical reaction? "They are lazy," "they do not respect you." Now, imagine the meeting starts, but at 1000 the meeting comes to an abrupt halt and tea is served. How would you typically respond if you were focused on a deadline? The negotiation barely got started, and now you are breaking for tea? Well, in Botswana this is the norm. In fact, tea is usually served at 10am and then again at 3pm. If you are dealing with a culture with a different perspective on time, just be prepared to slow down and recognize your perspective of time may be very different from your counterparts.

Body Movement and Gestures

Finally, the study of *Body Movement and Gestures* has yet another elegant name, *Kinesics* and comes from the Greek word "motion." [9] Experts focus on many different areas but the more common focus is on:

Facial Expressions

Eye Movement/Behavior

Body Movements

Gestures

We could dedicate an entire guide to cross-cultural sensitivities related to body movement and gestures and still not scratch the surface. For example, in the United States we perceive eye contact as a sign of sincerity, but in Botswana maintaining eye contact can be viewed as disrespectful. Also, when someone from Botswana hands you something, it is always with the right hand, touching their right forearm with their left hand... similar to South Koreans.

In many high context cultures, when someone shakes their head yes, their nonverbal behavior might just be a polite gesture, but they may completely disagree with you. By not wanting to offend you, they simply shook their head yes in order to let you know they heard you. Can you imagine how many people thought they reached an agreement only to find out that nothing had been accomplished?

NOTE: The story below is an example of how nonverbal communication can easily be misunderstood.

EXAMPLE: In January 1991, James Baker, then the United States Secretary of State, met with (Tariq Aziz), the foreign minister of Iraq. They met in an effort to negotiate an agreement that

would prevent a war. Present in the room was the half-brother of Saddam Hussein, whose role included frequent calls to Hussein with updates. Baker stated, in his standard calm manner, that the U.S. would attack if Iraq did not move out of Kuwait. Hussein's half-brother heard these words and reported, "The Americans will not attack. They are weak. They are calm. They are not angry. They are only talking." Six days later Desert Storm began and resulted in the loss of about 175,000 of their citizens. [10]

Why did this happen? Many high context cultures attend to how something is said more than what is said. If Baker had pounded the table, yelled, and shown outward signs of anger, the outcome may have been entirely different. His body language, (he appeared) to be calm and the way he said what he said, not the words, may have led his counterparts to assume he must not be sincere.

Finally, a successful negotiation to someone from one culture does not always look the same to another. Success may simply lie in relationship building. Sometimes people negotiate and never reach an agreement. In low context cultures such as the United States, people don't like to fail and often lack of closure can appear as a failure. This is not the case for cultures who depend on relationships and are compelled to avoid risk.

SUMMARY

This reading was intended to generate interest on how culture can affect a negotiation. You don't have to travel around the world to apply these concepts. People in your work center may come from many different backgrounds, some who may not even be native to the United States.

A start is knowing that cross-cultural environments can add complexity to any negotiation. We reviewed Worldview and looked at Individualistic or Low-Context societies who have a tendency to communicate with more direct and explicit verbal expressions; (English and German language systems). We also covered the Collectivistic or High-Context societies, (such as those found in many Latin and African cultures) who tend to focus more on status and context (social roles or positions).

Next, we explored Barriers & Interaction Skills designed to improve the cross-cultural negotiation process. We discussed active listening techniques and verbal/nonverbal communication to include paralanguage or the vocal aspect of communication. Then we looked at nonverbal communication to include *Touch, Space, Time, Body Movement/Gestures and how something is said*.

Finally, for any cross-cultural negotiation to be successful, it is important to have a "positive attitude" toward cultural differences, control judgment and possess the motivation to effectively relate, communicate, and negotiate across cultures to achieve mission success. As you grasp the significance of cross-cultural negotiations, it becomes clear that although knowing how to negotiate is vital, knowing how to communicate respectfully can be the difference between mission success and failure.

References

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