Cultural communication differences in a virtual world

What do we mean by ‘culture’
In this guide, the term culture refers to

‘... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.’ (Matsumoto 1996: 16);

‘Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour.’ (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 3)

Why this guide
Every individual within a culture(s) has a unique set of values. However, some values tend to permeate a culture. These are called cultural values and can influence people’s attitudes, behaviours and communication styles, including verbal and non-verbal.

We tend to judge people we come into contact with based on our own values systems as we assume that these are universally applicable. As a result, differences in communication styles can cause misunderstandings in both face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. This is because cultural background can have a significant impact on preferences relating to things like degree of directness and focus on the task/information or relationship aspects of communication.

What is considered appropriate and polite in one culture may be considered curt or impersonal in another. For example, people who tend to ‘get to the point’ quicker can come across as being rude (when their intention is to not waste your time); someone avoiding direct eye contact may give the impression that they are disinterested or insincere (when their intention is to show respect and deference).

This guide is designed to prompt you to think about your own communication styles and how differences in communication habits and expectations can become relevant in a virtual communication context. Understanding different communication styles and how culture can influence these will lead to more successful communication.

Introducing some cultural dimensions
One cultural dimension that is used to explain differences observed in communication styles between cultures is ‘high’ and ‘low context’.

High-context cultures rely heavily on communication conveyed through ‘context’ (rather than through words and text), including a focus on non-verbal communication. In these cultures, communication tends to be more indirect with a focus on establishing close and more permanent personal relations. In contrast, low context cultures depend largely on words themselves. Communication tends to be more direct, relationships tend to begin and end quickly, and hierarchies are more relaxed.
The high/low context dimension relates to individualism and collectivist with high-context cultures emphasizing *collectivist* tendencies, emphasizing family and work group goals above individual needs or desires. Low-context cultures tend to value *individualism*, emphasising personal achievement and having a strong sense of competition.

The image below suggests that some cultures considered lower context include the Swiss, German, Scandinavian, American, Australian and other Northern European Cultures. Cultures identified as higher context include South American, African, South European, Arabic and Asian cultures.

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*Image taken from https://online.pointpark.edu/business/cultural-differences-in-nonverbal-communication/*
Cultural dimensions and communication styles

In High Context cultures:
• Communication tends to be indirect and understated.
• People are expected to take it in turns to speak to one after another in an orderly, linear fashion.
• Disagreements are personally threatening and may not be directly stated. For example, a smile could be a sign of disagreement.
• Focus is on the collective rather than the individual
• An inductive style is preferred, with the speaker ‘warming up’ their audience before coming to their main point. Individuals may prefer to talk around a point rather than introduce it directly.
• There is an emphasis on hierarchy with a focus on conveying respect and deference to those in positions of seniority.
• The ‘relationship’ aspect of communication is favoured over the ‘information’ aspect.
• Webpages in high-context countries tend to have more images, including images of people, groups and communities.

In Low Context cultures:
• More tolerance for overlapping speech.
• Disagreements are depersonalized with conflicts not needing to be resolved immediately for work to continue.
• The deductive style of communication is preferred in interactions and presentations: presenting main points at the beginning and following on with arguments, explanations and clarifications.
• Words are valued above their context.
• Speed is valued. How efficiently something is done is important.
• Low context cultures tend to focus to a greater extent on minimizing social distance with prominence placed on egalitarianism e.g. individuals may prefer to use first-names rather than titles.
• Webpages in low-context countries tend to have more text with more images of ‘things’ and ‘products’ rather than people and communities.

Issues to consider for online communication:
• If you are in a virtual meeting, try and establish a clear structure giving everyone time to speak as some participants may not feel comfortable interrupting. Some people who are interrupted during online meetings may not attempt to regain the floor, especially if body language is less easy to use or read.
• It is important to consider cultural differences when addressing people e.g. the use of first names or titles in emails. Not everyone will expect to be referred to by their first name, especially in first encounters. A good strategy may be to ‘converge’ to the other person’s style.
• If working with cultures with a high person-orientation, you could consider a telephone conversation following an email correspondence.
• Low-context cultures may place more focus on clarity and brevity, which may be more prominent in communication via technology.
• During telephone calls, some cultures may want to place more emphasis on establishing rapport at the start of the conversation prior to entering the ‘business’ phase. For example ‘How are you’, while simply an opener for some cultures, can constitute a genuine questions in others.
• If someone is not maintaining eye contact during a video-call, this does not mean they are disengaged. Their intention could be to signal respect, especially to those in more senior positions.
Important things to be aware of

- While dimensions such as “high” and “low” context are examples of opposing cultures, many cultures fall in between these two extremes, displaying aspects of each.
- When we talk about ‘culture’ we tend to talk about large groups of people and what they have in common, from history and worldview to languages and geographical location. On the other hand, we need to avoid making sweeping generalisations: ‘people’ communicate, not ‘cultures’. Similar strategies may be used by anyone from any culture. Overgeneralising and making rigid one-to-one correlations between styles and cultures can lead to negative stereotyping.
- People may attend to the ‘relationship’ aspects of communication through different styles. For example, a Greek person may tend towards ‘interactional surplus’ and build the relationship through small talk; a German person may choose to refrain from keeping their conversational partner on the phone for too long, letting them know pretty soon the reason for calling.
- No culture is ‘better’ than another. Communication styles are simply ‘different’.

References


https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/interculturalskills/global_pad_-_what_is_culture.pdf