

### BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS - STEP 2: ADAPT YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE

Over my 20+ year career, I've been lucky to work with people from all over the world. Colleagues from Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia showed me new perspectives and helped me expand my horizons at work. I soon realized that what I thought made perfect sense actually only made sense to me and my American colleagues. I discovered that there was a communication barrier that I hadn't realized. Yes, there were some language barriers, but even when everyone was fluent in English, there was still a disconnect.

Eventually, I learned that this type of communication problem is very common with Americans working with people from other countries. In fact, different cultures around the world communicate and collaborate as colleagues in many different ways. We can differ on how we form relationships, how we disagree with each other, and even what types of leaders are preferred. These types of differences are critical for us to understand as we work with people that are different from us, and nowhere are these differences more critical than in the role of people leadership. If you are managing people, then you need to know about these cultural differences.

But as I studied cultural differences more and more, I realized something important. I am not the stereotypical ambassador for America, and the people I meet do not always match their cultural stereotypes. So instead of trying to communicate based on cultural stereotypes, I started to view people as individuals and try to communicate with them based on their individual preferences. And now I want to share my lessons with you. Over a series of seven articles, I will share with you the different dimensions of collaboration, and how you can improve your relationships with your colleagues, your customers, and even in your personal life.

This is the second article of the seven, and it is focused on how different people prefer to communicate with their colleagues.

#### The Seven Dimensions of Collaboration

The seven dimensions of collaboration is not a concept I created on my own. It is founded on research by Professor Erin Meyer, from INSEAD. In her amazing book, *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer highlights seven dimensions of collaboration that vary widely across cultures. The seven dimensions are:

- 1) How do we build trust? - Task-Based vs Relationship-Based Trust
- 2) How do we communicate with each other - Low Context vs High Context Communication
- 3) What is expected from leaders? - Egalitarian Leadership vs Hierarchical Leadership
- 4) How do we want decisions to be made? - Consensual vs Top-Down Decisions
- 5) What do we do when we disagree? - Confrontational Discussion vs Avoiding Confrontation
- 6) How do we prefer to give and receive feedback? - Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback
- 7) What is our approach to accomplishing tasks and delivering results? - Linear Timelines vs Flexible Planning

I fully recommend everyone read Erin Meyer's book, especially if you are ever working with someone from a different culture. But even if all of your colleagues and customers are from the same country, there is significant value in understanding the seven dimensions. Most people do not match the average cultural profile from their country. That is why I recommend trying to understand their individual preferences across the seven dimensions. By trying to understand their individual preferences, you will be able to form more productive relationships in your teams and more valuable relationships with your customers.

#### Dimension 2 - How Do We Communicate With Each Other?

While it might sound like an obvious statement to make, it is important to acknowledge that your performance and the performance of your colleagues is all founded on the ability to communicate. It is extremely rare for someone to work in pure isolation, and the reality is that most people work with other people. On a daily basis, your ability to communicate with other people impacts how successful you will be with your family, your friends, your colleagues, and even your customers. I can almost guarantee that your

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strongest and most successful relationships are also highly effective at communicating. You can share thoughts and the other person truly understands what you mean.

Even though it is fundamental to teams, communication is not always easy, and it often varies from person to person. Some people prefer to communicate in a very direct and explicit manner. They communicate in simple and clear statements. They do not want to leave anything for confusion, so they, in detail, explain their ideas and the background information needed to understand the idea. Basically, they say what they mean and mean exactly what they say. This type of communication is called “Low Context Communication,” as it does not require any shared background or history between the two people.

On the other side of the spectrum, some people prefer to communicate in a more indirect manner. I don’t mean they are trying to be vague or confusing, but rather their communication can be more nuanced and layered. They believe that some things don’t have to be said. Think of the couple that has been married for 40 years. They almost talk in code because of their shared background and history together. Similarly, some companies and teams can develop this style of communication, as they start speaking in acronyms or implicitly referencing things that a new person doesn’t understand. This type of communication is called “High Context Communication,” as it requires a significant amount of mutual understanding and context to truly understand the message.

While you might already have a good idea as to which type of communication you prefer, there is an easy way to find out. Answer the three questions below, and based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for either Low or High Context Communication.

1) I strive to communicate simply, clearly, and explicitly. I avoid reading (and speaking) between the lines.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2) The most effective presenters spell out what they're going to tell you, then tell you, and then summarize what they've told you, to ensure that the communication is crystal clear.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3) After a meeting or a phone call, it is important to recap in writing exactly what was said, to prevent misunderstanding or confusion.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for Focusing on Results.</b>	<b>High Preference for Low Context Communication</b>	<b>Slight Preference for Low Context Communication</b>	<b>Mixed Preference</b>	<b>Slight Preference for High Context Communication</b>	<b>High Preference for High Context Communication</b>

### Communicating With People Different Than You

It goes without saying that if your preference for communication matches the other person, then communicating with each other will be quite easy. But what do you do if you prefer Low Context Communication and the other person tends toward High Context Communication? Or what about the reverse? Don’t worry ... communicating with people who have different styles is possible. All it takes is a willingness to try and adapt your style to meet their preferences.

What you should do if you are a Low Context communicator, and the other person is more High Context:

- **Don’t be judgmental** - The first thing you need to do is to recognize that their style of communication is different from yours. So when you start thinking that they are communicating too vaguely or being secretive, you need to hold off on judging them. They are not trying to hide information from you or trying to communicate in a way that you don’t understand. They just have a different style of communication than you. So instead of judging them, be curious instead.
- **Look beyond what is said** - High context communicators do not always spell out every little detail of what they are thinking. They often look to communicate their messages beyond what they say. Their body language, tone of voice, and even what they don’t say all contribute to the message they are trying to communicate. So as a low context communicator, you need to focus on all the different aspects of their communication, not just their words.

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- **Recognize that yes sometimes means no** - Some people don't like to say "No." They will imply it or give hints at it, but they may never say it. For example, instead of saying No to your request, they might say something like, "It might be difficult, but we can look into it," or "Let me get back to you on that." If you are a low context communicator, this can be frustrating. But instead of getting mad, ask more questions.
- **Ask more open-ended questions** - Sometimes a high context communicator might assume you understand what they are trying to say, even if you don't have a clue. This is where you need to tap into your curiosity and ask more questions. But not just any type of questions, ask more open questions. Instead of asking "can you deliver project X by Y deadline" ask it in a more open way, "What would make it difficult for you to deliver project X by Y deadline?" Asking more open questions allows them to share more of their thoughts and provides more context for what they are trying to communicate to you.

What you should do if you are a High Context communicator and the other person is more Low Context:

- **Don't be judgmental** - Similar to the other scenario, the first thing you need to do is to recognize that their style of communication is different from yours. So, when you start thinking that they are communicating too directly or even condescendingly, you need to hold off on judging them. They are not trying to come across as rude or patronizing. They just have a different style of communication than you. So instead of judging them, be curious instead.
- **Open up your thoughts** - Low Context communicators are going to be focusing on what you say. While it may seem tough, you should try and be as transparent and clear as possible with them. If you want them to do X, then you need to clearly tell them you want them to do X. While it may seem too direct for you, you need to remember that they prefer this type of clarity and communication.
- **Ask if you are clear** - Sometimes you might assume the other person understood what you were trying to say, even if they didn't have a clue. This is where you need to be willing to check if they understood you. It might seem like a waste of time, but it is better to find out any potential miscommunications now and not weeks from now.
- **Summarize the key messages** - A simple trick when working with Low Context colleagues is to summarize key messages at the end of a meeting. This could be done verbally or done in an email after the meeting. When done correctly, summarizing the key messages ensures that both parties are clear on what was discussed and agreed upon.

### There Is No Ideal Style of Communication

It can be very easy to perceive your own style of communication (High, Low, or even Mixed) as the ideal style of communication. But research shows that all styles can be successful. In High Context countries like France or China, it is significantly more likely that CEO and senior executives have a High Context communication approach. In Low Context countries like the US or the Netherlands, CEOs and senior executives are more likely to be Low Context communicators.

The lesson from that research isn't that High Context communicators will struggle in the US. Instead, the lesson should be that good communication isn't about your style but the style of the other person. Communication is all about understanding the other person and helping the other person understand you. So instead of remaining fixed in your approach to communication, we recommend flexing towards the other person's preferred style. By adapting to the other person, you significantly raise the likelihood that you will have strong and clear communication between the two of you.



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*Cary Bailey-Findley has spent the past decade building the Human Capital within three Fortune 500 companies and was awarded the ranking of #1 development organization in the world by the Association of Talent Development. He is currently the Talent Manager for SimCorp the world's leading provider of integrated investment management solutions for investment and asset managers. He holds a Master's degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and a Master's degree in Business Administration.*

*You can follow his blog at [www.cavemaninasuit.com](http://www.cavemaninasuit.com) or download leadership and team development tools at (<https://highperformanceculture.org/>)*