

# Transcending Cultural Barriers: Context, Relationships, and Time

Mary O'Hara-Devereaux and Robert Johansen  
(EXCERPT)

The following excerpt from Globalwork discusses differences between high-context and low-context cultures, including their differing views of time. Such differences can have an important impact on how effectively we communicate with colleagues and students from around the world.

Context is probably the most important cultural dimension - and the most difficult to define. It refers to the entire array of stimuli surrounding every communication event - the context - and how much of that stimuli is meaningful (Hall & Hall, 1989, p. 6).

Everyone has automatic filters, learned during childhood, that select and color what they perceive in the daily course of living and interacting with others. Cultures vary dramatically as to how much of the total environment, or context, is meaningful in communication. High-context cultures assign meaning to many of the stimuli surrounding an explicit message. Low-context cultures exclude many of those stimuli and focus more intensely on the objective communication event, whether it be a word, a sentence, or a physical gesture. Thus in high-context cultures, verbal messages have little meaning without the surrounding context, which includes the overall relationship between all the people engaged in communication. In low-context cultures, the message itself means everything. Since context perception is a cultural pattern, most cultures can be placed on a high/low context scale (see Figure 2.3). China, Chile and Iraq, for instance, are high-context societies in which people tend to rely on their history, their status, their relationships, and a plethora of other information, including religion, to assign meaning to an event. The totality of all this information, implicit, explicit, guides their response to the event. This pattern is in sharp contrast to Norway or Austria, for instance, where people depend for meaning on a relatively narrow range of objective information in specific verbal or physical form.

High-context cultures are characterized by extensive information networks among family, friends, associates, and even clients. Their relationships are close and personal. They keep well informed about the people who are important in their lives. This extensive background knowledge is automatically brought to bear in giving meanings to events and communications. Nothing that happens to them can be described as an isolated event; everything is connected to meaningful context.

People in low-context cultures, on the other hand, tend to compartmentalize their lives and relationships. They permit little "interference" of "extraneous" information. Thus in order to give detailed meaning to an event, they require detailed information in a communication. The "context" must be explicit in the message. One might expect, therefore, that low-context communications are perforce wordier, or longer, than high-context messages, since they have to carry more information. In fact, the opposite is sometimes true: low-context cultures use language with great precision and economy. Every word is meaningful. In high-context cultures, language is promiscuous: since words have relatively less value, they are spent in great sums.

High-and low-context cultures have radically different views of reality. And the further apart they are on primary cultures, but also between different professional and functional cultures within a single primary culture. Indeed, context differences between work functions can lead to holy wars.

Consider, for example, the context orientations of marketing people compared to engineers (see Figure 2.4). The marketing culture is driven by rapport-building practices that attach high values to relationships. The best marketing people are good at understanding, accepting, and blending with the views of their customers. They are always selling - either themselves or their products or their clients. Engineers, on the other hand, tend to be driven by analytical thinking. They value precision and skepticism. To the engineer, the marketing people look fuzzy and even unprincipled: "They'll do anything to get a sale - including promising what we can't deliver." But from the marketing perspective, engineers often seem insensitive and rigidly boorish.

All cultures have unique concepts of time and ways of managing it. Americans tend to worship time and manage it as though it were a tangible and scarce resource: "Time is money." Few cultures - perhaps the Germans and Swiss - can compete with the American obsession with time. In most countries, time is more flexible. Being late to an appointment, or taking a long time to get down to business, is the accepted norm in most Mediterranean and Arab countries. Cultural time differences can be categorized according to whether they are monochronic (sequential) or polychronic (synchronic) and according to the culture's orientation to past, present, and future.

**Monochronic/Polychronic Time.** Time can be thought of as a straight line or as a circle: the linear, sequential march of days and years, or the rotation of the seasons. Our cultural orientation has a profound effect on our daily lives and business functions. As Edward and Mildred Hall have noted, "It is impossible to know how many millions of dollars have been lost in international business because monochronic and polychronic people do not understand each other or even realize that two such different time systems exist" (Hall & Hall, 1989, p. 16).

Monochronic time is one-track linear: people do one thing at a time. Polychronic time is multi-track circular; it allows many things to happen simultaneously, with no particular end in sight. Monochronic time is tightly compartmentalized: schedules are almost sacred. Polychronic time is open-ended: completing the task or communication is more important than adhering to a schedule.

People from polychronic and monochronic cultures have the same difficulties adjusting to one another as people from high-context and low-context cultures. In fact, polychronic time is characteristic of high-context people and monochronic time is characteristic of low-context people. Similarly, the first approach tends to characterize Southern cultures, while the second rules in the North (with some notable exceptions). Monochronic people tend to sequence communications as well as tasks. They would not be inclined, for instance, to interrupt a phone conversation in order to greet a third person. Polychronic people can carry on multiple conversations simultaneously - indeed, they would consider it rude not to do so.

**Past, Present, and Future Orientations.** Different cultures function according to different orientations towards the past, present, and future. In general, cultures are either future-oriented or past-oriented. That is, activities in the present are either designed to influence future events or likely to be influenced by past events. In the United States, the present is heavily influenced by the short-termed future. Asian cultures tend to be oriented toward a more distant future. Mexicans and many Latin cultures, on the other hand, are more heavily influenced by the past. Part of the difference may be related to cultural concepts of control over the environment, which may in turn be related to religious tradition. Mexico, for instance, is usually viewed as a fatalistic culture where the past is in control of the present and future. Americans, by contrast, have a greater sense of control over present and future events.

Table 2.2 Common Time Differences in Work Context

| <b>Monochronic People</b>                              | <b>Polychronic People</b>  |
|--|--|
| Do one thing at a time                                 | Do many things at once   |
| Concentrate on the job                                 | Highly distractible and subject to interruptions                       |
| Take time commitments seriously (deadlines, schedules) | Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved only if possible |
| Low-context and need information                       | High-context and already have information                              |
| Committed to the job                                   | Committed to people  |
| Adhere religiously to plans                            | Change plans often and easily  |
| Concerned about not disturbing others;                 | More concerned with relations  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Follow rules of privacy and consideration                      | (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy |
| Show great respect for private property, seldom borrow or lend | Borrow and lend things often and easily                        |
| Emphasize promptness   | Base promptness on the relationship                            |
| Accustomed to short-term relationships                         | Strong tendency to build lifetime relationships                |

Source: Hall & Hall (1989)

**Implications.** Like context, time is variable across all levels of culture - social, professional, and functional. And its implications in the business environment are almost endless: management of appointments, agendas, schedules, decision making, lead times, and much more (see Table 2.2). Some of the most important time differences have to do with personal and business relationships. Polychronic people tend to be more group-oriented in keeping with their high context orientation. They see relationships as deep and long term, spanning past, present, and future. They seek out business relationships that offer this orientation - even other factors including competitiveness. Monochronic cultures often value relationships according to more practical, future oriented criteria - even discard relationships that don't seem useful to future business goals. Likewise, polychronic employees tend to value long-term employment relationships, as in Mexico. Promotions are based on somewhat subjective criteria linked to one's network of relationships. In contrast, Canadians and Americans link promotion to achievements in the near past and likely success in the near future.

Time orientations have great relevance to cross-functional teaming, where it can become a major source of frustration. Functional cultures, no less than primary cultures, tend to be more or less polychronic or monochronic and oriented to past, present, or future. R&D people typically have a long-term perspective, which is reinforced by the tendency to measure their productivity by the frequency of "big ideas." Accounting, on the other hand, must have a short-term, incremental point of view and a present-tense orientation or face chaos. People with polychronic-oriented functions, as in marketing or advertising, are better able to blend into cross-functional teams because of their ability to handle concurrency and simultaneity. Monochronic, present-oriented individuals, such as accounting and information systems specialists, find this challenge much more daunting. We may find that in turbulent business times such as the 1990's, polychronic-time planning could have unforeseen advantages: after all, relationships tend to outlive even the most objective data. Furthermore, polychronic workers function with far greater comfort and assurance in that sea of information which threatens to swamp monochronic cultures.