

Intercultural Competencies: Understanding High- vs. Low-Context Cultures¹

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Introduction

The first publication in the *Intercultural Competencies* series provides insights and recommendations on engaging multicultural clientele by understanding and applying high-context and low-context cultural communication styles.

The changing demographics of the United States require Extension professionals to develop intercultural communication skills, particularly when engaging with people from different cultures, such as migrant workers (Diaz et al., 2022). In 2022, 46.2 million immigrants resided in the United States, making up 13.9% of the population. Although this percentage is slightly below the highest recorded immigrant population of 14.8% set in 1890, it is higher than the 13.7% recorded in 2019 before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Migration Policy Institute, 2024).

Extension educators are increasingly engaging with a multicultural clientele and may benefit from being prepared to effectively serve individuals from a variety of backgrounds (Warner et al, 2019). This includes seeking strategies to support their clients' needs and developing practical intercultural competencies, especially in communication (Diaz et al., 2022; Diaz et al., 2019; Suarez et al., 2020).

This article explores the aspect of intercultural competence—understanding communication differences in high vs. low context. Additionally, the article provides information on how to adapt communication styles to better connect with audiences from different backgrounds. Recommendations for Extension professionals, including district and county directors, are provided to integrate intercultural communication into their professional development plans and program design.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is a process of interacting with people or communities from different cultural backgrounds, which requires an understanding of cultural customs, beliefs, and methods of communication (Holliday et al., 2021). Mastering intercultural communication could help to navigate people from different backgrounds effectively (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Challenges in intercultural communication often stem from differences in language, nonverbal communication, and cultural perceptions. However, these challenges also present opportunities for personal and professional growth as individuals learn to cooperate with people from multicultural backgrounds (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Suarez et al., 2019).

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High- vs. Low-Context Cultures

Communication styles vary significantly across cultures, particularly in our increasingly interconnected global era (McKay-Semmler, 2017). A useful framework for understanding these differences is Edward Hall's concept of high-context and low-context cultures, introduced in 1976 and still widely used as a teaching tool today (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990; Hornikx & Pair, 2017; McKay-Semmler, 2017).

Hall proposed that cultures can be categorized as high-context or low-context, a distinction that has remained influential over the past four decades (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990). High-context cultures are typically collectivist, strongly emphasizing group harmony and indirect communication, where much of the meaning is conveyed through nonverbal cues and the surrounding context (Aleassa et al., 2023; Triandis, 1995). In contrast, low-context cultures are often individualistic, with communication being more direct and explicit, focusing on the content of the message itself rather than the relational context (Hofstede, 2001; Kittler et al., 2011).

In high-context cultures, communication relies heavily on implicit cues and nonverbal signals, requiring the listener to infer meaning based on the surrounding context. This style often involves indirect verbal expression, where much of the message is conveyed through gestures, tone, and other nonverbal indicators. On the other hand, low-context cultures prioritize direct and explicit information exchange, where the message is clear and straightforward, reducing the need for extensive interpretation of the context (Hall, 1976).

Understanding these cultural communication styles can support more effective cross-cultural interactions. Below, two example scenarios illustrate the contrast between high- and low-context communication in the implementation of a soil health program.

High-Context Culture (e.g., Guatemala)

In a high-context culture like Guatemala, where oral communication and relationships are emphasized, the presentation might be more nuanced and involve more context. An Extension educator might say:

“Good morning, everyone. I hope you are all well. Today, I'd like to introduce a new soil health program that has been very successful in other communities. This program involves several important steps, including soil testing and the use of organic amendments. It would be wonderful to

hear your thoughts and experiences, and perhaps we can schedule a practical demonstration in the coming days.”

In this example:

- The educator begins with a warm greeting, fostering a personal connection.
- The topic is introduced in a more narrative and relational manner.
- The educator invites feedback and suggests a follow-up demonstration, emphasizing collaboration and community involvement.

Low-Context Culture (e.g., United States)

In contrast, in a low-context culture like the United States, where written communication is favored, individuals value efficiency and clarity in their interactions. Consider an Extension educator presenting a new soil health program to farmers. The educator might say:

“Good morning, everyone. Today, we will discuss a new soil health program designed to improve crop yields and sustainability. The program includes three main steps: soil testing, applying organic amendments, and implementing crop rotation. Please refer to the handout for detailed instructions. Let's begin with soil testing.”

In this example:

- The educator provides a clear, direct introduction and outlines the steps.
- The communication is concise and to the point.

The educator expects participants to follow the handout and ask direct questions if they need clarification.

These examples demonstrate how Extension educators can adapt their communication styles to fit their audience's cultural context, thereby enhancing their programs' effectiveness and fostering better community relationships.

Finding the Appropriate Context Level

Individuals from high-context backgrounds may prefer information that opens the floor for conversation and appreciate the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Conversely, low-context individuals may struggle with excessive discussion and benefit from clear, concise instructions.

For example, suppose an Extension educator from a low-context culture gives a step-by-step guide on soil testing. In that case, farmers from a high-context culture might feel overwhelmed by the directness and prefer a more detailed narrative with opportunities for interaction and practical demonstration. On the other hand, if the educator from a high-context culture provides a detailed overview, encouraging questions and discussion without clear step-by-step instructions, low-context individuals might feel lost and unsure of how to implement the practices.

Extension educators can determine their audience's context level by observing factors such as the preference for direct versus indirect communication, the importance placed on relationships, and the type of feedback being sought. Engaging in preliminary discussions with the audience and paying attention to how they respond to open-ended versus direct questions can provide clues about their preferred communication style. Additionally, educators should consider demographic and industry-specific factors because certain industries, such as agriculture, may lean towards a more relational, high-context style, even in typically low-context cultures.

To determine if the audience is predominantly high or low context, Extension educators can use several strategies:

- Conduct pre-assessment surveys: These surveys can reveal preferences for communication styles and help gauge the audience's cultural orientation.
- Observe communication patterns: Initial interactions can provide insights into whether the audience prefers detailed explanations or direct instructions.
- Seek feedback: Regularly solicit participants' feedback about their communication preferences and adjust accordingly.

Identifying the appropriate level of communication context can be challenging (Hall & Hall, 1990). Extension educators might navigate this by adopting a flexible communication style—offering key details clearly, while also creating space for questions and discussion to ensure all participants feel comfortable and informed. For instance, an educator introducing a soil testing program could begin with a brief overview of the main steps, which may be especially helpful for individuals who prefer direct, task-focused communication. Following the specific instructions, the educator could facilitate a discussion or Q&A session, inviting high-context individuals to ask questions and engage in a dialogue about the process. Additionally, practical demonstrations can be incorporated to provide hands-on learning experiences, which can help both high-context and low-context

individuals better understand the material. This approach allows the educator to provide structure and clarity while creating space for interaction and clarification, accommodating the communication preferences of high-context and low-context participants.

Extension educators can improve engagement and effectiveness in their educational programs by adapting communication styles to the audience's cultural context needs.

Recognizing that subcultures may exhibit different communication preferences within any culture is also helpful. For example, while Guatemalan culture may generally follow high-context communication, certain groups therein, such as agricultural producers who have spent years operating in a low-context environment, may adopt low-context styles due to their exposure and adaptation to that system (McKay-Semmler, 2017). Various factors, including industry norms, relationship dynamics, and the interaction between traditional and evolving communication patterns, influence the communication context.

Why Does Understanding Context Matter?

Navigating the differences between high- and low-context communication can be important for fostering effective interactions across cultural groups. For individuals from high-context cultures, maintaining relationships and social harmony often takes precedence in communication (Croucher et al., 2012). Misunderstandings from low-context communication can damage relationships within Extension audiences, risking conflicts and reducing trust in Extension advice. For instance, an Extension educator delivering instructions on a new agricultural technique in a high-context community might prioritize building rapport and understanding the audience's existing practices before diving into specifics. This indirect approach can fail if the audience from a low-context background expects clear and concise instructions from the beginning.

Moreover, the effective communication of indirect messages, essential in high-context communication, becomes compromised by challenges posed by low-context interaction, leading to communication failures and misinterpretations (Croucher et al., 2012). Extension educators frequently rely on metaphors, analogies, or storytelling to convey messages in high-context communities. However, the intended learning outcomes may not be achieved if the audience interprets these messages literally due to low-context communication preferences.

Suggestions for Better Communication

The following suggestions could be considered when working in a multicultural group with high- and low-context cultures. The suggestions can be sent out via email to allow individuals time to reflect and respond, or they can be posed in the initial group meeting. These suggestions are designed to help individuals explore their communication preferences within the group so they can understand and align with each other's expectations. The group can enhance collaboration and work toward more effective communication practices by fostering mutual understanding of different communication styles.

Suggestions for High-Context Communicators When Communicating with Low-Context Communicators in Extension Work

- **Be clear and direct:** Do not extensively rely on metaphors or proverbs to explain a new agricultural technique. Provide step-by-step instructions with clear rationales behind each step.
- **Embrace directness:** Do not be offended by a farmer's seemingly direct questions. They are simply seeking specific information to make informed decisions.
- **State intentions clearly:** When seeking feedback from farmers, explicitly state what aspects of your program you want them to comment on. Clear instruction ensures they provide feedback relevant to your needs.
- **Ask for specific feedback:** Instead of a general "How was the workshop?", ask "What specific topics from the workshop would you find most helpful on your farm?" Specific questions encourage focused and actionable feedback.
- **Seek clarification:** Do not hesitate to ask farmers to clarify their questions or concerns if their directness seems ambiguous. Taking time to clarify ensures understanding and prevents misinterpretations.

Suggestions for Low-Context Communicators When Communicating with High-Context Communicators in Extension Work

- **Soften direct feedback:** Instead of straightforwardly stating issues with a farmer's current practices, phrase your feedback as suggestions for improvement or alternative approaches that build on their existing knowledge.

- **Focus on relationship building:** Take time to understand the farmer's perspective and challenges before diving into technical details. This additional time fosters trust and makes them more receptive to your Extension advice.
- **Read body language:** Pay attention to nonverbal cues like hesitation or furrowed brows. These cues might indicate underlying concerns even if they verbally agree with your suggestions.
- **Acknowledge implicit agreement:** If a farmer seems hesitant to disagree openly with a proposed practice change, acknowledge their perspective and offer opportunities to discuss potential concerns privately.
- **Use open-ended questions:** Instead of asking, "Do you understand?", ask, "How can we adapt this recommendation to suit your specific needs better?" Open-ended questions encourage them to elaborate and allow for a more nuanced conversation.
- **Frame questions positively:** Instead of asking, "Are you sure this equipment is safe?", phrase it as, "What safety measures do you currently have in place for using this equipment?" By positively framing questions, Extension professionals can avoid seeming overly critical.

Balancing Communication: Strategies for Engaging Mixed High- and Low-Context Audiences in Extension Work

- **Structured content with flexibility:** Start with a structured presentation that outlines the key points and steps clearly and concisely. This approach targets low-context communicators who prefer direct and specific information. Follow this with a more open-ended segment that encourages discussion, questions, and sharing of experiences, appealing to high-context communicators.
- **Interactive elements:** Incorporate interactive elements such as Q&A sessions, small group discussions, and practical demonstrations. During these activities, encourage participants to ask questions and share their thoughts. This approach allows high-context communicators to engage in a more relational and contextual manner while still providing the clear information needed by low-context communicators.
- **Dual-style feedback mechanism:** Provide opportunities for both written and verbal feedback. For instance, use direct surveys or feedback forms for low-context communicators and hold informal discussions or focus groups for high-context communicators. Multiple feedback options ensure that all participants can share their views in a manner they are comfortable with.

- **Clear and open communication:** Make it clear that questions and discussions are welcome anytime. Explicitly state that you value both direct questions and more nuanced, contextual feedback. This openness can help bridge the gap between the different communication styles.

Conclusion

Understanding high- versus low-context cultures is important for effective communication, particularly in today's globalized world. As Extension professionals, it is important for us to recognize the cultural differences in communication preferences and to adapt our approaches so we can better engage with varied audiences.

In high-context cultures, where context plays a significant role in communication, paying attention to tones, implicit meanings, and nonverbal cues is important. Building trust and valuing interpersonal relationships are key communication components in these cultures. On the other hand, in low-context cultures, where direct and explicit communication is preferred, clarity, efficiency, and conciseness are prioritized.

In conclusion, by embracing the principles of high- vs. low-context communication and implementing strategies to enhance intercultural competence, Extension educators can effectively engage with multicultural communities, promote cultural understanding, and facilitate positive social change.

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