

# ***Lecture 2: Culture and Communication***

- When we discuss communication and culture, we should be aware of the total spectrum of communication including language, non-verbal communication, perceived values, and concepts of **time** and **space**.
- Culture therefore designates **what we pay attention to and what we ignore** (Hall:1976:74).
- **The Japanese:**
  - For example, Hall tells about **an American businessman** who registered in a **Japanese hotel**, telling them he intended to stay for one month. After 10 days, without notice, he is moved to another room. He discovers this by accident and is surprised to find that all his personal items have been placed around the room in **almost the identical position to that in which he had put them his first room**. Not wishing to make a fuss, he says nothing.
  - To his surprise, he is moved two more times, each time without notification. Eventually, when he returned to the hotel instead of just asking for the key to his room, he would ask whether he was in the same room. During the last week, he was moved again, but this time into another hotel (Hall:1976:50)!
  - In Western societies, moves are associated with status – the lowest ranking individual is the one moved.

- Looking at this same situation from a Japanese cultural perspective, when a person enters a hotel he/ she becomes part of a family. As a member of the family, the hotel feels they can quietly move you if the need arises. Taking such liberties with your accommodation signals that you belong, that you are a member of the family.
- However, the Japanese are also familiar with the reaction such moves have on Westerners. They are sensitive to the fact that other cultures react loudly to being moved and having their personal items touched with out their permission. The familiarity displayed in the example above is more likely to occur in a hotel located well away from normal tourist territory.
- As Hall notes, **each culture has its own language of space.**

- **The Germans:**
- To the German **space is sacred**. Homes are protected by a variety of barriers, fences, walls, hedges solid doors, shutters and screening to prevent visual or auditory intrusion (Hall:1990:38).
- Germans **seldom invite anyone who is not a close friend to their home**. To be invited is considered an honour.
- **Positions in things is also important** - for example, **the right side represents a place of respect** (Hall:1990:42). So, in seating arrangements or just walking from one place to another, the senior person or the group leader should be placed on the right.
- The German **sense of privacy is very strong**. Americans feel that Germans do not interact with neighbours and perceive German behaviour as unfriendly. German friends of many years continue to address each other by their last names: “Herr Schmidt” not “Walter”.
- Germans are careful **not to touch accidentally or to encourage signs of intimacy**. On the other hand, they do maintain direct eye contact in conversations to show they are paying attention.

- They have a strong drive for conformity and object strenuously when people fail to obey signs and directions.
- Associated with their demand for high-quality, long-lasting goods is the German abhorrence of waste. Waste is a sin, such as heating, cooling and lighting buildings when it is not necessary (Hall:1990:46).
- **Context:**
- Another **important aspect of communication is the level of context in which the message is passed**. Linguists and anthropologists use the terms **'high' and 'low' context** to indicate how much information is required for successful communication.
- High-context communication is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little of the message is actually in words (Hall:1976:79).
- Low-context communication is just the opposite: most of the information is verbalized.

- Couples often can communicate with a look, or a nod of the head at most.
- **Twins who have grown up together** can and do communicate more economically (**high context**) than can **opposing lawyers** in a courtroom during a trial (**low-context**) (Hall:1976:79).
- In the Far East, high-context communication is much more common than in North America.
- The greater the cultural distance, the more difficult the interface.
- An example of easy-to-interface communication would be Germany and Switzerland. The cultural distance in this case is not great since both cultures are low context as well as monochronic.
- A difficult-to-interface communication would be France and the United States.

- Japanese, Arabs and Mediterranean peoples, who have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues and clients and who are involved in close personal relations are high-context. As a result, for most normal transactions in family life they do not require, nor do they expect, much in depth background information. This is because they keep themselves informed about everything having to do with the people who are important in their lives.
- Low-context people include Americans, Germans, Swiss, Scandinavians and other northern Europeans. They compartmentalize their personal relationships, their work, and many aspects of day-to-day life. Consequently, each time they interact with others they need detailed background information.
- The French are much higher on the context scale than either the Germans or the Americans.

- High context people are apt to become impatient and irritated when low- context people insist on giving them information they don't need (Hall:1990:10).
- Conversely, low-context people are at a loss when high-context people do not provide enough information. One of the great communication challenges in life is to find the appropriate level of contexting needed in each situation. Too much information leads people to feel they are being talked down to; too little information can mystify them or make them feel left out.



- **Different Concepts of Time:**
- Another **important factor in cross-cultural communication** is the concept of time. For example, in Germany if you arrive late by even a few minutes, no one will be impressed by your sales presentation, no matter how good it is. Indeed, they may not even wait around to hear it (Hall:1990:28).
- We can divide people into two rough categories with respect to time: **monochronic and polychronic people**. Monochronic people tend to do one thing at a time, concentrate on the job at hand, take time commitments seriously and are concerned not to disturb others. They also tend to be rule followers, show great respect for private property, seldom borrow or lend and emphasize promptness. In addition, they are low-context in terms of the category discussed earlier.
- Polychronic people are almost opposites in all of the above. They are high-context types, who do many things at once, are highly distractible and subject to interruptions. While they consider time commitments objectives to be met if possible, they are more concerned with relationships, especially family and friends (Hall:1990:15).

- As mentioned above, promptness is taken for granted in Germany. In fact, it's almost an obsession. If there is a chance you'll be late for an appointment, phone ahead. The Germans want to know where people are at all times; not knowing violates their sense of order (Hall:1990:36).
- It is always important to know which segment of the time frame is emphasized. Eastern peoples tend to be **pastoriented**.
- Others, such as those in the urban United States, are **oriented to the present and short-term future**.
- Still others, such as Latin Americans, are **both past and present oriented**.
- In Germany, where historical background is very important, every talk, book, or article begins with background information giving an historical perspective. This irritates many foreigners who keep wondering "why don't they get on with it?"
- The Japanese are also steeped in history, but because they are **high-context culture**, historical facts are **alluded to obliquely**.

- The key to understanding Japanese time is to know that the Japanese have two modes: a monochronic mode for foreigners and technology and a polychronic mode for virtually everything else. The Japanese switch from an open system for those in their inner circle to a more closed and tightly scheduled system for outsiders. To an outsider everything in Japan is rigidly scheduled. They organize a visitor's time and present him with a full schedule upon arrival. However, as one comes to know the Japanese, one discovers another aspect of their time system— flexibility (Hall:1990:114).

- **Space:**

- Territoriality is highly developed and strongly influenced by culture. It is particularly well developed in the Germans and the Americans. Americans tend to establish places that they label “mine” - a cook's feeling about a kitchen or a child's view of her or her bedroom. In Germany, this same feeling of territoriality is commonly extended to all possessions,
- In German and Americans the top floor is more important than others, while for the French middle floors are more important (Hall:1990:11).

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- Few people are allowed to penetrate this bit of mobile territory and then only for short periods of time.
- In **northern Europe**, **the bubbles are quite large** and people keep their distance.
- In **southern France, Italy, Greece, and Spain**, **the bubbles get smaller and smaller** so that the distance that is perceived as intimate in the north overlaps normal conversational distance in the south.
- In northern Europe, one does not touch others. Even the brushing of the overcoat sleeve used to elicit an apology (Hall:1990:11).