
Communicating With The French

By Lothar Katz

Low- and High-Context Societies

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall once pointed out that any kind of information transfer between humans relies on both meaning and context. He also noted that they are “inextricably bound up with each other” and thus cannot be measured independently.

However, their relative influence varies greatly between different cultures. Where a society is found on the high-low-context continuum determines how implicitly or explicitly information is communicated among their members. The fact that this also applies to information transferred to “non-members” of the culture makes understanding context very important in international business communication.

Hall describes “low-context” cultures as those where most of the information is communicated through the explicit part of a message. Americans are on the low-context side of the continuum. Others, for instance Germans and Northern Europeans, are even closer to that end of the spectrum: in their oral and written communication, most information is clearly stated and little is found “between the lines”. It is advisable to be very explicit and factual when communicating with people from these cultures.

On the other side of the spectrum are high-context cultures in which much of the information transferred lies in the physical context or is internalized in the person communicating. People in these cultures will resort to highly explicit information transfers only if none of those involved in the communication share a sufficient context understanding. A good example of a high-context culture, and one that often baffles Americans, is France. While it is not at the extreme end of the spectrum (where Japan and China are found), understanding how communication works in and with France is a good preparation before interacting with other high-context cultures.

France: One Is Expected to Know

Several Americans doing business with French companies, or with French subsidiaries within their own companies, reported that they often felt as if they were being kept in the dark on purpose. People seemed to ignore proposals, left e-mails unanswered, and it seemed impossible to predict their decisions. A complaint that is frequently heard is that the French “just won’t tell you what is going on”.

People in France have a different view of how to communicate information. What is said and written in formal communication is often kept to a bare minimum, at least when viewed from an American perspective. While in the U.S. information is readily available and updates are often provided automatically, in France, one is expected to ask and find out. The primary sources for this are individual contacts, and the French will spend considerable time developing and nurturing their networks. In this high-context culture, building a strong network of dependable relationships is a way to “fill the gaps” and become aware of what is going on.

Note that this applies to the French communicating among themselves as well. For example, it can be surprising to observe how little information French managers will sometimes share with their employees. They will frequently expect employees to find out themselves whatever it is they need to know.

Recommendations

Here is some advice to help you become more effective when communicating with the French in business.

- Watch carefully for subtle messages conveyed through choice of words, body language, also through what is *not* said.
- Spend considerable time building your own network of insiders, intermediaries, and influencers.
- When in doubt, ask questions rather than waiting for someone to inform you.
- Communicate through people, not channels.
- Do not rely on e-mail (the French may or may not respond). Call them instead.

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, he regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. These included many parts of Asia, e.g., China, India, and Japan. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe.