

Communication Styles

Communication is by far the most problematic area for my clients. There has been a great deal of research done on different communication styles between the genders. Add in national origin, culture and subcultures, accents, and language barriers, to name a few, and you can see how the workforce today is faced with a much more complex situation. So, how do you communicate effectively when you are dealing with so many variables? In business, clarity in communication is vital. So, how do you ensure that you are receiving an accurate and complete message?

It is beneficial to start with the concepts of cultural competence and cultural adaptability. These concepts help individuals interact across cultures without judgment. This ability enables them to approach communication issues with more patience and a stronger desire to reach an understanding that works for everyone and that is inclusive. They are not so concerned about doing it “their way” but focus more on finding a middle ground that respects and includes everyone.

The different communication styles we will discuss are:

- High Context versus Low Context
- Direct versus Indirect
- Formal versus Informal

It is important to remember when talking about communication styles for various groups, we are generalizing and there are variations within each group.

High Context versus Low Context

You will also see patterns within the styles; for example, people from high context cultures tend to be indirect and formal communicators. People from low context cultures tend to be direct and informal communicators.

Groups that have high context communication styles combine verbal and nonverbal messages to convey the entire meaning. A listener must read between the lines and add nonverbal nuances to fully understand the message. It is important to have excellent listening and observational skills when interacting with individuals from a high context culture.

If someone appears to be listening to what you are saying but their body language is closed, what are they actually saying? For example, someone appears to be listening attentively; however, they have their arms folded in front of them and a frown on their face. So, while they *appear* to be listening, their body language can best be described as closed to your message. Examples of high context cultures are most countries in: Asia; the Middle East; Africa; and South America.

Low context cultures, on the other hand, rely on the literal and precise meaning of the words they use. They prefer explicit conversations where words convey the bulk of if not the entire message. Groups with this preference prefer written communication as they do not need to include the subtleness of nonverbal communication. Examples of countries with low context cultures are: the United States; Germany; Switzerland; and the Scandinavian countries.

Exercise:

Circle your preferred style

High Context

Low Context

Direct versus Indirect Communication

A second preference is direct and indirect communication. Groups that prefer a direct style of communicating also focus on the explicit meaning of words, similar to low context cultures. The popular saying, “You can take my words to the bank” conveys a belief that individuals say exactly what they mean. Americans, Germans, and Israelis, are direct communicators, each having varying degrees of directness.

This group prefers to deal with conflict head-on and uses statements like, “Let’s put everything on the table” or “Let’s get everything out into the open”. They believe that if you discuss everything, you can resolve the conflict. Direct communicators believe that it is better to say what needs to be said.

Indirect communicators do not believe everything needs to be said. They are often part of a culture that is more group-focused rather than individual-focused. Because of this, they live within societal norms that are different and less focused on individual needs. An important goal of their conversational style is to maintain harmony, or at least the appearance of harmony. Therefore, not everything is said, but rather, much can be implied.

Individuals who prefer an indirect communication style will avoid dealing directly with conflict. When issues arise, they are dealt with privately, through a third party, or through passive resistance. Rather than state their opposition directly, it will be handled in a manner that causes the least amount of open dissension. This style believes strongly in “saving face”, a concept that many direct communicators do not factor in when dealing with conflict. Saving face is simply dealing with an issue or concern in a manner that does not publicly embarrass anyone or cause them to lose respect in their own eyes or those of other individuals. Therefore, blame is not directly placed on anyone but is usually alluded to. Examples of indirect communicators are most of the countries in: Asia; the Middle East; Africa; and South America.

Exercise:

Circle your preferred style

Direct

Indirect

What do direct and indirect communicators think of each other?

Direct communicators think indirect communicators:

- *Are evasive*
- *Are dishonest*
- *Can’t take a stand*
- *Have no opinion*
- *Increase tension by not dealing with issues directly*

Indirect communicators think direct communicators:

- *Are insensitive*
- *Have no tact and are boorish*
- *Are insulting*
- *Are harsh*
- *Increase tension by dealing with issues in a direct manner*