# Job Aid: Strategies for Communicating with High-context and Low-context Cultures

Globalization, the pervasiveness of mass and digital media, and now-commonplace international travel have made the world smaller and more familiar. Still, different cultures communicate in different ways. This is most clearly evident in the contrast between high-context and low-context cultures.

Being an effective communicator in a culturally diverse work setting means developing cross-cultural communication skills that will resonate with both high-context and low-context cultures.

## Communicating with high-context cultures

| Action | Communication skills |
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| Use observation to gauge the understanding of your message | • Employ effective listening to determine the acceptance and full understanding of your message.<br>• Look out for phrases and key words that may convey implied intention on the part of the listener.<br>• Develop an awareness of nonverbal cues such as body language, tonality, and facial expressions. This will help you to understand when more information is required by a high-context listener. |
| Reconstruct the received message to ensure correct understanding | • Pay attention to the speaker's actions as well as the content of their message. In a high-context setting, there is often an implied, unspoken message being communicated. |

| Action | Communication skills |
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| | • Ask open-ended questions that communicate a desire to learn more about the person and their message. |
| Build relationships early and work to maintain them | • Work to connect to your audience emotionally.<br>• Remember your communication will be more effective if you take the time to build stable, personal relationships that are based on trust. |
| Pay attention to cultural norms | • Listen more, observe more, and speak less.<br>• Show respect and take care not to set yourself above or separate from the group.<br>• Use a formal presentation style and make the effort to know the titles and positions of those in meetings and acknowledge their status. |

## Communicating with low-context cultures

| Action | Communication skills |
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| Avoid relying on body language and nonverbal clues | • In a low-context culture, the emphasis is placed on the actual content of the message rather than the way it's delivered. Best practice is therefore to avoid |

| Action | Communication skills |
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| | relying on communication through implied messaging, gestures, and pauses.<br>• Do not overanalyze the body language of the listener, and do not assume that the recipient of the message is aware of the cultural codes of implied communication. |
| Focus on delivering the content of the message with clarity | • Ensure the message is stated concisely. Low-context communicators like to know the answers to basic questions such as the what, where, when, and how of an issue.<br>• Low-context cultures also prioritize time as an asset, so the core content of your message should be communicated as soon as possible. Stay on message and convey key information at the outset so that the purpose of the conversation is clear. |
| Use clarifying questions to ensure the intended meaning has been communicated | • Unlike a high-context setting, where questions may suggest you haven't been paying adequate attention, your directness in asking for clarification will be appreciated. In a low-context culture, it's far better to seek clarity at the outset, rather than assuming that the message is clear when there is actually a gap in understanding. |

| Action | Communication skills |
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| Separate relationship-building from task execution | • When communicating with low-context cultures, you are expected to separate personal relationship-building from task execution. Individualism and the ability to work and achieve goals independently is highly valued, while the importance of prior relationships and hierarchy is diminished.<br>• The successful completion of the task is prioritized over accomplishments via relationships. And since time is considered a premium at work, it's considered normal to skip preliminary social interactions and move straight to focusing on the task at hand. |