UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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PART 1

Key Concepts: Underlying Structures of Culture

CULTURE IS COMMUNICATION

In physics today, so far as we know, the galaxies that one studies are all controlled by the same laws. This is not entirely true of the worlds created by humans. Each cultural world operates according to its own internal dynamic, its own principles, and its own laws—written and unwritten. Even time and space are unique to each culture. There are, however, some common threads that run through all cultures.

It is possible to say that the world of communication can be divided into three parts: *words, material things,* and *behavior.* Words are the medium of business, politics, and diplomacy. Material things are usually indicators of status and power. Behavior provides feedback on how other people feel and includes techniques for avoiding confrontation.

By studying these three parts of the communication process in our own and other cultures, we can come to recognize and understand a vast unexplored region of human behavior that exists outside the range of people's conscious awareness, a "silent language" that is usually conveyed unconsciously (see Edward T. Hall's *The Silent Language*). This silent language includes a broad range of evolutionary concepts, practices, and solutions to problems which have their roots not in the lofty ideas of philosophers but in the shared experiences of ordinary people. In the words of the director of a project on cross-cultural relations, understanding the silent language "provides insights into *the underlying principles that shape our lives.*" These underlying principles are not only inherently interesting but eminently practical. The readers of this book, whether they be German, French, American, or from other countries, should find these principles useful at home and abroad.

Culture can be likened to a giant, extraordinary complex, subtle computer. Its programs guide the actions and responses of human beings in every walk of life. This process requires attention to everything people do to survive, advance in the world, and gain satisfaction from life. Furthermore, cultural

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programs will not work if crucial steps are omitted, which happens when people unconsciously apply their own rules to another system.

During the three years we worked on this book, we had to learn two different programs for our office computer. The first was quite simple, but mastery did require paying close attention to every detail and several weeks of practice. The second was a much more complex program that required weeks of intensive practice, hours of tutoring, and days of depression and frustration when "the darn thing didn't work." Learning a new cultural program is infinitely more complicated and requires years of practice, yet there are many similarities in the learning process.

Cultural communications are deeper and more complex than spoken or written messages. *The essence of effective cross-cultural communication has more to do with releasing the right responses than with sending the "right" messages.* We offer here some conceptual tools to help our readers decipher the complex, unspoken rules of each culture.

FAST AND SLOW MESSAGES:
FINDING THE APPROPRIATE SPEED

The speed with which a particular message can be decoded and acted on is an important characteristic of human communication. There are fast and slow messages. A headline or cartoon, for example, is fast; the meaning that one extracts from books or art is slow. A fast message sent to people who are geared to a slow format will usually miss the target. While the content of the wrong-speed message may be understandable, it won't be received by someone accustomed to or expecting a different speed. The problem is that few people are aware that information can be sent at different speeds.

EXAMPLES OF FAST AND SLOW MESSAGES

Fast Messages	Slow Messages
Prose	Poetry
Headlines	Books
A communique	An ambassador
Propaganda	Art
Cartoons	Etchings
TV commercials	TV documentary
Television	Print
Easy familiarity	Deep relationships
Manners	Culture

Almost everything in life can be placed somewhere along the fast/slow message-speed spectrum. Such things as diplomacy, research, writing books, and creating art are accomplished in the slow mode. Buddha, Confucius, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Rembrandt all produced messages that human beings are still deciphering hundreds of years after the fact. Language is a very slow message; after 4,000 years, human beings are just beginning to discover what language is all about. The same can be said of culture, which incorporates multiple styles of "languages" that only release messages to those who are willing to spend the time to understand them.

In essence a person is a slow message; it takes time to get to know someone well. The message is, of course, slower in some cultures than in others. In the United States it is not too difficult to get to know people quickly in a relatively superficial way, which is all that most Americans want. Foreigners have often commented on how "unbelievably friendly" the Americans are. However, when Edward T. Hall studied the subject for the U.S. State Department, he discovered a worldwide complaint about Americans: they seem capable of forming only one kind of friendship—the informal, superficial kind that does not involve an exchange of deep confidences.

Conversely, in Europe personal relationships and friendships are highly valued and tend to take a long time to solidify. This is largely a function of the long-lasting, well-established net-

works of friends and relationships—particularly among the French—that one finds in Europe. Although there are exceptions, as a rule it will take Americans longer than they expect to really get to know Europeans. It is difficult, and at times may even be impossible, for a foreigner to break into these networks. Nevertheless, many businesspeople have found it expedient to take the time and make the effort to develop genuine friends among their business associates.

HIGH AND LOW CONTEXT: HOW MUCH INFORMATION IS ENOUGH?

Context is the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event. The elements that combine to produce a given meaning—events and context—are in different proportions depending on the culture. The cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high to low context.

> A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which *most* of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation.
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> Edward T. Hall, 1976

Japanese, Arabs, and Mediterranean peoples, who have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues, and clients and who are involved in close personal relationships, are high-context. As a result, for most normal transactions in daily life they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth, background information. This is because they keep

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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. This difference can affect virtually every situation and every relationship in which the members of these two opposite traditions find themselves.

Within each culture, of course, there are specific individual differences in the need for contexting—the process of filling in background data. But it is helpful to know whether the culture of a particular country falls on the high or low side of the scale since every person is influenced by the level of context.

Contexting performs multiple functions. For example, any shift in the level of context is a communication. The shift can be up the scale, indicating a warming of the relationship, or down the scale (lowering the context), communicating coolness or displeasure—signaling something has gone wrong with a relationship. In the United States the boss might communicate annoyance to an assistant when he shifts from the high-context, familiar form of address to the low-context, formal form of address. When this happens the boss is telling the subordinate in no uncertain terms that she or he has stepped out of line and incurred disfavor. In Japan moving the direction of the context is a source of daily feedback as to how things are going. The day starts with the use of honorifics, formal forms of address attached to each name. If things are going well the honorifics are dropped as the day progresses. First-naming in the United States is an artificial attempt at high-contexting; it tends to offend Europeans, who view the use of first names as acceptable only between close friends and family. With Europeans, one is always safe using a formal form of address, waiting for the other person to indicate when familiarity is acceptable.

Like their near relations the Germans, many Anglo-Americans (mostly those of northern European heritage) are not only low-context but they also lack extensive, well-developed information networks. American networks are limited in scope and development compared to those of the French, the Spanish, the Italians, and the Japanese. What follows from this is that Americans, unless they are very unsophisticated, will feel the need for contexting, for detailed background information, any time they are asked to make a decision or to do something. The American approach to life is quite segmented and focused on discrete, compartmentalized information; Americans need to know what is going to be in what compartment before they commit themselves. We experienced this in Japan when we were asked on short notice to provide names of well-placed Japanese and Americans to be participants in a small conference. Like most prudent Americans, we were reluctant to provide names until we knew what the conference was about and what the individuals recommended would be expected to do. This seemed logical and reasonable enough to us. Nevertheless, our reluctance was read as obstructionist by our Japanese colleagues and friends responsible for the conference. In Japan the mere presence of certain individuals endows the group and its activities with authority and status, which is far more important than the topic of the conference. It is characteristic of high-context, high-information societies that attendance at functions is as much a matter of the prestige associated with the function as anything else. This in turn means that, quite frequently, invitations to high-level meetings and conferences will be issued on short notice. It is taken for granted that those invited will eschew all previous commitments if the meeting is important enough. As a general rule Americans place greater importance on how long ago a commitment was made, on the agenda, and on the relevance of the expertise of different individuals to the agenda. (For an in-depth discussion of the Japanese, we refer the reader to the authors' *Hidden Differences: Doing Business with the Japanese,* in the reading list.)

Another example of the contrast between how high- and low-context systems work is this: consider a top American executive working in an office and receiving a normal quota of visitors, usually one at a time. Most of the information that is relevant to the job originates from the few people the executive sees in the course of the day, as well as from what she or he reads. This is why the advisors and support personnel who surround the presidents of American enterprises (as well as the president of the United States) are so important. They and they alone control the content and the flow of organizational information to the chief executive.

Contrast this with the office of virtually any business executive in a high-context country such as France or Japan, where information flows freely and from all sides. Not only are people constantly coming and going, both seeking and giving information, but the entire form and function of the organization is centered on gathering, processing, and disseminating information. Everyone stays informed about every aspect of the business and knows who is best informed on what subjects.

In Germany almost everything is low-context and compartmentalized. The executive office is both a refuge and a screen—a refuge for the boss from the distractions of day-to-day office interactions and a screen for the employees from continual supervision. Information communicated in the office is not shared except with a select few—the exact antithesis of the high-information cultures.

High-context people are apt to become impatient and irritated when low-context people insist on giving them information they don't need. Conversely, low-context people are at a loss when high-context people do not provide *enough* information. One of the great communications 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. Ordinarily, people make these adjustments automatically in their own country, but in other countries their messages frequently miss the target.

The other side of the coin when considering context level is the apparent paradox that high-context people, such as the French, want to see *everything* when evaluating a *new* enterprise to which they have not been contexted. Annual reports or tax returns are not enough. Furthermore, they will keep asking until they get the information they want. Being high context, the French are driven to make their own synthesis of the meanings of the figures. Unlike Americans, they feel uncomfortable with someone else's synthesis, someone else's "bottom line."

SPACE

Every living thing has a visible physical boundary—its skin—separating it from its external environment. This visible boundary is surrounded by a series of invisible boundaries that are more difficult to define but are just as real. These other boundaries begin with the individual's personal space and terminate with her or his "territory."

Territoriality

Territoriality, an innate characteristic whose roots lie hundreds of millions of years in the past, is the act of laying claim to and defending a territory and is a vital link in the chain of events necessary for survival. In humans 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 his bedroom. In Germany this same feeling of territoriality is commonly extended to all possessions, including the automobile. If a German's car is touched, it is as though the individual himself has been touched.

Space also communicates power. A corner office suite in the United States is conventionally occupied by "the brass," and a private office in any location has more status than a desk in the

open without walls. In both German and American business, the top floors are reserved for high-ranking officials and executives. In contrast, important French officials occupy a position in the *middle*, surrounded by subordinates; the emphasis there is on occupying the central position in an information network, where one can stay informed and can control what is happening.

Personal Space

Personal space is another form of territory. Each person has around him an invisible bubble of space which expands and contracts depending on a number of things: the relationship to the people nearby, the person's emotional state, cultural background, and the activity being performed. Few people are allowed to penetrate this bit of mobile territory and then only for short periods of time. Changes in the bubble brought about by cramped quarters or crowding cause people to feel uncomfortable or aggressive. 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, all of which means that Mediterranean Europeans "get too close" to the Germans, the Scandinavians, the English, and those Americans of northern European ancestry. In northern Europe one does not touch others. Even the brushing of the overcoat sleeve used to elicit an apology.

The Multisensory Spatial Experience

Few people realize that space is perceived by *all* the senses, not by vision alone. Auditory space is perceived by the ears, thermal space by the skin, kinesthetic space by the muscles, and olfactory space by the nose. As one might imagine, there are great cultural differences in the programming of the senses. Americans to some extent and Germans to a greater extent rely

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heavily on auditory screening, particularly when they want to concentrate. High-context people reject auditory screening and thrive on being open to interruptions and in tune with what goes on around them. Hence, in French and Italian cities one is periodically and intrusively bombarded by noise.

Unconscious Reactions to Spatial Differences

Spatial changes give tone to communication, accent it, and at times even override the spoken word. As people interact, the flow and shift of distance between them is integral to the communication process. For example, if a stranger does not maintain "normal" conversational distance and gets too close, our reaction is automatic—we feel uncomfortable, sometimes even offended or threatened and we back up.

Human beings in the course of a lifetime incorporate literally hundreds of spatial cues. They imbibe the significance of these cues like mother's milk, in the context of their own culture. Just as a fragrance will trigger a memory, these cues and their associated behaviors release unconscious responses, regulating the tone, tempo, and mood of human transactions.

Since most people don't think about personal distance as something that is culturally patterned, foreign spatial cues are almost inevitably misinterpreted. This can lead to bad feelings which are then projected onto the people from the other culture in a most personal way. When a foreigner appears aggressive and pushy, or remote and cold, it may mean only that her or his personal distance is different from yours.

Americans have strong feelings about proximity and the attendant rights, responsibilities, and obligations associated with being a neighbor. Neighbors should be friendly and agreeable, cut their lawns, keep their places up, and do their bit for the neighborhood. By contrast, in France and Germany, simply sharing adjacent houses does not necessarily mean that people will interact with each other, particularly if they have not met socially. Proximity requires different behavior in other cultures.

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TIME

Life on earth evolved in response to the cycles of day and night and the ebb and flow of the tides. As humans evolved, a multiplicity of internal biological clocks also developed. These biological clocks now regulate most of the physiological functions of our bodies. It is not surprising, therefore, that human concepts of time grew out of the natural rhythms associated with daily, monthly, and annual cycles. From the beginning humans have been tied to growing seasons and were dependent on the forces and rhythms of nature.

Out of this background two time systems evolved—one as an expression of our biological clocks, the other of the solar, lunar, and annual cycles. These systems will be described under the headings "Time As Structure" and "Time as Communication." In the sections that follow we restrict ourselves to those manifestations of time that have proved to be stumbling blocks at the cultural interface.

Monochronic and Polychronic Time

There are many kinds of time systems in the world, but two are most important to international business. We call them monochronic and polychronic time. Monochronic time means paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time. Polychronic time means being involved with many things at once. Like oil and water, the two systems do not mix.

In monochronic cultures, time is experienced and used in a linear way—comparable to a road extending from the past into the future. Monochronic time is divided quite naturally into segments; it is scheduled and compartmentalized, making it possible for a person to concentrate on one thing at a time. In a monochronic system, the schedule may take priority above all else and be treated as sacred and unalterable.

Monochronic time is perceived as being almost *tangible:* people talk about it as though it were money, as something that can be "spent," "saved," "wasted," and "lost." It is also used as

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a classification system for ordering life and setting priorities: "I don't have time to see him." Because monochronic time concentrates on one thing at a time, people who are governed by it don't like to be interrupted. Monochronic time seals people off from one another and, as a result, intensifies some relationships while shortchanging others. Time becomes a room which some people are allowed to enter, while others are excluded.

Monochronic time dominates most business in the United States. While Americans perceive it as almost in the air they breathe, it is nevertheless a learned product of northern European culture and is therefore arbitrary and imposed. Monochronic time is an artifact of the industrial revolution in England; factory life required the labor force to be on hand and in place at an appointed hour. In spite of the fact that it is *learned*, monochronic time now appears to be natural and logical because the great majority of Americans grew up in monochronic time systems with whistles and bells counting off the hours.

Other Western cultures—Switzerland, Germany, and Scandinavia in particular—are dominated by the iron hand of monochronic time as well. German and Swiss cultures represent classic examples of monochronic time. Still, monochronic time is not natural time; in fact, it seems to violate many of humanity's innate rhythms. ·

In almost every respect, polychronic systems are the antithesis of monochronic systems. Polychronic time is characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many things and by a *great involvement with people*. There is more emphasis on completing human transactions than on holding to schedules. For example, two polychronic Latins conversing on a street corner would likely opt to be late for their next appointment rather than abruptly terminate the conversation before its natural conclusion. Polychronic time is experienced as much less tangible than monochronic time and can better be compared to a single point than to a road.

Proper understanding of the difference between the monochronic and polychronic time systems will be helpful in dealing with the time-flexible Mediterranean peoples. While the gener-

alizations listed below do not apply equally to all cultures, they
will help convey a pattern:

MONOCHRONIC PEOPLE	POLYCHRONIC PEOPLE
do one thing at a time	do many things at once
concentrate on the job	are highly distractible and subject to interruptions
take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously	consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible
are low-context and need information	are high-context and already have information
are committed to the job	are committed to people and human relationships
adhere religiously to plans	change plans often and easily
are concerned about not disturbing others; follow rules of privacy and consideration	are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) than with privacy
show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend	borrow and lend things often and easily
emphasize promptness	base promptness on the relationship
are accustomed to short-term relationships	have strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

The Relation between Time and Space

In monochronic time cultures the emphasis is on the compart-
mentalization of functions and people. Private offices are sound-
proof if possible. In polychronic Mediterranean cultures, business

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offices often have large reception areas where people can wait. Company or government officials may even transact their business by moving about in the reception area, stopping to confer with this group and that one until everyone has been attended to.

Polychronic people feel that private space disrupts the flow of information by shutting people off from one another. In polychronic systems, appointments mean very little and may be shifted around even at the last minute to accommodate someone more important in an individual's hierarchy of family, friends, or associates. Some polychronic people (such as Latin Americans and Arabs) give precedence to their large circle of family members over any business obligation. Polychronic people also have many close friends and good clients with whom they spend a great deal of time. The close links to clients or customers creates a reciprocal feeling of obligation and a mutual desire to be helpful.

Polychronic Time and Information

Polychronic people live in a sea of information. They feel they must be up to the minute about everything and everybody, be it business or personal, and they seldom subordinate personal relationships to the exigencies of schedules or budgets.

It is impossible to know how many millions of dollars have been lost in international business because monochronic and polychronic people do not understand each other or even realize that two such different time systems exist. The following example illustrates how difficult it is for these two types to relate:

A French salesman working for a French company that had recently been bought by Americans found himself with a new American manager who expected instant results and higher profits immediately. Because of the emphasis on personal relationships, it frequently takes years to develop customers in polychronic France, and, in family-owned firms, relationships with customers

may span generations. The American manager, not understanding this, ordered the salesman to develop new customers within three months. The salesman knew this was impossible and had to resign, asserting his legal right to take with him all the loyal customers he had developed over the years. Neither side understood what had happened.

These two opposing views of time and personal relationships often show up during business meetings. In French meetings the information flow is high, and one is expected to read other people's thoughts, intuit the state of their business, and even garner indirectly what government regulations are in the offing. For the French and other polychronic/high-context people, a tight, fixed agenda can be an encumbrance, even an insult to one's intelligence. Most, if not all, of those present have a pretty good idea of what will be discussed beforehand. The purpose of the meeting is to create consensus. A rigid agenda and consensus represent opposite goals and do not mix. *The importance of this basic dichotomy cannot be overemphasized.*

Past- and Future-Oriented Countries

It is always important to know which segments of the time frame are emphasized. Cultures in countries such as Iran, India, and those of the Far East are past-oriented. Others, such as that of the urban United States, are oriented to the present and short-term future; still others, such as those of Latin America, 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? After all, I am educated. Don't the Germans know that?" The Japanese and the French are also steeped in history, but because they are high-context cultures, historical facts are alluded to obliquely. At present, there is no satisfactory explanation for why and how differences of this sort came about.

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TIME AS COMMUNICATION

As surely as each culture has its spoken language, each has its own *language of time;* to function effectively in France, Germany, and the United States, it is essential to acquaint oneself with the local language of time. When we take our own time system for granted and project it onto other cultures, we fail to read the hidden messages in the foreign time system and thereby deny ourselves vital feedback.

For Americans, the use of appointment-schedule time reveals how people feel about each other, how significant their business is, and where they rank in the status system. Treatment of time can also convey a powerful form of insult. Furthermore, because the rules are informal, they operate largely out-of-awareness and, as a consequence, are less subject to conscious manipulation than language.

It is important, therefore, to know how to read the messages associated with time in other cultures. In France almost everything is polychronic whereas in Germany monochronic promptness is even more important than it is in the United States.

Tempo, Rhythm, and Synchrony

Rhythm is an intangible but important aspect of time. Because nature's cycles are rhythmic, it is understandable that rhythm and tempo are distinguishing features of any culture. Rhythm ties the people of a culture together and can also alienate them from members of other cultures. In some cultures people move very slowly; in others, they move rapidly. When people from two such different cultures meet, they are apt to have difficulty relating because they are not "in sync." This is important because synchrony—the subtle ability to move together—is vital to all collaborative efforts, be they conferring, administering, working together on machines, or buying and selling.

People who move at a fast tempo are often perceived as "tailgating" those who move more slowly, and tailgating doesn't

contribute to harmonious interaction—nor does forcing fast-paced people to move too slowly. Americans complain that the Germans take forever to reach decisions. Their time is out of phase with American time and vice versa. One must always be contexted to the local time system. There will be times when everything seems to be at a standstill, but actually a great deal is going on behind the scenes. Then there will be other times when everything moves at lightning speed and it is necessary to stand aside, to get out of the way.

Scheduling and Lead Time

To conduct business in an orderly manner in other countries, it is essential to know how much or how little lead time is required for each activity: how far ahead to request an appointment or schedule meetings and vacations, and how much time to allow for the preparation of a major report. In both the United States and Germany, schedules are sacred; in France scheduling frequently cannot be initiated until meetings are held with concerned members of the organization to permit essential discussions. This system works well in France, but there are complications whenever overseas partners or participants are involved since they have often scheduled their own activities up to two years in advance.

Lead time varies from culture to culture and is itself a communication as well as an element in organization. For instance, in France, if the relationship is important, desks will be cleared when that person arrives, whether there has been any advance notice or not. Time will be made to work together, up to twenty-four hours a day if necessary. In the United States and to some extent in Germany, on the other hand, the amount of lead time can be read as an index of the relative importance of the business to be conducted, as well as of the status of the individuals concerned. Short lead time means that the business is of little importance; the longer the lead time, the greater the value of the proceedings. In these countries, two weeks is the minimum advance time for requesting appointments. In Arab countries,

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two weeks may be too long—a date set so far in advance "slides off their minds"; three or four days may be preferable. In Japan lead time is usually much shorter than in the United States, and it is difficult to say how many conferences on important subjects, attended by all the most competent and prestigious Japanese leaders in their fields, fail to attract suitable counterparts from the United States because of the short lead time. Although misunderstandings are blameless artifacts of the way two very different systems work, accidents of culture are seldom understood for what they are.

Another instance of time as communication is the practice of setting a date to end something. For example, Americans often schedule how long they will stay in a foreign country for a series of meetings, thus creating the psychological pressure of having to arrive at a decision by a certain date. *This is a mistake.* The Japanese and, to a lesser degree, the French are very aware of the American pressure of being "under the gun" and will use it to their advantage during negotiations.

The Importance of Proper Timing

Choosing the correct timing of an important event is crucial. Politicians stake their careers on it. In government and business alike, announcements of major changes or new programs must be carefully timed. The significance of different time segments of the day also must be considered. Certain times of the day, month, or year are reserved for certain activities (vacations, meal times, etc.) and are not ordinarily interchangeable. In general in northern European cultures and in the United States, anything that occurs outside of business hours, very early in the morning, or late at night suggests an emergency. In France there are times when nothing is expected to happen, such as national holidays and during the month of August, when everything shuts down for *vacances.* Culturally patterned systems are sufficiently complex so that it is wise to seek the advice of local experts.

In the U.S. the short business lunch is common and the business dinner rarer; this is not so in France, where the function

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of the business lunch and dinner is to create the proper atmosphere and get acquainted. Relaxing with business clients during lunch and after work is crucial to building the close rapport that is absolutely necessary if one is to do business.

Appointments

The way in which time is treated by Americans and Germans signals attitude, evaluation of priorities, mood, and status. Since time is highly valued in both Germany and the United States, the messages of time carry more weight than they do in polychronic countries. Waiting time, for example, carries strong messages which work on that part of the brain that mobilizes the emotions (the lymbic systems). In the U.S. only those people with very high status can keep others waiting and get away with it. In general those individuals are the very ones who know enough of human relations to avoid "insults of time" whenever possible. It is the petty bureaucrat who likes to throw his weight around, the bully who takes pleasure in putting people down, or the insecure executive with an inflated ego who keeps visitors waiting. The waiting-room message is a double-edged sword. Not only does it communicate an attitude towards the visitor, but it reveals a lot about the individual who has kept a visitor waiting. In monochronic cultures such as those in the U.S. and Germany, keeping others waiting can be a deliberate putdown or a signal that the individual is very disorganized and can't keep to a schedule. In polychronic cultures such as those of France or Hispanic countries, no such message is intended. In other words, one's reading of the message should be tempered by the context, the realities of the situation, and not with an automatic projection of one's own culture.

Clearly, interactions between monochronic and polychronic people can be stressful unless both parties know and can decode the meanings behind each other's language of time. The language of time is much more stable and resistant to change than other cultural systems. We were once involved in a research project in New Mexico, conducting interviews with Hispanics.

Our subjects were sixth- and seventh-generation descendants of the original Spanish families who settled in North America in the early seventeenth century. Despite constant contact with Anglo-Saxon Americans for well over a hundred years, most of these Hispanics have remained polychronic. In three summers of interviewing we never once achieved our scheduled goal of five interviews each week for each interviewer. We were lucky to have two or three. Interviews in Hispanic homes or offices were constantly interrupted when families came to visit or a friend dropped by. The Hispanics seemed to be juggling half a dozen activities simultaneously, even while the interviews were in progress.

Since we are monochronic Anglo-Saxons, this caused us no little concern and considerable distress. It is hard not to respond emotionally when the rules of your own time system are violated. Nor was an intellectual understanding of the problem much help at first. We did recognize, however, that what we were experiencing was a consequence of cultural differences and was, therefore, a part of our data. This led us to a better understanding of the importance as well as the subtleties of information flow and information networks in a polychronic society.

INFORMATION FLOW:
IS IT FAST OR SLOW AND WHERE DOES IT GO?

The rate of information flow is measured by how long it takes a message intended to produce an action to travel from one part of an organization to another and for that message to release the desired response. Cultural differences in information flow are often the greatest stumbling blocks to international understanding. Every executive doing business in a foreign land should know how information is handled—where it goes and whether it flows easily through the society and the business organization or whether it is restricted to narrow channels because of compartmentalization.

In low-context countries, such as the United States, Germany, and Switzerland, information is highly focused, compartmentalized, and controlled, and, therefore, not apt to flow freely. In high-context cultures, such as the French, the Japanese, and the Spanish, information spreads rapidly and moves almost as if it had a life of its own. Those who use information as an instrument of "command and control" and who build their planning on controlling information are in for a rude shock in societies where people live in a sea of information.

In high-context cultures, interpersonal contact takes precedence over everything else; wherever people are spatially involved with each other, information flows freely. In business, executives do not seal themselves off behind secretaries and closed doors; in fact in Japan senior executives may even share offices so that each person knows as much about the entire base of operations as possible, and in France an executive will have ties to a centrally located bureau chief to keep a finger on the pulse of information flow. In these cultures most people are already highly contexted and therefore don't need to be briefed in much detail for each transaction; the emphasis is on stored rather than on transmitted information. Furthermore, channels are seldom overloaded because people stay in constant contact; therefore, the organizational malady of "information overload" is rare. Schedules and screening (as in the use of private offices) are minimized because they interfere with this vital contact. For high-context people, there are two primary expectations: to context everybody in order to open up the information channels and determine whether the group can work together and to appraise the chances of coming to an agreement in the future. The drive to stay in touch and to keep up to date in high-context cultures is very strong. Because these cultures are also characteristically high-information-flow cultures, being out of touch means to cease to exist as a viable human being.

Organizations where information flows slowly are familiar to both Americans and northern Europeans because low-flow information is associated with both low-context and monochronic time resulting from the compartmentalization associated with

low-context institutions and of taking up one thing at a time. In the United States information flows slowly because each executive has a private office and a secretary to serve as a guard so that the executive is not distracted by excessive information. Since executive territory is jealously guarded, American executives often do not share information with their staff or with other department heads. We were once hired as consultants to a large government bureaucracy in which there were problems. Our study revealed multiple causes, the most important of which was a bottleneck created by a high-ranking bureaucrat who managed to block practically all the information going from the top down and from the bottom up. Once the problem had been identified, an agency staff director remarked, "I see we have a blockage in information." In a high-context situation everyone would have already known that this was the case. In a low-context system, however, it was necessary to call in outside consultants to make explicit what some people had suspected but were unable or unwilling to identify.

ACTION CHAINS:
THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPLETION

An action chain is an established sequence of events in which one or more people participate—and contribute—to achieve a goal. It's like the old-fashioned ritual of courtship with its time-honored developmental stages. If either party rushes things too much, omits an important procedure, or delays too long between steps, the courtship grinds to a halt.

Business is replete with action chains: greeting people, hiring and training personnel, developing an advertising campaign, floating a stock offering, initiating a lawsuit, merging with or taking over other companies, even sinking a golf putt. Many bureaucratic procedures are based unconsciously on the action-chain model. Because of the diversity of functions, it may be difficult for some people to link all these activities in their minds,

but the common thread of underlying, ordered sequence ties each case to the others.

Because the steps in the chain are either technical (as in floating a stock offering or completing a merger) or else so widely shared and taken for granted that little conscious attention is paid to the details, the need to reexamine the entire pattern has largely gone unrecognized in the overseas setting.

There are important rules governing the structure, though not the content, of action chains. If an important step is left out, the action must begin all over again. Too many meetings and reports, for example, can break the action chains of individual projects, making it difficult for people to complete their work. In fact the breaking of an action chain is one of the most troublesome events with which human beings have to contend in our speeded-up technological twentieth century.

All planning must take into account the elaborate hierarchy of action chains. Monochronic, low-context cultures, with their compartmentalized approach and dependence on scheduled activities, are particularly sensitive to interruptions and so are more vulnerable to the breaking of action chains than high-context cultures. Most Americans are brought up with strong drives to complete action chains. High-context people, because of their intense involvement with each other and their extensive, cohesive networks, are more elastic; there is more "give" in their system. Some polychronic peoples will break an action chain simply because they don't like the way things are going or because they think they can "get a better deal." For instance, we once knew a monochronic architect in New York who was designing a building for a polychronic client. The client continually changed the specifications for the building. With each change, the building design had to be revised, even down to alterations in the building's foundations. The architect found this process particularly devastating because designing and constructing a building is an incredibly complex and elaborate collection of action chains. Changing one thing is likely to throw everything else out of gear.

The relationship between action chains and disputes is important. All cultures have built-in safeguards—even though they may not always work—to prevent a dispute from escalating to an out-and-out battle. Keep in mind, however, that these safeguards apply only within the context of one's own culture. In any foreign situation where a dispute appears imminent, it is essential to do two things immediately: proceed slowly, taking every action possible to maintain course and stay on an even keel; and seek the advice of a skillful, tactful interpreter of the culture.

INTERFACING: CREATING THE PROPER FIT

The concept of interfacing can be illustrated by a simple example: it is impossible to interface an American appliance with a European outlet without an adaptor and a transformer. Not only are the voltages different, but the contacts: one are round; on the other, thin and flat. The purpose of this book is to serve as an adaptor for business executives operating at the interfaces between American, French, and German cultures.

The problems to be solved when interfacing vary from company to company, but some generalizations are possible.

First, it is more difficult to succeed in a foreign country than home.

Second, the top management of a foreign subsidiary is crucial to the success of interfacing. Therefore, it is important to send the very best people available, take their advice, and leave them alone. Expect that your foreign manager or representative will start explaining things in terms of the local mentality which may sound alien and strange.

Cultural interfacing follows five basic principles:

1. The higher the context of either the culture or the industry, the more difficult the interface;

2. The greater the complexity of the elements, the more difficult the interface;

3. The greater the cultural distance, the more difficult the interface;

4. The greater the number of levels in the system, the more difficult the interface;

5. Very simple, low-context, highly evolved, mechanical systems tend to produce fewer interface problems than multiple-level systems of great complexity that depend on human talent for their success.

An example of an easy-to-interface business would be the manufacture of small components for microscopes by two divisions, one in Germany, the other in Switzerland. The cultural distance in this case is not great since both cultures are low-context as well as monochronic, and the business operation itself does not involve different levels of complexity.

A difficult-to-interface enterprise would be a newspaper or magazine in two countries that are vastly different, such as France and the United States. Publishing is a high-context enterprise which must be neatly meshed at literally dozens of points, including writing, advertising, and editorial policy. The success of newspapers and magazines depends on writers and editors who understand their audience's culture and know how to reach their readers.

RELEASING THE RIGHT RESPONSES

The Importance of Context and Following the Rules

The key to being an effective communicator is in knowing the degree of information (contexting) that must be supplied. If

you're communicating with a German, remember she or he is low-context and will need lots of information and all the details in depth. If you're communicating with someone from France, she or he is high-context and won't require as much information. Here are two examples from our interviews:

> One German manager working for a French firm was fired after his first year because he didn't perform as expected. The German manager was stunned. His response was, "But nobody told me what they wanted me to do."

> The opposite problem was encountered by a Frenchman who resigned from a German firm because he was constantly being told what he already knew by his German superior. Both his intelligence and his pride were threatened.

In both situations, the executives were inept at releasing the right response from their subordinates.

One of the factors that determines whether one releases the right response includes observing the rules of the other culture, including the time system. In Germany a salesman can have a very fine presentation, but if he arrives late by even a few minutes, no one will be impressed, no matter how good it is. Indeed, in all probability, the Germans will not even wait around to hear it. In France form is preeminent; without it, no message can release the right response. Americans must take great care not to alienate the French by being casual and informal in their manners; if Americans are not meticulously polite and formal, their message will not get through to the French, and they and their product will suffer.

The Importance of the Right Interpreter

Releasing the right response will also depend on choosing the right interpreter. An interpreter's accent or use of the local dialect can cause a negative reaction. The importance of this facet of communication cannot be overstressed, yet it is one of the most frequent violations of the unwritten laws of communi-

cation abroad. For example, if you are trying to communicate with a Japanese executive using an interpreter who is not well educated nor extremely polite and proper, the desired response from the Japanese will not be forthcoming. A well-educated and well-mannered interpreter whose use of the language reflects a good background is also highly desirable in France and Germany.

SUMMARY

Speed of messages, context, space, time, information flow, action chains, and interfacing are all involved in the creation of both national and corporate character. In organizations everything management does communicates; when viewed in the cultural context, all acts, all events, all material things have meaning. Some organizations send strong, consistent messages that are readily grasped by employees and customers alike. Other organizations are less easy to interpret; they do not communicate clearly, or their messages are incongruent. Sometimes one part of the organization communicates one thing and another part communicates something else. The cues around which these corporate and cultural messages are organized are as different as the languages with which they are associated. Most important, their meaning is deeply imbedded and therefore harder for management to change when making the transition from one country to another.

Many messages are implied or have a cultural meaning, and there is a tacit agreement as to the nature of that meaning which is deeply rooted in the context of the communication. There is much that is taken for granted in culture that few people can explain but which every member of the culture accepts as given. Remember that messages come in many forms (most of them not in words) which are imbedded in the context and in the choice of channels.

Within all cultures there are important unstated differences as to what constitutes a proper *releaser*. Our research over the

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years in choosing the correct releaser has indicated that people cluster around preferences for "words," "numbers," and "pictures." Using the wrong format (sending numbers when words are wanted, words when the recipient only feels comfortable with numbers, or words and/or numbers to the visually-oriented person) can only release a negative, frustrated response. The fascinating thing is that the message can be the same in every case. Furthermore, it is quite evident that each culture has its own preferences in this regard.

A television ad that is effective in the United States will have to be translated into a print media message to reach Germans. Germans are print-oriented, which explains in part why there is so little advertising on German TV. Also, Germans are always looking for what is "true" and to them numbers are a way of signaling that a product is exactly as it has been represented. Germans demand facts, facts, and more facts.

It is not uncommon for Americans to experience difficulty getting the French—even those whom they know and have done business with—to reply to inquiries, even urgent ones. This can be exasperating. The reasons are many but most have to do with the importance of immediate human contacts to the French. A solution that succeeds when other methods fail is to use a surrogate to relay messages rather than relying on a letter or a phone call. Why? Because letters and telephone calls aren't personal enough. If you send a properly placed emissary, one whom the individual you are trying to reach likes and trusts and considers important, you add the necessary personal touch to your message and will thereby release the right response.

The French also stress the importance of observing the many rituals of form. If you don't use the right form, the message conveyed is that you are ignorant or ill-mannered or don't care. In any event, the response that is released is almost certain to be negative. Remember that the French deplore casualness and informality. Paying attention to the details and being correct in everything you do is the only tactic that releases the right response in France.

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It is not necessary to solve every problem at once, only to show a genuine desire to do so and to take one step at a time, even if it seems to take a lifetime. The rewards are not only material but psychological and mental as well. New frontiers are not only to be found in outer space or in the microworld of science; they are also at the interfaces between cultures.