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Context Matters: High-Low Context Orientation as Expressed in Japanese and American Business Communication

Abstract

High-low context orientation is a central concept in the field of intercultural communication. It can be utilized to understand tendencies in communication styles and values among various cultural groups, yielding important insights in the study and practice of international business. The goal of this chapter is to explicate this concept, illustrating its meaning primarily using examples from Japan and the United States. The paper begins with a brief overview of basic intercultural communication-related definitions, linking language, symbols, messages, culture, and context. High-low context is presented as a continuum—a model that enables descriptions of predominant communication styles in specific national cultures while at the same time recognizing individual diversity of communication styles within those cultural groups. Next, the differences between low and high context communication styles originally postulated by Hall are elucidated, including direct and indirect messaging, verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as sender and receiver orientations, followed by an explanation of how individuals situationally shift their communication style along the high-low context continuum based upon power dynamics between communicative partners and their degree of shared ingroup membership. Then three common themes (empathy, sincerity, and humility) that impact Japanese high context communication in business are detailed so that those trying to decipher high context messages in Japanese business situations are better prepared to do so. The chapter concludes with brief recommendations as to how high-low context differences can be bridged to realize more effective communication outcomes.

Keywords: high-low context communication, contextual communication orientation, Japanese business communication, American-Japanese intercultural communication, direct-indirect communication, verbal-nonverbal communication

Contextual communication orientation, more commonly referred to as high-low context, is a central concept in the field of intercultural communication and can be used to understand tendencies in communication styles and communication-related values among various cultural groups. This had decided implications for the study and practice of international business, for example, grasping cultural differences in the fields of management and marketing (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998). The goal of this chapter is to explicate this concept, illustrating its meaning primarily using examples from Japan and the United States. I will draw from my 25-year career as a corporate trainer and university educator, employing examples from the literature in intercultural communication, international business, and Japan studies, as well as my own experiences as a US American living in Japan for nearly 25 years. By the end of this chapter, readers should have a clear grasp of what constitutes context, differences between high and low context communication styles, and a richer understanding of how such communication style differences impact business communication among Japanese and Americans as well as between them. I will conclude with brief recommendations as to how such differences can be bridged to realize more effective, positive communication outcomes between people experiencing challenges in communicating across the high-low context divide.

Before Context: Language, Symbols, Messages, and the Construction of Meaning

First, it is critical to lay the groundwork for explaining high-low context by providing some definitions from the field of intercultural communication: language, symbols, messages, and culture—as well as explaining their relationships. According to Gudykunst and Nishida (1994),

language constitutes a system of rules for

how the sounds of the language are made, how sentences are formed, the meaning of words or combinations, and how the language is used. When the rules of language are translated into a channel of communication (e.g., the spoken word) using symbols, messages are created. (p. 4)

Symbols of particular interest in this chapter include words and nonverbal signals such as gestures, eye contact, or facial expressions. All symbols refer to something, whether it is an idea or an object, yet the relationship between a symbol and that to which it refers is arbitrarily constructed by human beings, and often the meaning assigned to symbols differs from culture to culture. For instance, the same symbol, a thumbs up gesture, can be a show of approval in some cultures but a grave insult in others. Another symbol, the word “difficult,” typically means “impossible” in Japan but “challenging yet possible” in North America.

Symbols are combined into messages, which are in turn transmitted to others who then interpret them. Depending upon the cognitive framework of the receiver, one may perceive the meaning of that message differently from how the sender intended it. Because each individual has their own unique cognitive makeup, which is a combination of their life experiences (nurture) and hereditary characteristics (nature), no two individuals transmit or interpret messages in exactly the same way. Those cognitive frameworks used for both deciding how to transmit messages and how to interpret them are shaped in part by culture—one aspect of nurture.

Hall and Hall (1987) described culture as “a system for creating, sending, storing, and processing information” (p. 3), whereas Barnlund (1989) argued that culture gives its members “a commitment to similar ways of managing meanings” (p. xiii). Thus, culture adds another layer of complexity to the already complex processes of message transmission and interpretation. While countries can be useful proxies for cultural groups existing roughly on the level of nation, a culture can be formed by any group of regularly interacting people who, in the process of such interactions, establish their own communicative norms, beliefs, and associated practices; therefore, cultures may exist on many levels of abstraction such as geographic region, ethnic group, work organization, and family (Bennett, 2013). How we transmit and interpret messages can vary from one cultural group to another—whether on the level of nation, region, organization, family, or whichever types of groups are being compared.

Defined by Gudykunst and Nishida (1994), communication refers to the “exchange of messages and the creation of meaning (e.g., assigning significance or interpreting the messages),” and it is only effective to the extent that the person who interprets the message attaches “a meaning to the message that is similar to what the transmitter intended” (p. 5). Given the complexity of the processes of encoding and interpretation, as well as the potentially infinite variation in human cognitive frameworks for deriving meaning from communication, co-constructing similar or identical meanings to the same message is no small task, and differences between what is termed high and low context communication play a significant role in making the overall process of communication more challenging. High-low context orientation forms a dimension of cultural variability that can be used to explain how people communicate differently across cultures (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994), and if these two forms of encoding and interpreting messages are better understood and capably bridged, intercultural communication can become more effective in the process, engendering more positive relational outcomes.

Context Defined

What exactly is context? According to Hall and Hall (1987), it constitutes “the information that surrounds an event and is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event” (p. 7). Hall (1976) explained that a high context message is one in which “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit,

transmitted part of the message” (p. 79); therefore, in high-context communication, meaning is communicated, as per Condon (1984), “in the *context* within which words are spoken—such as who says the words, where and how they are spoken and so on” (p. 45). Alternately, Condon clarified, a low context message is one in which “the mass of information is vested in the explicit code” (p. 70). Because low context communicators tend not to presume that the listener shares unsaid context, to facilitate accurate, effective communication, they explicitly verbalize their message so the meaning of messages can be gleaned from the words themselves.

Cultures on the level of nation can influence the use of context to communicate intended meanings. For instance, Hall (1976), Condon (1984), and Ramsey (1998) asserted that Americans tend to place a strong trust in words to communicate and rely little on context to do so (i.e., they tend to be low context communicators), whereas Japanese often follow the opposite pattern (i.e., they are apt to be high context communicators). However, reliance upon context to communicate is not just a function of cultural patterns; context can be utilized in relational dyads or groups simply due to their greater familiarity with other(s) in that dyad or group. For example, even among low context communicators, spouses may communicate through context to a much higher extent than they would in other relationships, simply because they have built such an extensive foundation of shared experiences and meanings that they can readily tap into, thus relying on a few words or just a facial expression to encode messages to each other.

Therefore, high context communication presumes a large degree of collective knowledge and assumptions that do not need to be made explicit because communicative partners assume, at least unconsciously, that both are aware of or can readily tap into such shared bodies of information and the meanings commonly derived from them. The conditioning that makes such communication possible may occur through socialization in a specific society or even a work organization. In Japan, for example, corporate newcomers are indoctrinated in organizational culture through an extensive orientation period, or *shinyuu shain kenshuu*. Once ensconced in the company, continuous efforts are made to build upon the foundation of shared information, leading to similar cognitive frameworks for encoding and decoding such information. For instance, a Japanese client once told me that upon joining his company he was trained that it was his job—and that of everyone in the same section—to listen to other colleagues’ conversations on the office phones to be current on all work-related business.

High-Low Context: Not a Dualism but a Continuum

US American communication patterns are utilized in this chapter as a primary counterpoint to Japanese ones; however, high-low context is not conceived as dualistic concept, but as a continuum. As Hall and Hall (1987) wrote, “The elements that combine to produce a given meaning—events and context—are in different proportions depending on the culture. It is thus possible to order the cultures of the world on a scale from high to low context” (p. 7). Therefore, low-context communicators, for example, are not all created the same—those closer to the low-context extreme of the scale incorporate greater proportions of explicit messages in their communication, while those high-context communicators nearer to the high-context extreme rely more on context in theirs. If one imagines a continuum from low to high context (illustrated in Figure 1), one could plot national group tendencies as Hall and Hall proposed, or individual communication styles. When plotting countries, if one were to assess high-low context using a quantitative instrument, for example, Japan’s group average would presumably be near (but not at) the extreme end of the high context continuum as indicative of a strong high context communication style compared with most other national averages, and America situated clearly on the low context end of the continuum but comparatively higher in context than the points representing Swiss, German, and Scandinavian averages (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994).

Insert Figure 1 here

Thus, there are degrees of low and high context, and the relative positions of individuals and the groups to which they belong on this continuum help to shape their reactions to others in everyday communication. For instance, many Japanese businesspeople perceive Americans and Britons as low context, yet in Figure 1, the British tend to be placed in a higher context position than Americans, yet still on the low context half of the continuum. I was confronted by such differences regularly when I lived in Oxford, England for one year while on sabbatical. The first two months, I was quite confused, as people frequently seemed to omit information that I needed to grasp what they were saying—typically intimating something that appeared obvious to them but unknown to me. One day, an American friend who had lived a decade in the UK and two decades in Japan advised me, “When the British talk to you, just imagine they are speaking Japanese.” Eureka! When my colleagues spoke, I imagined their words in Japanese (instead of American English), and using this high context framework for interpretation, their implied meanings grew much clearer.

The high-low context continuum raises several important issues and implications. First, when plotting countries, a group’s point on the continuum only represents an average score for all members tested within a group—not necessarily individual communication styles. This also means that all gradations of high and low context on the continuum may be found among individuals in that national group. For example, if we examined the predominant communication style of a large group of Americans (or Japanese), we would expect to identify people whose primary communication tendencies could be plotted all over the continuum, demonstrating a diversity of individual styles. One would also likely find a cluster of individual American (or Japanese) scores at or near their group average—signifying a common communication style within the group, though not one that is indicative of every person in it. In other words, it is important to remember that low and high context communication patterns exist in all cultural groups, but one style that has been conditioned during members’ primary socialization tends to be shared broadly among those members. Thus, high-low context is a dimension of cultural variation that can be used to describe the predominant communication style in a specific national culture while at the same time recognizing that the individual with whom we are communicating may or may not align with such patterns, or that tendencies at the group cultural level are not necessarily held at the individual level (Komisarof & Zhu, 2016; Richardson & Smith, 2007).

The continuum can also be used similarly to visualize the communication style of any given individual. For instance, if we examined someone’s communication style, we would likely find that person employs both high and low context styles: in specific situations (e.g., expressing one’s opinion at a meeting, negotiation, or handling difficult requests from customers) or with particular conversational partners (e.g., one’s boss vs. a subordinate), they are likely to assume a communication style represented by different gradations along the high-low context continuum. However, if we plotted a large number of communication scenarios, then a dominant individual high or low context style would likely emerge, which could be expressed as a plot on the continuum indicating that person’s primary communication tendency.

Tests of Hall’s Original Positions for American and Japanese Culture

Empirical tests of Hall’s original assertion of Japan as an extremely high context culture and America as a moderately strong low context culture have generally showed mixed results. For instance, Richardson and Smith (2007) measured individual tendencies in high-low context among Japanese and Americans, finding significantly different mean group scores between them, with Japanese scoring higher on the scale; however, this difference was modest, and the Japanese sample’s mean score was only at the scale midpoint. They concluded that Japan may be considered higher in context than America, but not necessarily high context in any absolute sense.

Kim, Pan, and Park (1998) attempted to empirically assess whether Americas are low context (and Chinese and South Koreans high context). With the caveat that their samples were

not representative (comprising business managers enrolled in 3 separate MBA programs) and modest in size, differences were statistically significant between Americans (comparatively low context) and Chinese as well as Koreans, respectively (comparatively high context). Thomas (1998), however, could not confirm high-low context differences between Americans and South Koreans, though this study comprised an analysis of written texts produced by participants in only a small sample.

Thus, empirical support of Americans as low context and Japanese as high context is inconclusive, though these positions are often assumed in research (Cardon, 2008). Though a significant portion of the literature supporting Hall's original assertions about these two national cultures is theoretical and/or anecdotal as opposed to empirical, this does not render it invalid. First, empirical studies of Japan's and America's position on the high-low context continuum, particularly in comparison with one another, are scant. Moreover, theoretical and anecdotal descriptions of Japanese high context and American low context communication styles have helped countless numbers of people to adapt to communication patterns in the other—whether it was Americans trying desperately to understand Japanese people or Japanese struggling to adjust to Americans. Further empirical research is recommended to better understand high-low context tendencies in both countries, particularly in cross-cultural comparison, as well as studies testing the efficacy of various strategies for bridging their differences.

Differentiating High and Low Context

High and low context were originally distinguished by Hall (1976) as summarized in Figure 2. In the subsequent sections, these differences will be discussed in turn, illustrated with examples, and elaborated upon.

Insert Figure 2 here

Direct vs. Indirect Communication

The first difference between high and low context relates to how verbal communication is organized: high context tends to be circular and indirect with low context being linear and direct. Over 50 years ago, Nakane (1970) observed the central importance of shared context in Japanese relationships and how it enables indirect communication to be understood: "Members of a group know each other exceedingly well. . . . Among fellow members a single word would suffice for the whole sentence." (p. 121).

Once such knowledge of the other is gained, then one can often infer what the other means to communicate without them needing to do so explicitly. For instance, a Japanese manager once told me that when he wanted a subordinate to handle a problem, he would just say, "Take care of it" (in Japanese, *Nantoka shite oite*). He reasoned that a trusted, competent subordinate would know what to do without the details needing to be enumerated. Low context communication, in stark contrast, tends to be direct, detailed, and unambiguous, with managers generally expected to explain precisely what they want done and how.

One Japanese high context expression that typically causes confusion to those unaccustomed to doing business there is "It's a little difficult" (*Sore wa chotto muzukashii desu*), which means that something is impossible or undesirable. Quite simply, it means no. By stating this indirectly, the face is saved of both the speaker and listener and interpersonal harmony maintained.

Naturally, there are exceptions to Japanese communicating in a high context manner: as previously discussed, there are Japanese who utilize primarily low context communication styles, and we can also observe diverse styles employed by the same individual. For example, even if

Japan's most high context communicator sees a fire rapidly approaching, s/he would not say, "Do you feel it is getting a bit hot?" to imply that a fire is about to engulf them. Screaming "Fire!" and running away is culturally universal.

Another important difference in the organization of high and low context styles is that the former tends to be circular and the latter linear. Japanese people often describe details of a situation or event without explicitly stating the main point, expecting that listeners who understand the context, or the body of knowledge related to the issue, will be able to infer what the speaker is alluding to. In this sense, the speaker is "moving around" the main point without verbalizing it—thus utilizing a "circular" style. North American communicators tend to state the main point first and provide pertinent reasons and examples afterward, thus becoming frustrated with their Japanese counterparts who do not "get to the point," while Japanese may feel that the predominant North American style is invasive and/or pushy for its overly linear, direct approach (Ramsey, 1998).

Verbal Communication and Words vs. Nonverbal Communication, Shared Knowledge and Role Expectations

While low context communication is heavily dependent upon words to communicate meaning, high context communication tends to reference bodies of unstated context that the speaker elicits in the mind of the listener. There are 3 ways this is usually achieved: through 1. nonverbal communication, 2. allusions to collective knowledge, and 3. shared role expectations. From here, each is considered in turn.

Sugiyama Lebra (1976) asserted that Japanese place a premium upon implicit, nonverbal, intuitive communication, rather than that which is explicit and verbal: "The Japanese . . . feel that speech is a poor substitute for an intuitive understanding of what is going on in other people's minds" (p. 46), and "only an insensitive uncouth person needs a direct, verbal, complete message" (p. 47). Hall and Hall (1987) emphasized Japanese predilections toward having prodigious needs for "information about human relationships and how people are feeling . . . [and possessing] quite sensitive antennae for perceiving emotional reactions" (p. 75).

Nonverbal communication is achieved through various channels including body language (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, and body posture), eye language (e.g., eye movements or frequency of eye contact), space language (e.g., standing distance between conversational partners), touch language (e.g., the places on the body considered appropriate to be touched and the frequency of such touching), and paralanguage—or the non-lexical aspects of speech communication (e.g., tone and volume of voice) (Yashiro et al., 2001).

High context communicators are commonly socialized to be extremely sensitive to nonverbal signals. For instance, when my wife and I were engaged and still had different last names, we gave an intercultural communication workshop as co-trainers. To maintain an air of professionalism, we decided that we would not acknowledge our relationship to the participants and behave neutrally toward each other. After the workshop, a group of Americans and a Japanese participant approached us. One American asked if we knew each other well, to which I responded, "Actually, we are engaged." Everyone's mouth dropped open in surprise except for the Japanese man, who said with a small smile, "I thought that you were not just training partners." When I asked him how he knew, he told us it was in how we gestured toward each other. Despite our best efforts to camouflage our relationship, we could not deceive his high context nonverbal observational skills.

Another form of nonverbal communication which plays a large role in high context communication, particularly in Japan, is silence. In low context cultures such as the US, silence tends to be seen as uncomfortable and something to be avoided because of its ambiguity. In Japan, silence is often employed as an important tool in communication. In business, silence can be used

to indicate agreement (as when no one objects to a proposal) or as disagreement (as when a speaker at a meeting implores agreement with their position but others remain silent). As Barnlund (1989) explained, “There are silences [in Japan] as damning, eloquent, reassuring or confirming as any remark one might make” (p. 129).

In addition to nonverbal channels, references to shared knowledge play an important role in high context communication. In Sakamoto and Naotsuka (1982), an American recounted when she asked a Japanese teacher whether he had any discipline problems in his high school, to which he replied, “Our school is an old school.” Baffled, she repeated the question, thinking he had misunderstood. He gave the same answer. To the American, an old school had no relationship to discipline problems—it was merely old. From his perspective, he was communicating quite clearly that his school was an old school, or one with a long history, which meant it was a college preparatory school with high admissions standards and students aspiring to go to Japan’s best universities; therefore, he expected the listener to share this commonplace knowledge and grasp that he did not have major discipline problems with the utterance that his school was old.

Shared role expectations constitute another critical aspect of high context communication. To demonstrate this point in my corporate workshops, I often give the following scenario: Imagine that you live in an apartment building with your partner and your 8-year-old daughter, who loves to practice the piano every afternoon. One day, you exit your apartment and by chance run into the woman who lives next door. After exchanging greetings, she says, “Your daughter plays piano so well.” When I ask American participants how they interpret this statement, typically 80-90% respond that the neighbor is complimenting their daughter’s piano playing. Yet with Japanese audiences, 80-90% say that the neighbor is complaining that their daughter plays too noisily. Why? In Japanese society, a key role expectation is that neighbors will not cause any inconvenience or trouble (in Japanese, *meiwaku*) for each other. Excessive noise is one form of *meiwaku*, so when neighbors in Japan communicate, their antennas are raised, so to speak, to detect subtle messages that hint of any sources of trouble needing to be ameliorated.

Likewise, providers are expected to offer their customers service that minimizes any form of inconvenience—a smooth user experience—and if some form of inconvenience is pointed out, the vendor will usually try to remedy the problem, which is a key to getting repeat business as well as referrals to new clients. For instance, I have hired several Japanese moving companies (6 times in total) with extremely consistent experiences. When moving, some of the most common sources of potential trouble are a scratch to the property that one is moving out of, the property being moved into, or to one’s possessions. Therefore, as soon as moving companies arrive on a property, most will set up easily removable covers all over the walls to make sure that they are not inadvertently scratched when carrying furniture in or out. The furniture itself is wrapped in elastic covers made of padded protective material. Finally, even the slightest movers are stunningly strong and agile, moving large furniture seamlessly through narrow spaces, blending grace and power as they navigate twisting halls and cramped stairwells—all the while avoiding scratches or bumps anywhere—in a country that is famous for small living spaces.

A final example of shared role expectations that impacts Japanese business communication is the role of a manager, who is presumed to know the projects being currently addressed by each of their subordinates, thus implicitly understanding everyone’s current workload. In low context cultures such as the US, if a manager asks an employee to take on extra work and the employee feels overloaded, they are generally expected to say so, reminding the manager about other projects in which they are involved. In Japan, however, since the manager is supposed to be conscious of everyone’s workload, subordinates often assume that requests are being made with that workload already in their manager’s mind. Given this role expectation and the sensitivity to keeping harmonious collegial relations, subordinates frequently will accept such burdensome assignments. This leaves potential for misunderstandings (and a burned-out workforce) when low context American managers assume that Japanese subordinates will let them know if their request is not

feasible, yet the high context employee assumes that their boss understands exactly what is being asked and is requesting them to complete this task despite the overwork they are sure to encounter.

Conflict Avoidance vs. Conflict Acknowledgement

The next major differences between high and low context communication styles described in Figure 1 relate to the purpose of communication and attitude toward conflict. As for high context communication, especially in Japan, one of *the* primary purposes is establishing and maintaining harmonious human relationships (Dalsky & Su, 2020), so differences of opinion, especially arguments, are usually seen as disruptive to positive interactions and conflict is generally avoided (Gercik, 1992; Goldman, 1994; Morisaki & Gudykunst, 1994). Barnlund (1989) observed that Japanese tend to search for what is mutually agreeable, at least in initial stages of conversation, with differences of opinion being expressed indirectly and gingerly. This is not to say that diverse ideas and contrary information are never shared, but when they are, great attention is paid to keeping positive relations through protecting the face of one's communicative partner. In groups, consensus-based decision making is preferred, and in discussions, a person and their idea are often considered one and the same; in other words, if you express disfavor towards another's idea, you could easily be construed as attacking their personhood.

In contrast, the primary purpose of low context communication is generally thought to be exchanging information and ideas, where differences of opinion can be frankly considered (Condon, 1984), particularly because low context communicators are more likely than high context communicators to see another's personhood and their ideas as distinct. In the workplace, as long as norms for polite language and professional behavior are adhered to, people are more likely to receive disagreements without feeling attacked or that their face needs are in jeopardy. Barnlund (1989) characterized American communication as an instrument of analysis, utilized for "clarifying positions, . . . comparing and contrasting views, and a way, ultimately, of testing the relative merits of different opinions" (p. 42). Ramsey (1998) described how these tendencies manifest in business:

The persuasive function is highly emphasized in North American corporate communication style. Selling a product or promoting an action relies heavily on the assumption that if one can be shown the facts, the numbers, the details, or the direct correlation between cause and effect logically or objectively, he or she will accept the point. . . . All parties to a conversation are responsible for their own opinions; active give-and-take is expected. (p. 123)

Such observations may be connected to what is termed the *independent* and *interdependent self*. Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguished the former (common in Western countries such as the United States) as a conception of the self as "an independent, self-contained, autonomous entity," while the latter, common in Japan, as one that insists upon the "fundamental relatedness of individuals to each other" (p. 224) and constitutes a self that "changes structure with the nature of the particular social context" (p. 227). As the self is characterized as embedded in context and shifting, "relationships between individuals and interactively defined meaning are prioritized over the individual self and 'private' meaning" (Bachnik, 1994, p. 18).

Moreover, Japan is broadly thought to be a collectivistic society in which maintaining harmony within groups is at a premium (Dalsky & Su, 2020; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). When ingroup differences of opinion arise, people tend to tread carefully, often utilizing indirect statements and questions to hint at an alternative view. Another frequent rhetorical strategy is making utterances that stimulate empathy in one's communicative partner to convince them of the speaker's perspective. In contrast, low context communication tends to predominate in individualistic cultures such as the United States, as it is important for one to state opinions clearly so others can know how that person stands as an individual (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). In such cultures, instead of the empathy-eliciting approach often employed by Japanese, persuasive logic is

used to argue to the efficacy or correctness of the speaker's position.

I have seen these tendencies clash innumerable times when Americans propose controversial changes in Japanese companies. Typically, Americans support their viewpoint with reasons, data, and examples. If Japanese remain unconvinced, rather than risk overt conflict, they often drop the matter—appearing to assent to the American view but in fact quietly continuing the status quo. Invariably, this eventually comes to light, followed by Americans charging they have been deceived and Japanese feeling further besieged with unreasonable demands. Moreover, the Japanese often become less transparent about other matters that could lead to discord, which inflames American feelings of exclusion from the organization's daily workings (Komisarof, 2011).

Another example comes from a former client—a newly arrived American executive manager of an American company's Tokyo office that was populated almost entirely with Japanese employees. Relationships with "Ronald's" Japanese subordinates were quite strained after several months, so he read extensively about Japanese culture to decipher how to repair them. He discovered what he thought was clearly a panacea for doing so: taking a corporate trip together at the organization's expense. Such events are a traditional mainstay in Japanese companies for building positive relations as people stay overnight at a hotel eating, drinking, and singing karaoke together.

When Ronald proudly proposed this idea at his sectional meeting the next week, he was greeted with silence. He repeated his idea. Once again, silence. Ronald had spent so much time coming up with this solution, and people were not even willing to tell him what they thought! He exploded in frustration. Unfortunately, his outburst further soured intercultural relations. I was brought in several months later to help. After interviews with Ronald's managers, I learned that the Japanese were silent at the meeting because they had not had time first to gauge their coworkers' opinions. Offering individual opinions about a proposal that affects an entire group of people would be seen as inconsiderate of those with a divergent point of view: in this case, those against the trip could be required to go if someone spoke out in favor of the idea, or those wanting to attend might be disappointed if the first speakers rejected the proposal. Furthermore, if anyone publicly opposed the executive's proposal, from a high context perspective, they could be seen as repudiating his leadership and personhood—which could destroy their relationship. On multiple levels, Japanese employees tried to avoid conflict with Ronald and with each other.

So how do Japanese people express contrarian opinions yet circumvent conflict at meetings? Dalsky and Su (2020) detail one common method:

In a Western setting, a meeting is typically a forum to exchange ideas and opinions, or to develop plans for moving forward. In a Japanese setting, a meeting . . . is usually a formality in which all parties involved meet to agree on a predetermined course of action. This action has been planned and discussed beforehand in a practice called *nemawashi*. Typically, an individual will have discussed a proposal with relevant members and superiors, considered their opinions, and gained their acceptance before raising the proposal for formalization in the meeting. (p. 592)

Thus, *nemawashi* promotes social cohesion through the interaction between coworkers and superiors that it requires. It also maintains harmony within meetings by avoiding potentially awkward disagreements that have already been aired and negotiated beforehand.

Challenges to Notions of Conflict Avoidance and Acknowledgment

While Japanese tendencies towards conflict avoidance and American ones towards conflict acknowledgement have been described by the scholars cited so far, other studies have challenged or refined these ideas. For example, Ward et al. (2016) tested the premise that the higher context the communication style, the less likely one is to express contrarian opinions. They found among a robust sample of faculty members at US universities (including both American and foreign citizens)

that there are two important boundary conditions of this relationship: the type of voice being considered (i.e., promotive voice that offers novel, additive ideas and solutions vs. prohibitive voice that criticizes existing plans and strategies), as well as relational context (i.e., whether the speaker sees oneself as part of the same ingroup as the message's receiver). While high context communicators reported using prohibitive voice less frequently than those who are low context, they did not necessarily voice suggestions (i.e., use the promotive voice) less frequently. Moreover, high context communicators voiced suggestions less frequently than low context communicators when they did not share ingroup status with others, but they "may practice non-face damaging upward communication when in an in-group context" (p. 1505) with comparable frequency. Thus, while there is evidence that high context communicators attempt to preserve harmony through conflict avoidance with greater urgency than low context communicators, these tendencies relent when they feel close to others and are using the promotive voice, as such suggestions are less likely to conflict with their deference, face maintenance, and harmony goals.

Thomas (1998) analyzed stylistic differences in written communication among Americans and South Koreans using central criteria from Hall's original definition of high-low context, such as use of politeness strategies to avoid offending others, direct vs. indirect organizational patterns in explaining one's main point, and linear vs. recursive lines of reasoning. Though the study itself has numerous limitations including a small sample, she found that Americans employed politeness strategies with similar frequency to South Koreans. This begs the question whether and in which situations Americans are indeed direct and openly acknowledge conflict.

Such caveats and contradictory findings about conflict avoidance vs. acknowledgment merit a final comment on the body of research validating the high-low context concept. Though a comprehensive review of the literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, Cardon's (2008) meta-analysis concluded that while high-low context is the most important concept in intercultural business and technical communication (given its numerous citations and central role in so many studies), it has not yet been empirically validated. Specifically, "Most of the contexting categories simply have not been researched enough to make firm conclusions" (p. 422). However, he also asserted that the propositions of the high-low context model deserve serious attention given the large body of diverse intercultural communication researchers across the globe who have developed them. I would add that the experiential validation from innumerable practitioners who have found the concepts useful to make sense of and improve their daily intercultural communication dynamics also speaks to the need for further research of this promising concept. Future studies will presumably probe the differences between high and low context, clarifying if and when they are significant and how they transform based upon various boundary conditions. This is best achieved by developing more rigorous measures of the high-low context concept and using them to examine more countries (most literature focuses upon the US, Japan, Australia, and South Korea), studying more dimensions of contexting than that of directness-indirectness, and clarifying within specific cultures when high and low context messages tend to be utilized (Cardon, 2008).

Sender and Receiver Orientations

In Japan, there is a famous saying, "Hear 1 understand 10" (*ichi ieba juu waku*). In other words, if you hear 1 piece of information, you should be able to understand 10 implications from it. A good communicator listens carefully and can grasp their partner's intended meaning without them needing to verbalize it explicitly. In Japanese, inferring such messages is called "reading the air" (*kuuki wo yomu koto*), and those unable to do so are derisively called "K.Y." meaning *kuuki wo yomenai*, or someone who cannot read the air. Thus, the burden for successful communication lies firmly with the message receiver, who must fill information gaps to understand the sender's meaning. For low context communicators, this burden rests squarely on the message's sender, who is expected to clearly articulate their message so their intended meaning is accurately received. To "say what you mean" is the hallmark of an effective communicator in societies where low context communication is valued.

An American client demonstrated the importance of hearing 1 and understanding 10 in Japanese business communication. As the representative of the Japanese office of an American company, he was leading the talks between his organization and the Japanese government about a potential joint project. Going into the initial meeting with an important Japanese government official, his biggest concern was whether his current proposal allowed enough time to execute the project—particularly since his firm was tied up with other commitments at the moment and would have trouble starting right away. Accompanied by his trusted number two manager, a Japanese national, the American was relieved by the Japanese official's great enthusiasm for the project. As he was praising the project, the official paused for one moment, saying almost incidentally, "My motto is speed," then continuing along his previous line of thought. The meeting ended amicably. Afterwards, once they were alone, the American confided to his Japanese manager, "I was worried for nothing. The official was positive from the start, and he never mentioned any problem with our proposed schedule." Immediately, the Japanese manager's face turned ashen as he interjected, "No! He was very clear that we must move more quickly when he said, 'My motto is speed.'" From that one brief comment during a 30-minute meeting, the Japanese manager had grasped the essence of what the official had intended to communicate: the project was highly desirable, but only if it could be executed rapidly.

Differences between receiver and sender orientations can be further illustrated through the role of questions in high and low context communication. In low context communication, a question is usually precisely that—a question. If a low context communicator proposes modifications in their company's customer service model and they are asked, "What will our customers think?", then they will likely explain how they anticipate the customers will react to the changes—in other words, they will answer the question as it has been stated. However, in high context communication, a question can potentially be a question, but it frequently has a different function: expressing disagreement. By asking "What will the customer think?", my high context communicative partner might be saying that they believe customers will find the proposed changes undesirable. Such questions are a form of face-saving communication, as they allow the questioner to state their disagreement without doing so directly and the listener to process this objection without being overtly challenged.

Another function of questions in Japanese high context communication is making requests (Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982). A Japanese corporate trainer arrived for the first time at the office of his American client. He needed materials for that day's workshop to be copied—a situation which he assumed was understood. When he asked the American coordinator of the workshop, "Can you tell me where the copy machine is?", he expected his client to infer that he was actually requesting for someone from the company to make copies for him; in Japanese companies, to walk through an organization's office space and use their copier unaccompanied would typically be considered inappropriate if one is not an employee. The trainer was quite surprised when his request went completely unrecognized and the client simply responded, "It's on the second floor on the left after you exit the elevator."

Naturally, low context communicators use questions as requests or indirect statements of disagreement, too. However, the frequency differs. Consequently, low context communicators may not be ready to regularly interpret questions as requests or disagreements—mistakenly assuming that they are straightforward inquiries with no further interpretation necessary. In other words, their sender orientation dictates that it is the speaker's responsibility to clearly state requests or disagreements as such, so they might fail to detect these other uses of questions when they are employed. High context communicators, especially in Japan, encounter these uses of questions regularly and are hence quite accustomed to activating their receiver orientation to recognize and decode them.

Shifting Along the High-Low Context Continuum: Power Dynamics and Insider Status

As stated earlier in the chapter, individuals may shift their communication style along the high-low context continuum based upon the situation, including their conversational partner. This next section attunes readers to how such shifts can occur in Japan: specifically, depending upon the status differences between them and the extent that they share membership in the same ingroup. In other words, one's choice of style on the high-low context continuum among Japanese is dynamic and hence cannot be understood or estimated without clarifying the nature of the relationship between the communicating parties.

Hierarchical ranking in Japan is dependent upon various factors such as age, gender, and job status (Bachnik, 1994), and such ranking decidedly influences conversational dynamics—for example, those higher in rank than their conversational counterparts will commonly speak for much longer amounts of time, expecting their partner to take the role of listener (Nakane, 1970). As a faithful listener of lesser status, relational subordinates commonly adopt a high context style specifically by avoiding the expression of opposing views and listening attentively to discern the wishes and opinions of the higher status speaker. Conversely, those higher in status are much less likely to hesitate in scolding their subordinates (Yashiro et al., 2001) and tend to express differences of opinion with little hesitation. Thus, tendencies to speak indirectly, avoid conflict, and be a faithful listener are all high context features that are far more likely to be adopted by those lower in status as a display of deference.

Another key factor in Japanese relationships in determining the degree of high context communication utilized can be traced to *uchi-soto* (literally “inside-outside”), or the insider-outsider continuum of human relationships. As Bachnik (1994) explained, “One is constantly constraining or expressing ‘self,’ in relation to the degree of social constraint, or relaxation of constraint, that is perceived appropriate” (p. 25) in a particular social setting with one's communicative partner(s). Such dynamic tension between the relaxation and tightening of constraint depends in part upon one's insider or outsider status in relation to the other, and this dynamic accentuates different facets of communication on the high-low context continuum. For instance, if people share an ingroup, they can enjoy relations characterized by spontaneity (Bachnik, 1994), thus enabling a certain degree of freedom to express differences of opinion (Ward et al., 2016)—a characteristic associated with a low context style. On the other hand, mutual ingroup status provides numerous opportunities through common experiences to develop shared knowledge and assumptions that they can reference through indirect verbal or nonverbal communication—i.e., high context communication. Thus, insider relationships reveal aspects of both high and low context communication. Outsider relationships similarly combine both high and low context facets: lacking the same degree of familiarity as insiders, those with an outsider relationship may need to verbalize more, so as to make themselves understood; however, as they rely more on standardized social rituals, they draw upon high-context elements in that norms for avoiding differences of opinion tend to be quite stringent (Bachnik, 1994).

Ultimately, *uchi-soto* relations are fluid: one is constantly calculating based on circumstantial conditions who is on the inside and outside relative to the self (Wetzel, 1994), and the same conversational partner might be inside one moment and outside the next depending upon who is sharing a social space. For instance, two members of the same company in different departments might consider each other outsiders, or *soto*, if they are discussing an interdepartmental matter in which they are each representing the distinct and somewhat conflicting interests of their respective ingroups. However, if they meet several hours later with someone from another company, and they must work collaboratively to represent their own company's unified interests to the outsider, then they will reposition in this new situation to an *uchi*, or insider relationship. As such insider-outsider dynamics shift between people, so may their use of various facets of high or low context communication, dynamically and fluidly moving them along the high-low context continuum.

Commonly Encountered Context Impacting Japanese Business Communication

When encountering Japanese high context communicators, even the most detailed understanding of high-low context is incomplete without grasping the assumptions and information to which high context messages so frequently refer. The purpose of the following sections is to explain three common themes that impact Japanese high context communication in business so that those trying to decipher such messages are better prepared to do so.

Context in Business Theme 1: Empathy, Hospitality, and Customer Service

Every businessperson must understand how to treat their customers in order to keep them. Indeed, the mutual expectations embedded in the customer-provider relationship in Japan are quite specific, and they frequently impact business communication. The first key is grasping the importance of empathy in Japanese high context communication, as well as its relationship to hospitality generally and more specifically to customer service. Though dated, Sugiyama Lebra's (1976) description of empathy and hospitality's role in everyday communication still holds true today:

Empathy is manifested in Ego's readiness to anticipate and accommodate Alter's need. Ego tries to optimize Alter's comfort by providing what Alter needs or likes and by avoiding whatever might cause discomfort for him. . . . The Japanese concept of hospitality is to have everything arranged ahead of time . . . [and] should be done on the basis of an understanding of Alter's feelings without verbal communication. (p. 40)

This notion of empathy infusing hospitality can be used whether hosting a business partner or building relationships with colleagues in the same organization. For example, when I first arrived in Japan, a teacher at my high school of employment kindly offered to give me Japanese lessons, during which he would often ask me about my hobbies, habits, and the types of Japanese food I liked (and disliked), which made perfect practice for my rudimentary speaking skills. One day, he invited me to his home for a meal his wife had meticulously prepared. I was shocked and profoundly moved when I sat down at the dinner table to find every type of food that I had told him over the past 6 months I liked, and none of the foods for which I had expressed antipathy. I immediately realized that our conversations had never been just about language practice; rather, they were vital sources of information for him to understand me through my food preferences, and once he built up that reservoir of context, he could work with his wife to execute the perfect menu for this thankful guest.

Thus, in Japan, the ideal experience as a guest in someone's home, and by extension, a customer of any business, is having one's needs understood, remembered, and fulfilled without needing to ask or repeat them. This is the spirit of *omotenashi*, or a traditional code of conduct for the guest-host relationship. Such hospitality includes the anticipation of the needs of others fused with modesty by not displaying one's extensive efforts to create such an environment. *Omotenashi* forms a core element of the context in the Japanese business world. For instance, impeccable customer service stems from an impeccable grasp of one's customers' needs.

In America, the belief prevails that each individual knows best what they want, so service usually gives the customer a broad array of options that they are empowered to select at any moment, allowing them to choose anew each time there is a service encounter. While the American model provides for choices to be made anytime at an individual's whim, the Japanese model places a premium on predictable behavior based on preferences that have been defined at the onset of the customer-provider relationship (without the need to be reiterated because the vendor remembers them). Thus, empathy allows one to anticipate and satisfy customer needs with minimal explanation. This starkly contrasts with the widespread American assumption that one should not presume another person's needs, intentions, or preferences without confirming them first (Ramsey, 1998).

Context in Business Theme 2: Sincerity

Another critical aspect of context in the Japanese business world is that of treating customers with absolute sincerity or “trueheartedness” (*magokoro*). Providers are expected to dedicate themselves to customer care, which in turn inspires customer trust and loyalty. Illustrating as much, a close friend shared a story about when he bought a home in Tokyo. The deal would be sealed at a meeting between the realtors of my friend and the seller, the seller himself, and the bank providing my friend’s loan. Bringing together so many parties at a mutually convenient time was extremely challenging but required by law, so any change in the meeting date was out of the question.

As the day approached, the health of my friend’s realtor’s father declined rapidly in a hospital that was a 2-hour plane ride from Tokyo. Though he knew he might not be able to see his father in the hospital before his impending death, the realtor stayed for the meeting, though my friend would have certainly understood if the realtor had asked one of his colleagues from the same office to represent their company. As soon as the meeting ended, the realtor went straight to the airport to book the next available flight, but it was too late—his father passed away while he was waiting for a plane with an open seat. Weeks afterward and the realtor met my friend again, he explained his reason for staying in Tokyo: his father had always taught him to be sincere toward his customers, so the realtor felt that he was honoring his father by staying for the meeting and giving the best possible customer service. While this may be an extreme example, it is safe to say that Japanese vendors are often prepared (and expected) to go to great lengths for their customers—a keystone in such relationships which shapes context when providers make pledges to their customers, or customers make requests to those serving them.

Context in Business Theme 3: Humility

A third value that frequently influences Japanese high context communication both in business and beyond is humility. When asked to take on an important job, many Japanese downplay their credentials or even profess that they lack the ability to handle such an assignment or post. If they go on to say they will humbly accept, then the listener can rest assured that the person is just being self-effacing and is indeed well-qualified. As the Japanese proverb says, “The larger the fruit on an ear of grain, the deeper its head bows,” meaning “The greater the person, the humbler” (Yashiro et al., 2001).

This brings to mind an experience I had shortly after arriving in Japan in 1990 at the high school where I worked. One day, I was greeted by a physical education teacher, whom I will fictitiously call “Mr. Sato.” During our conversation, I asked him his favorite sport. He replied “soccer.” I probed further: “Are you good at soccer?” to which he said, “I am not so good.” He must have noticed my twisted facial expression, as I thought how utterly pathetic it was that a PE teacher was *bad* at his own favorite sport. The next day, another PE teacher approached me, saying he had overheard my conversation with Mr. Sato. He gently informed me that Mr. Sato had been the captain of his university soccer team, which had won the Japanese national championship, after which he had gone on to play for Japan’s national team.

My jaw must have dropped to the floor as I received my first lesson in the depth of Japanese humility. In fact, I later learned that Mr. Sato was a bit of a celebrity at our school for his decorated soccer career and still possessed mesmerizing skill. Since it would have been untoward for Mr. Sato to explain all of this himself when I asked him, he had humbly deflected my question, assuming that I would know from his demeanor that he was indeed talented. When it was obvious from my facial expression that I had misunderstood, it was only through a third party a factual message could be directly communicated in a way attuned to my low context style. Mr. Sato was a deeply bowing ear of grain, and in business communication, when someone replies with humility

about questions related to their competence in a skill that can help the company, this is often a good sign that you have found the right person.

Minding the Gap: Bridging High-Low Context

After detailing differences between high and low context communication styles, particularly in terms of how they tend to manifest themselves in Japan and the US, it is only fair to conclude by sharing some ways that these differences can be bridged. First, many low context communicators have found that focusing on the nonverbal signals of their high context counterparts helps them to understand their partner's intended message more frequently and accurately (Komisarof, 2011). Strategies include paying extra attention to vocal inflections, facial expressions, silence, and even verbal hints to discern subtle signs of discomfort or disagreement.

Low context communicators can also ask questions to solicit opinions from high context colleagues. Open-ended questions are recommended, or those that begin with "how," "what," or "why," as they tend to elicit more detailed responses and do not indicate the preferred answer of the questioner (thus avoiding answers in which the responder guesses the opinion of the questioner and provides a complementary answer). Asking open-ended questions to elicit high context coworkers' opinions before asserting one's own is an essential means of gathering critical information from one's colleagues to make the best decision.

For high context communicators attempting to adjust to low context communication, putting into words more than they do usually can help them to construct explicit messages that are more easily interpreted by sender-oriented low context communicators. Also, asking whether one's communicative partner has received the information that they need, while taking the time to clarify any requested information, can go a long way in bridging the communication gap. Since conflict aversion is not as common among low context communicators, it is essential to realize that differences of opinion do not necessarily indicate a rejection of you as a person—just a concern about your idea; moreover, expressions of contrary views by coworkers are not necessarily final rejections that idea but may actually serve as openings to further discuss your diverging views and come to a mutually agreeable solution.

By employing some of these simple, yet powerful strategies, both low and high context communicators can enjoy smoother communication with each other and ultimately build more positive, productive relationships. Indeed, the gap between those who prefer nonverbal, non-confrontational, and receiver-oriented communication and those who tend to employ verbal, conflict acknowledging, and sender-oriented communication can be great, but armed with an understanding of both the self and the other, as well as the determination and curiosity to bridge this divide, great rewards in business and interpersonal relations await.

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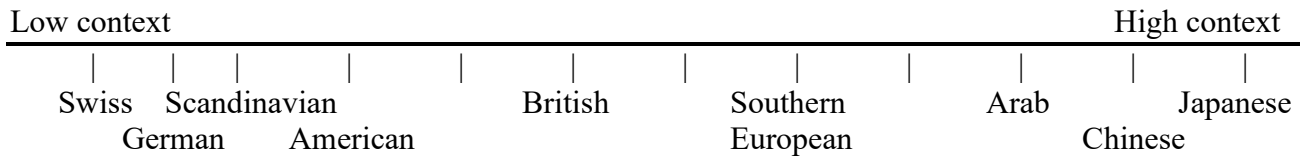
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Figures

Figure 1. The High-Low Context Continuum with National Groups Plotted



Adapted from Hall and Hall (1990).

Figure 2. High and Low Context Communication Styles

	HIGH CONTEXT	LOW CONTEXT
ORGANIZATION	Indirect, circular	Direct, linear
USE OF LANGUAGE	Implicit (how you say it is more important than what you say)	Explicit (what you say is more important than how you say it)
EMPHASIS	Nonverbal communication, shared knowledge, and role expectations	Words
PURPOSE OF COMMUNICATION	Establish and maintain good relations	Exchange ideas and information
ATTITUDE TOWARD CONFLICT	Should be avoided or resolved through consensus. Judgments of person and their ideas are not separate.	Conflict can be acknowledged openly. Person and their ideas often separate.
COMMUNICATIVE FOCUS	Receiver-oriented: receiver must interpret the message accurately.	Sender-oriented: sender must clearly convey the message.

