

# Applying Hall's High Context and Low Context Cultures Model to Analysis the Implications of Cultural Differences on Functioning in Cross-cultural Groups

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**ABSTRACT.** *This article illustrates the positive and negative effects of cultural differences in the cross-cultural groups, through the application of Hall's high and low context culture model to analyze the reasons of those phenomena. Finally, through the above analysis, the methods to help the cross-cultural team improve work efficiency are summarized.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Hall's High Context and Low Context Cultures Model, Cultural Differences, Cross-cultural Groups*

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of globalization and international trade, the number of people who choose immigration, work in multinational companies and study abroad is increasing constantly. According to data from the International Organization for Migration, the total number of international migrants this year was 271.6 million (Data, 2020), which was 13.6 million more than that of 2018 (Vidal and Tjaden, 2019). In addition, in 2017, there were over 5.3 million international students, up from 2 million in 2000 (International students, 2020). Therefore, for the people who are in a cross-cultural environment, encountering cross-cultural groups in work and study seems to be an inevitable trend.

While working in groups, cross-cultural groups also need to face the variables brought about by cultural differences. Cultural differences are always been regarded as positive factors of cultural diversity. However, when it is applied to cross-cultural groups, different effects may be produced. It may help the groups to conduct the works which are beyond expectations and surprisingly satisfying, or it may cause diverge which leads to unsatisfying results. Therefore, how to correctly recognize and use cultural differences to create greater value is a matter worth studying.

This paper will apply Hall's High-context and Low-context cultures model to discuss the role of cultural differences in cross-cultural groups and how to make cross-cultural groups more efficient.

## **2. General Analysis of the Implications of Cultural Differences on Functioning in Cross-cultural Groups**

Each culture has its own unique ideas, values and other characteristics, which differentiate itself from other cultures. These cultural differences can promote cultural diversity and create a more dynamic world through the constant collision of ideas (Bouncken, 2009). However, the implications of cultural differences on functioning in cross-cultural groups naturally include both positive aspects and challenging side. Since different cultures shape the different behaviour of people.

In general, one of the advantages of cross-cultural teams brought by cultural differences is that there are fewer unspoken assumptions. People with the same culture and similar cultural backgrounds may have certain similarities when thinking and working. When the group members question the unclear content, people may find some mistakes during explaining and persuading processes. Therefore, cross-cultural groups could have more comprehensive perspectives and may be able to spring more innovative ideas.

On the other hand, less unspoken assumptions may cause more misunderstandings at work, which may lead to time-wasting and unnecessary conflicts. Coupled with language barriers, efficiency may be affected.

## **3. Applying High Contexts and Low Context Culture Model to Analysis Cross-cultural Groups**

In cross-cultural groups, there may be many misunderstandings and conflicts caused by cultural differences. The reason for the misunderstanding is that different cultural backgrounds will cultivate different behaviours and interaction patterns. And people's understanding of different cultures is not enough to support him to deal with or integrate into another culture without barriers. This section utilizes Hall's High-context and Low-context cultures model (Hall, 1976) to demonstrate some of the factors that may lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural groups.

The Hall's model identified different cultural characteristics into two types, High-context culture and Low-context culture, which works as a measure of how clear the information exchanged in culture is and how important context is in communication (Hall, 1976). Asian, African, Arabic, Central European, and Latin American cultures are generally considered as high-context cultures, while cultures of Western European origins, such as the United States and Australia, are generally regarded as low-context cultures (Intercultural Communication: High and Low Context Cultures, n.d.) Generally, people of High-context cultures utilize messages

indirectly, while people of Low-context cultures prefer to transmit messages more directly.

According to Hall's High-context and Low-context cultures, A high-context culture relies on implicit communication and nonverbal cues, while a low-context culture relies on explicit verbal messages (Intercultural Communication: High and Low Context Cultures, n.d.). More specifically, people with the high-cultural background may rely on common understanding and common assumptions, while people with the Low-context cultural background may lack common experience. This means that people of a Low-context culture background require clearer procedures as the guidances to the work each time they work. People with a high-context cultural background theoretically do not need much explanation, everyone knows what to do and how to do.

In addition, people with low-context culture pay more attention to personal privacy, while people with high-context culture put more emphasis on interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging (University of Montana, 2020). This may be related to individualism and collectivism, which was also mentioned by Dutch psychologist. Hofstede's 6 culture dimensions model (National Culture, n.d.). Individualism/collectivism can be defined as "taking care of only yourself and your immediate family members, not those in the group who take care of them in exchange for loyalty." (Mooij and Hofstede, 2015). When this feature is observed in teamwork, people with high context cultures may sacrifice partial personal privacy in exchange for close relationships with colleagues and superiors. People of Low-context culture may just focus on tasks. (University of Montana, 2020). This point could be extended to relationship-based and rule-based cultures (Hooker, 2018)

Moreover, people from High-context cultures tend to emphasis more on body language, even the use of silence. Whereas silence is an important communication device in many high-context cultures, while people from low-context cultures often feel uncomfortable with silence (Nam, 2015). In High-context culture, it is more important to know when not to talk in a particular cultural situation than know when to talk (Hall and Hall.R, n.d.). Silence could be used for agreement, unsaid disagreement and other attitudes.

People from High-context cultures and Low-context cultures also have different concepts of time, monochronic and polychronic (Contributions of Edward T. Hall, 2011). Many of the above factors may be the reasons that affect the efficiency of cross-cultural teams.

#### **4. Make Cross-cultural Groups More Effectively**

Based on the discussion above, some of the factors that influence cross-cultural groups performance has been identified. Teamwork requires completing valued common goal in a limited way within a certain period, which needs strong interaction and communication among groups members. Moreover, group effectiveness is a measurement of the outcomes of team performance processes relative to some set of

criteria (Salas, Cooke and Rosen, 2008). People working in intercultural groups need to consciously avoid and solve the above problems without wasting time.

The efficiency of cross-cultural groups could be improved through the following methods:

The awareness of the importance of cultural differences should be built before starting work. Before work begins, cross-cultural teams should be given a certain amount of training on cultural differences and cultural models (Jennifer and Raman, 2015). Although people may not 100% recognize that they are one of the characteristics of the cultural model or may not be restricted by the representation of the country in the cultural model, they can exchange personal experiences and ideas in the process. This may help them increase their familiarity so that they can more easily raise questions and discuss ideas at work.

Some ground rules should be set at the first beginning. Based on some standard group cooperation specifications, with group members' proposals, set rules that are more suitable for the group. Work under clearer rules and have clear cooperation and decision-making procedures, which may reduce hesitation in decision-making due to interpersonal relationships.

Ask questions actively and confirm that everyone has a consensus before taking action. Due to cultural differences, people may complete their tasks differently. If people assume that everyone thinks the same, it may lead to misunderstanding and time-wasting. Furthermore, in the process of questioning and explaining, perhaps a more comprehensive solution may be sought.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the role of cultural differences in cross-cultural groups has both positive and challenging aspects. If people can obtain a certain amount of cultural differences knowledge and establish an awareness of cultural differences before starting work, many problems and misunderstandings that may be encountered in cross-cultural groups are relatively avoidable.

Additionally, the cultural model should be used as a tool to help people understand the cultural differences, but not be a limitation. Since Hall's cultural model was completed before 2000, it may seem to overgeneralize. In addition, people's behaviour will be affected by various factors such as where they live and beliefs. In a certain degree, people are unpredictable, and the specific and more effective way of cross-cultural team cooperation still needs to be determined according to the specific situation.

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