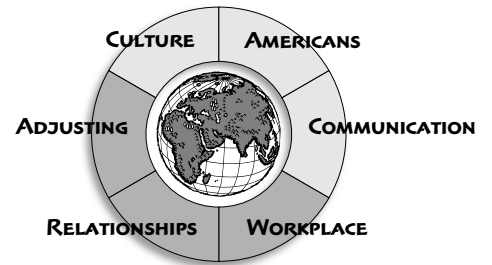


# CHAPTER THREE

## STYLES OF COMMUNICATION



Communication, the sending and receiving of messages, is an integral part of culture. Edward Hall, the noted interculturalist, has maintained that culture *is* communication. What he probably means is that since culture is such an important ingredient in all behavior, and so much of behavior is spent in one type of communicating or another, then it's hard to tell where one ends and the other takes over. In any event, whether or not they are one and the same, culture and communication certainly go hand in hand.

In the cross-cultural context, communication, like everything else, is more complicated. It's almost impossible to send a message that does not have at least some cultural content, whether it's in the words themselves, in the way they are said, or in the nonverbal signals that accompany them. And even if it were possible to *send* a message without any cultural content, it's not possible to receive one without passing it through the filter of one's own cultural conditioning. All of which means that host country people may not interpret everything you say the way you meant it. And vice versa.

Communication problems, especially misunderstanding and misinterpretation, are one of the most common frustrations experienced by PCVs. In this chapter, you will examine your own style of communication and then compare it to that of the host country, a process which should highlight some of the likelier challenges that await you.



*Every country has its own way of saying things. The important thing is that which lies behind people's words.*

—Freya Stark,  
*The Journey's Echo*

### 3.1—DEAR GAVIN

Jan has finished training now and settled in at her site. In this letter to her PCV friend Gavin, Jan recounts the experience she recently had negotiating her living arrangements. As she relates the encounter with her landlord, she describes at least five common techniques of indirect communication. See if you can find them.

*Dear Gavin:*

*1. How are things out east? I've heard so much about your part of the country I've decided I will have to come and see for myself, maybe in the new year. Will you be around in January?*

*2. Settling in has been the circus I was more or less expecting. Some parts of it have gone quite smoothly; other parts haven't even begun to resolve themselves yet. By far the most intriguing aspect of settling in was trying to rent a room. I had this most amazing conversation with my landlord; it was the kind of cross-cultural incident they told us about in training, where you go along thinking one thing is happening and the other person is thinking something entirely different.*

*3. Anyway, I found a room I liked in a nice enough house and met with the landlord to discuss terms and price. One issue we had to resolve was whether I could use the attic to store some of my things, as my room had no extra space at all. I asked if it would be OK, and he said "Yes. If you like." Then he launched into a story, whose point I never did grasp, about how in his culture the aim in life is to be able to see the folly of attachments and to divest ourselves of material possessions as we get older, that these things blind us to the more important truths that we should be looking for if we're ever going to understand the meaning of life. I'm sure he's right, but I just wanted to rent a room.*

*4. Then we moved on to the problem of my meals and whether or not I could eat with the family, or if I should make other arrangements. By way of "response," he started talking*

*(continued)*

*The immature rice stalk stands erect, while the mature stalk, heavy with grain, bends over.*

*—Cambodian proverb*

*about how close his house was to my work, which would be very convenient for me, so we still haven't resolved the meals question yet.*

*5. Next, it was time to talk about price. When I asked him how much he would charge, he blushed and said he had no idea. "Why don't you suggest a price?" he asked. I know what the going rate is in this town, so I told him 200. "That's good," he said. "Don't you think?" I said I thought it was fine, and asked him whether or not I needed to sign something, and when I might be able to move in. He said it was not necessary to sign a contract, and then asked me if I was sure I was happy with the price. I assured him I was.*

*6. He looked taken aback, and then asked me if I thought the room had enough space for all my possessions. "Americans have so many nice and useful things," he said. I said that so long as I could store some things in his attic, as he had promised, I would be fine. "Ah, yes," he said. "My attic. My poor, little attic. And all your wonderful things. And so little money you are paying me."*

*And there we were: back to square one.*

*It's much more fun in the retelling, I can assure you, but it all ended well, nearly an hour later, when we came to terms and finally understood each other.*

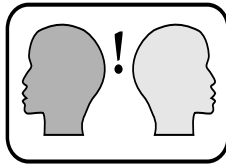
*I meant to write more, but my candle is low, (the power is out again) and dawn comes early here. All the best, and write me back immediately.*

Jan

## 3.2—STYLES OF COMMUNICATION— INDIRECT AND DIRECT

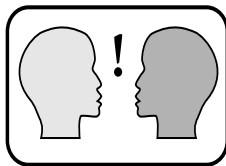
Interculturalists have identified numerous differences in communication styles from culture to culture. The most important and most studied distinctions are the indirect/direct, or high context/low context, dichotomy described below:

### Indirect/High Context—



Context refers to the amount of innate and largely unconscious understanding a person can be expected to bring to a particular communication setting. In high context cultures, such as Thailand, which tend to be homogenous and collectivist, people carry within them highly developed and refined notions of how most interactions will unfold, of how they and the other person will behave in a particular situation. Because people in high context cultures already know and understand each other quite well, they have evolved a more indirect style of communication. They have less need to be explicit and rely less on words to convey meaning—and especially on the *literal* meaning of the spoken word—and more on nonverbal communication. People often convey meaning or send messages by manipulating the context. Because these cultures tend to be collectivist, people work closely together and know what everyone else knows. The overriding goal of the communication exchange is maintaining harmony and saving face.

### Direct/Low Context—



Low context cultures, like the United States, tend to be more heterogeneous and individualist and accordingly have evolved a more direct communication style. Less can be assumed about the other person in a heterogeneous society, and less is known about others in a culture where people prefer independence, self-reliance, and a greater emotional distance from each other. They cannot depend merely on manipulating context—*not* doing or *not* saying something that is always done or said in that situation—or communicating nonverbally to make themselves understood; they must rely more on words, and on those words being interpreted *literally*. Getting or giving information is the goal of most communication exchanges.

The exercise below helps you define the differences. In the underlined space before each of the numbered statements, write “I” if you think it applies to a culture where communication is indirect/high context, or “D” if communication is direct/low context.

### **CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIORS**

1.      Communication is like that between twins.
2.      People are reluctant to say no.
3.      You have to read between the lines.
4.      Use of intermediaries or third parties is frequent.
5.      Use of understatement is frequent.
6.      It’s best to tell it like it is.
7.      It’s okay to disagree with your boss at a meeting.
8.      “Yes” means yes.
9.      “Yes” means I hear you.
10.     Communication is like that between two casual acquaintances.
11.     It’s not necessary to read between the lines.
12.     People engage in small talk and catching up before getting down to business.
13.     Business first, then small talk.
14.     Lukewarm tea means all is not well.
15.     Lukewarm tea means the tea got cold.
16.     People need to be brought up to date at a meeting.
17.     People are already up to date.
18.     The rank/status of the messenger is as important as the message.
19.     The message is what counts, not who the messenger is.
20.     People tell you what they think you want to hear.

#### **—INSIGHT—**

Different styles of communication mean an increased possibility of misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

[For suggested answers, see page 239.]

*It would be a social insult for a campesino to tell a gringo that he's not going to come to a meeting. He says "yes," and so the meeting is scheduled. Twenty-five people said they'd come and two show up, and those two are not among the twenty-five who said they'd come.*

*—Peace Corps  
staff member*

### 3.3—CLASH OF STYLES?

The American style of communication, which is more direct than that of many other cultures, can affect your relations with host country nationals. Can you think of any times thus far in country when, in retrospect, you might have come on too strong, been too blunt, blurted out what was on your mind, or otherwise disturbed the harmony of a situation, or caused someone to lose face? Can you, alternatively, think of any examples of host country communication which, in retrospect, might have meant other than what you took them to mean? Note such incidents in the space below:

### 3.4—CULTURE & COMMUNICATION STYLES—AMERICAN AND HOST COUNTRY VIEWS COMPARED

This exercise asks you to examine American, host country, and your own communication style in the context of direct vs. indirect styles. The mechanism used here is a continuum: a line with opposite views or positions presented at each end.

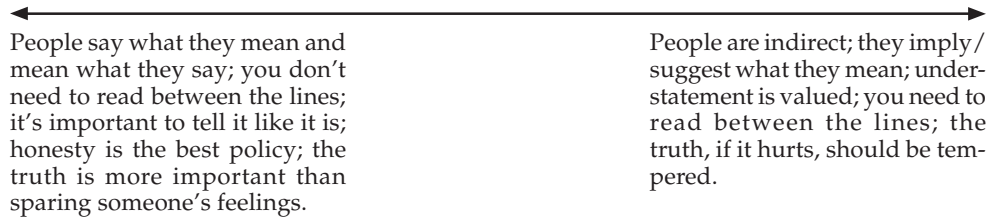
Four communication topics are listed, with a continuum for each. Put the letters "U.S." on that point on the line that you think best represents the "typical American" view of that topic; then, after consulting with a host country informant or a knowledgeable PCV, mark each continuum with the letters "H.C." to indicate the typical host country position.

#### STYLES OF COMMUNICATION—CONTINUUM

##### Degree of Directness

Direct

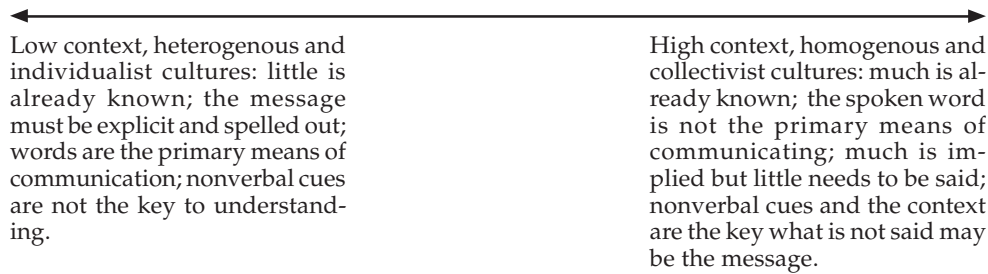
Indirect



##### The Role of Context

Low Context

High Context



3.4

### The Importance of Face

Face Less Important

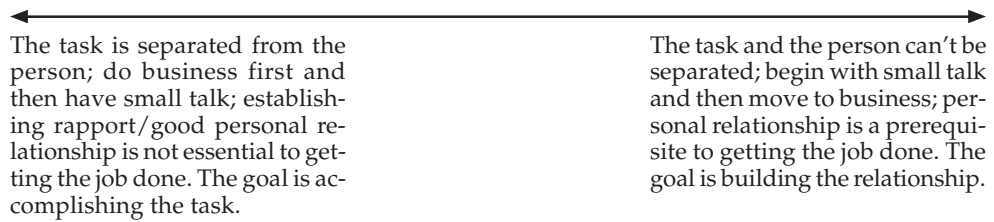
Face Is Key



### The Task or The Person

The Task

The Person





**CONTINUUM NOTES**

In the space below, note any continuum in which the U.S. and H.C. marks are at opposite ends, and then indicate specifically how you think host country nationals would perceive your behavior in this respect. Using the Task or Person continuum, for example, you might observe that “They think I’m too work oriented or too impersonal.”

Continuum: \_\_\_\_\_

How HCNs perceive me as an American:

Continuum: \_\_\_\_\_

How HCNs perceive me as an American:

**—INSIGHT—**

Americans and host country nationals have different views on fundamental aspects of communication.

Remember that where a culture’s mark is on the continuum represents what the people in that country think of as normal, natural, right, or good, and that it is from this perspective that they will be judging and interpreting the behavior of others.

*[When you have finished, turn to page 240 for possible perceptions.]*



*Observation Activity*



**3.5—NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION—  
GESTURES, EYE CONTACT  
& CONVERSATIONAL STYLE **

Communication falls into two classic categories: verbal and nonverbal. Nonverbal communication, in turn, can be divided into a number of specific subcategories. Two separate exercises (3.5 & 3.7) will be presented, each focusing on three types of nonverbal communication. These exercises may be completed over time, as you continue to become aware of personal, familial, and work behaviors in your host country.

**GESTURES**

In a number of different settings, watch what people do with their arms, hands, fingers, and whole body. Try to describe the gestures as “scientifically” as possible (a man held out his hand, palm down, and wiggled his fingers to call a waiter to his table) and indicate what you think is the meaning.

Hands	Arms
Fingers	Whole Body

## EYE CONTACT

Observe the degree and nature of eye contact in as many of the following situations as possible:

Between two men of the same age	Between two women of the same age
Between an older and younger man/woman	Between a man and woman
Between a husband and wife in public	Between a boss and employee
Between a teacher and a student	Between a parent and child
Between people passing on the street	

*Some social situations require body contact between members of the same sex. This entails being held by the elbow, kissing on both cheeks, being kissed on the hand, talking at unnaturally close range, or occasionally holding little fingers.*

—PCV Afghanistan

1. In situations where host country people maintain *more* eye contact than Americans normally do, how might Americans come across to host country nationals?
2. How might host country people come across to Americans in those same situations?
3. In situations where host country people maintain *less* eye contact than Americans usually do, how might Americans come across?
4. How might host country people come across to Americans in those same situations?

—INSIGHT—

The meaning of gestures, eye contact, and conversational patterns may not be the same in the host culture as in American culture.

### CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

Observe the following nonverbal aspects of typical conversations:

1. How much gesturing goes on in general?
2. How does the transition from one speaker to the next take place?  
Check one:  
 speaker A starts before speaker B finishes  
 speaker A starts just after speaker B finishes  
 speaker A pauses before starting

3. How long does one person speak before allowing the other to speak?
4. How do people indicate they want to end the conversation?
5. How do people show disagreement?
6. How do people show displeasure with what they hear?
7. How do people show pleasure at what they are hearing?
8. What is the pattern of eye contact between speaker and listener?



## 3.6—DIALOGUES

---

Each of the dialogues presented here contains an example of a misunderstanding due to differences in communication styles—indirect in one culture, direct in the other. Your task is to note in the space below each dialogue the *difference* between what was said or done and how the PCV interpreted it.

### **QUICK TRIP**

- HCN: How did the visit to the co-op go?  
PCV: Quite well, I think they're interested in using my expertise.  
HCN: Did they show you around?  
PCV: Yes. I saw the whole co-op.  
HCN: The whole thing! That must have taken hours.  
PCV: Actually, we were in and out in less than 30 minutes. They said another guy was coming at noon.

### **COMMITTEE MEETING**

- 1st PCV: How did it go with the committee members?  
2nd PCV: A lot easier than I was expecting.  
1st PCV: Really? Did you ask about buying the new equipment?  
2nd PCV: Yes. I explained we had to have it and told them how much it would cost.  
1st PCV: And?  
2nd PCV: There was no discussion. They said fine and asked me to move on to the next item.

**WE'LL GET BACK TO YOU**

- HCN: How did it go at the clinic?
- PCV: Very well, I think, for the first meeting.
- HCN: When will you see the director again?
- PCV: In the end, I didn't meet with the director. I met with his assistant.
- HCN: Did she ask you a lot of questions about your proposal?
- PCV: A few.
- HCN: When are you going back?
- PCV: Probably next week.
- HCN: You're not sure?
- PCV: I asked for another appointment and she said she would get back to me.

**EXPLANATIONS\***

- PCV: Miss Chung. What can I do for you?
- HCN: Excuse me. I need some help with this new machine.
- PCV: Of course. Let me explain it again.
- HCN: I asked Li, but she couldn't help me.
- PCV: No, she hasn't tried it yet.
- HCN: It's a little bit complicated.
- PCV: It's very complicated, but after I explained it to you and asked you if you understood, you said yes.
- HCN: Yes. Please excuse me.

\*Craig Storti. *Cross-Cultural Dialogues*, reprinted with permission of Intercultural Press, Inc., Yarmouth, ME. Copyright, 1994.

—INSIGHT—

In some cultures, the real message is between the lines.

**TRANSFER**

1st PCV: I asked the director for a transfer yesterday.

2nd PCV: What did she say?

1st PCV: Not much. She asked me how I was getting along with Radu these days.

2nd PCV: What did you say?

1st PCV: I told her nothing had changed, that I wanted out because of him.

2nd PCV: Then what?

1st PCV: She said she understood my problem, that she knows Radu isn't easy.

2nd PCV: Do you think she'll transfer you?

1st PCV: Oh, I'm sure. She said she'd had a lot of complaints about Radu over the years.

[For notes on the dialogues, turn to page 240.]





*Observation Activity*



## 3.7—NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION— FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, PERSONAL SPACE & TOUCHING

This is the second of two exercises in which you observe and record instances of nonverbal communication. In this activity, you focus on facial expressions, personal space, and touching:

### **FACIAL EXPRESSIONS**

Observe what people do with their head, eyes, eyebrows, mouth, nose, chin, etc. Record these observations as accurately as you can in the spaces below, indicating what these facial expressions mean:

The Head and Forehead	Eyes and eyebrows
The Nose	The Chin and Jaw
Any part of the face or head in combination with the hands and fingers	

### PERSONAL SPACE

Observe how close various kinds of people stand to each other in various settings:

In normal conversation, at work, or on the street	
In line at the post office, bank, cinema, etc.	
In an elevator, crowded or uncrowded	
Two men	Two women
Two children	An older and younger person
Parent and child	A man and woman
Husband and wife	HCN and PCV

1. In those situations where host country people stand *closer* to each other than do Americans, what impression might people have of Americans?
2. What impression might Americans have of host country people in those same situations?
3. In those situations where host country people stand *further apart* from each other than do Americans, what impression might people have of Americans?
4. What impression might Americans have of host country people in those same situations?

—INSIGHT—

Interpret facial expressions from the host country culture's point of view, not your own.



### TOUCHING

Observe how much and in which parts of the body the following people touch each other:

Two men	Two women
Husband and wife	Unrelated man and woman
Parent and child	Older and younger person
Boss and subordinate	Male boss/female worker and vice versa
What differences do you observe in touching behavior in public and in private?	

1. In those situations where host country people touch each other *more* than Americans do, what impression might people have of Americans?
2. What impression might host country people convey in those same situations?
3. In those situations where host country people touch *less* than Americans do, what impression might people have of Americans?
4. What might be the impression of host country people?



### 3.8—PRACTICING INDIRECTNESS

*It's just not in their culture to tell or even suggest what they think you should do. Even when you are asking for advice, I don't think they feel comfortable giving it. The direct American style is often taken as impolite.*

—PCV Papua New Guinea

The next two exercises give you a chance to practice the skill of indirect communication. In this first activity, you are presented with a series of seven direct statements. Try to rephrase them to make them more indirect, writing your suggestions in the blank space below each one. While these statements could be appropriate in some situations, the setting here is a meeting, where allowing people to save face is important. Suggested rephrasing of the first statement is offered as an example.

1.	I don't think that's such a good idea.	<i>Do you think that's a good idea? Are there any other ideas? I like most parts of that idea.</i>
2.	That's not the point.	
3.	I think we should....	
4.	What do you think, Mr. Cato? <i>(Calling on people sometimes embarrasses them. How can you find out what Mr. Cato thinks without directly asking him?)</i>	
5.	Those figures are not accurate.	
6.	You're doing that wrong.	
7.	I don't agree.	

—INSIGHT—

The direct way of saying certain things may strike some listeners as too harsh.

[See page 241 for suggestions.]

### 3.9—DECODING INDIRECTNESS

This exercise is the opposite of the one you just completed. In this activity, you are presented with a series of indirect statements and asked to decode them—to explain in direct language what the speaker probably means. Looking at the first statement, “That is a very interesting viewpoint,” remember that the person may mean exactly that, but *sometimes* it’s an indirect way of saying “I disagree with you.” In communicating across cultures, you need to *at least entertain the possibility* that the speaker may mean something other than what he or she has said. The first statement has been rephrased for you.

1.	That is a very interesting viewpoint.	<i>I don't agree. We need to talk more about this. You're wrong.</i>
2.	This proposal deserves further consideration.	
3.	I know very little about this, but....	
4.	We understand your proposal very well.	
5.	We will try our best.	
6.	I heard another story about that project.	
7.	Can we move on to the next topic?	

[See page 242 for suggestions.]

#### —INSIGHT—

The actual meaning of the words may be a poor guide to what an indirect communicator is saying.



## NEIGHBORS

---

*Coming from brash America,  
we have to look hard to pick out  
the subtle feedback we don't  
even realize we're being given.*

—PCV Fiji

I spent most of the afternoon writing letters, catching up on correspondence that had piled up in my mailbox while I was away. I was also conveniently avoiding the heat and, to some degree, the village itself. At the moment, it didn't feel like the place where I wanted to be.

A cool breeze from the mountains picked up late in the afternoon. I took advantage of the cooler air to get a little exercise and walked to the post office. When I started back, the rain was looking like a sure thing. Little dust devils were whirling around in the dirt streets, and withered leaves twirled down from the sycamore trees that formed an arcade over the wide, dilapidated street. Dark clouds were bearing down from the mountains to the south. I picked up my pace.

Down the street, coming towards me, was a woman wrapped up in a turquoise *jellaba*. I recognized her as my downstairs neighbor. As we continued towards each other, we were nearly jogging, trying to reach our destinations before the rain. We exchanged the minimum smiles and hello, how-are-yous as we passed.

"Please tell Aisha to put the goats in the shed, it's going to rain," she shouted at me over her shoulders as she continued on her way.

"Okay," I said.

In that moment, I had such a feeling of elation! Why, over something so small and trivial? Because she said it in Arabic, not in French. Because she didn't slow it down or dress it up for speaking to a foreigner. Because she said it to me in the same way she would have said it to one of her own children or one of her other neighbors, without formality, without any awareness that she was talking to someone from the other side of the world, but just saying it the way she would normally say it. Because, after all, I was only her neighbor, no one strange or special. I was just the guy who lived upstairs.

—PCV Morocco



## 3.10—HARMONY AND SAVING FACE

As noted earlier, indirect communication owes much to the importance many cultures place on preserving harmony and saving face. In this exercise, you are presented with a number of specific incidents that require diplomacy. Applying the skills and techniques you've learned in this chapter, write below each description how you would handle the situation to avoid causing embarrassment or loss of face.

### **CROP FAILURE**

Your boss has come up with a new scheme for improving crop yields in your province. Since you are the technical expert in this area, he has come to ask you for your opinion. His scheme is based on unreliable data and will in all likelihood not work in your part of the country. It's possible farmers could lose their whole crop if they try this experiment. What is your response?

### **END RUN**

In the clinic where you work, the supervisor you report to is ineffective. Because of this person's incompetence, the project you're working on is getting nowhere. You know if you could go directly to this person's superior, the manager of the entire division, you would get much better results—and get them much faster. But if you ignore or go around your supervisor, she will be hurt and embarrassed. How do you resolve this situation?



*People tell you what they think  
you want to hear, which may  
not be what you need to know.*

—PCV Fiji

### **MOVING UP**

The counterpart you work with is an agreeable person but not very competent. Now your boss, who is also his boss, has called you into her office to ask you whether your counterpart should be promoted to a new position. How do you respond?

### **ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Three companies have been asked to bid the job of supplying electronic mail service to the organization you work for as a computer specialist. The ultimate decision will be made by your boss, but he is relying heavily on your advice in this matter. As it happens, a cousin of your boss owns one of these companies, the company asking for the most money and the least able to deliver the goods. Your boss asks you what you think of that company. What do you say?

### **TIGHT SPOT**

At a faculty meeting, the head of your department states a position on an important matter. The school headmaster then turns to you and asks your opinion. You don't agree with the head of your department. Now what?

*[For brief notes on these incidents, see page 242.]*

## DEAR GAVIN—AN ANALYSIS

Now that you have finished this chapter, read the letter to Gavin again and see if you can find some of the techniques of indirect communication discussed in these pages; then read the analysis below.

**Paragraph 3**—When the landlord says “Yes. If you like” to Jan’s inquiry about using the attic, he is probably saying no. Yes, as you have seen, means little in some cultures, and a qualified yes (if you like) is even more problematic. The landlord next launches into a story about the advantages of owning little, which may be his polite way of saying that he won’t be able to store Jan’s many possessions in his attic. This fact becomes abundantly clear when we get to paragraph 6.

**Paragraph 4**—Indirect communicators often change the subject rather than disagree with or say no to someone, which may be why the landlord answers Jan’s question about meals with a comeback about the convenient location of the house.

**Paragraph 5**—The landlord’s reply to Jan’s offer of 200, “That’s good, don’t you think?” is mere politeness. If he were pleased with 200, he would probably have been much more positive. Any doubt is erased when he then asks her if she thinks 200 is enough; if he thought it was enough, he wouldn’t have asked. She interprets his question as a real question, when it is in fact a way of expressing disagreement or disapproval. When he then goes back to the matter, asking her if she’s happy with the price, he is signaling that *he* is not happy with it, but she still doesn’t understand.

**Paragraph 6**—Now we get the answer to the inquiry about using the attic. Since she thought he gave permission (Yes. If you like) but he did not, he has to come back to the matter to clarify it. He’s not going to say no, but he gives enough hints, and then brings up the price again.

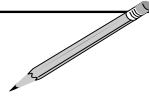
To summarize, these are techniques of indirect communication illustrated here:

1. Using a qualified yes to mean no.
2. Telling a story as a way of saying no delicately.
3. Changing the subject to avoid saying no.
4. Asking a question to give a negative answer.
5. Returning to a previous point of discussion to signal disagreement.

*Khoo Ah Au liked Americans. Above all he found their personal relationships easy to read. His own people were always very careful not to give themselves away, to expose crude feelings about one another. Americans seemed not to care how much was understood by strangers. It was almost as if they enjoyed being transparent.*

—Eric Ambler,  
*Passage of Arms*

### **JOURNAL ENTRY 3**



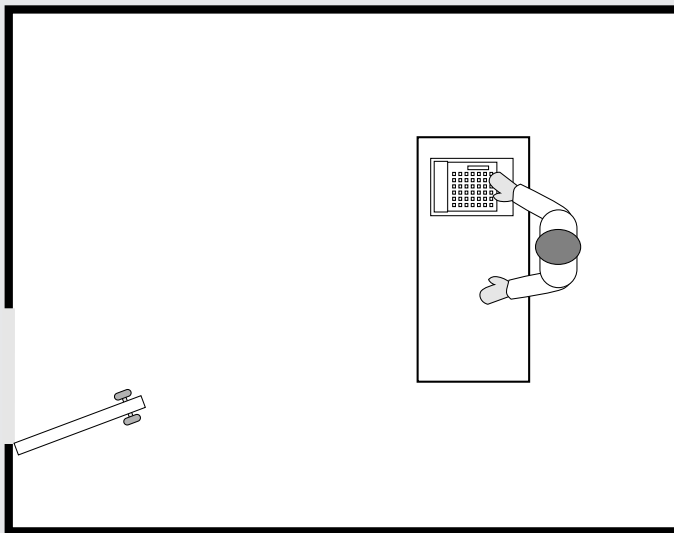
What have you learned about your communication style in this chapter? Are you going to have to make adjustments in your style? Do you think you normally interpret the remarks of host country people correctly? How can you be yourself, yet still respect host country norms of preserving harmony and saving face?

## FUNDAMENTALS OF CULTURE III THE CONCEPT OF TIME *✍*

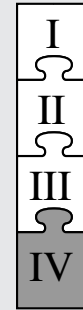
This exercise introduces the third of the four fundamentals of culture: the concept of time. The two poles of this dimension, monochronic and polychronic, are defined and explored in the activity immediately following this one.

### III.1—SERVICE WITH A SMILE *✍*

The drawing below represents a shopkeeper standing behind the counter in his shop. Imagine six patrons ready to check out. Using circles to represent them, draw a diagram of how the patrons should arrange themselves in front of the counter.



On what basis did you decide to put the people where you did?



*The post office offered the usual experience: a cluster of people mashed together in front of the sullen clerk, all thrusting their business in his face, with a line of the less determined off to one side, standing patiently in the belief they would be waited on sometime.*

—PCV Morocco

—INSIGHT—

Lining up and not lining up are culturally determined behaviors.

*[For a drawing of how people from a different culture would stand in this situation, see page 243.]*

III.2

## III.2—CONCEPT OF TIME— MONOCHRONIC AND POLYCHRONIC

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Another of the ways in which cultures differ is in how people conceive of and handle time, and how their concept of time affects their interactions with each other. In this activity, you are given a general description of the two poles or extremes of this dimension—monochronic and polychronic\*—and then asked to assign characteristics to one category or the other. The two poles are described below:

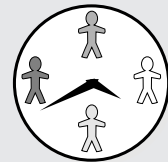
### Monochronic—

Time is the given and people are the variable. The needs of people are adjusted to suit the demands of time—schedules, deadlines, etc. Time is quantifiable, and a limited amount of it is available. People do one thing at a time and finish it before starting something else, regardless of circumstances.



### Polychronic—

Time is the servant and tool of people. Time is adjusted to suit the needs of people. More time is always available, and you are never too busy. People often have to do several things simultaneously, as required by circumstances. It's not necessary to finish one thing before starting another, nor to finish your business with one person before starting in with another.



*\*Based on concepts developed by Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, 1959 and *The Dance of Life*, Anchor-Doubleday, 1983.*

In the underlined blank space before each of the behaviors or characteristics listed below, put “M” if you think it is *more likely* to apply to a culture where time is monochronic and “P” if it is polychronic.

## CHARACTERISTICS & BEHAVIORS

1.     Time is money.
2.     To be late is rude.
3.     Schedules are sacred.
4.     The focus is on the task, getting the job done.
5.     Being made to wait is normal.
6.     Interruptions are life.
7.     Plans are fixed, once agreed upon.
8.     This attitude is consistent with an individualist viewpoint.
9.     The focus is on the person, establishing a relationship
10.     This attitude is consistent with a collectivist viewpoint.
11.     Deadlines are an approximation.
12.     To be late is to be late.
13.     Focus on the internal clock.
14.     Plans are always changing.
15.     Having to wait is an insult.
16.     People are never too busy.
17.     Interruptions are bad.
18.     People stand in line.

### —INSIGHT—

Time is a cultural phenomenon.



[The answers appear on page 243.]



## TIME TRIALS

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*Time always seems to be on  
their side.*

—PCV Cameroon

At my site, I'm a 40-minute walk from the closest village where I do my shopping. Many of the stores are run out of villagers' homes, and these stores have taught me a lesson about Fiji. An Australian man once visited the island while doing research and asked me when the stores were open, since it was afternoon and he hadn't seen an open store yet. Taken aback by what seemed at the time an incredibly stupid question, I told him the obvious truth. "They're open when their doors are open." It was only when I walked away that I realized that it really wasn't such a stupid question and was a question I might have asked myself when I first arrived on Fiji. Having lived on Lakeba for a year at that time, I had learned my lesson and knew that time is a foreign concept. The stores were open when the villagers decided they had something to sell. Some days they're open; some days they're not.

When I first traveled out to my island via the cargo ship, I was told to report at 4:00 p.m. Tuesday. We left late in the day on Thursday. Welcome to a tiny island in the South Pacific.

—PCV Fiji



### III.3—SCORE YOURSELF— MONOCHRONIC & POLYCHRONIC

The exercise below can help you to discover whether your own concept of time is more monochronic or polychronic. After reading the paired statements (a. and b.), circle the one that best describes the action you would take or the way you feel about the particular topic.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1a. People should stand in line so they can be waited on one at a time.  | 1b. There's no need to stand in line, as people will be waited on as they are ready for service.           |
| 2a. Interruptions usually cannot be avoided and are often quite beneficial.  | 2b. Interruptions should be avoided wherever possible.   |
| 3a. It's more efficient if you do one thing at a time.   | 3b. I can get as much done if I work on two or three things at the same time.                              |
| 4a. It's more important to complete the transaction.   | 4b. It's more important to stick to the schedule.  |
| 5a. Unanticipated events are hard to accommodate and should be avoided where possible.                                   | 5b. Unexpected things happen all the time; that's life.  |
| 6a. You shouldn't take a telephone call or acknowledge a visitor when you are meeting with another person.               | 6b. It would be rude not to take a phone call if I'm in, or to ignore a visitor who drops by.              |
| 7a. You shouldn't take deadlines too seriously; anything can happen. What's a deadline between friends?                  | 7b. Deadlines are like a promise; many other things depend on them, so they should not be treated lightly. |
| 8a. It's important, in a meeting or a conversation, not to become distracted or digress. You should stick to the agenda. | 8b. Digressions, distractions are inevitable. An agenda is just a piece of paper.                          |
| 9a. I tend to be people-oriented.  | 9b. I tend to be task-oriented.  |
| 10a. Personal talk is part of the job.   | 10b. Personal talk should be saved for after hours or during lunch.  |

III.4

—INSIGHT—

Time means different things  
in different cultures.

*In urban America, five minutes is the basic unit of meaningful time. Turkish time is built on considerably longer meaningful units. Waiting thirty to sixty minutes for a well-placed official is normal. Highly valued time is, after all, a byproduct of industrial society.*

—PCV Turkey

Now that you have made your selections, turn to page 244 for results, and then calculate whether you came out more on the monochronic or polychronic side. Is your score here consistent with your self-concept?

Keep in mind that there is nothing scientific about this exercise, that it doesn't prove anything about you. After all, most of the paired statements are taken out of context; you might select one alternative in one set of circumstances and the opposite in another set. Even so, you have at least been exposed to some alternative behaviors and ways of thinking and perhaps been given some food for thought.

### III.4—INDICATIONS

By now you must have encountered examples of either monochronic or polychronic behaviors in your host country, though you may not have known what to call them. What examples have you noticed? The next time you're in a public place, notice whether people line up. Try to notice whether people interrupt other people in "private" conversation more or less than in the U.S.

Are there aspects of each approach that you like and agree with? What?

Are there aspects of each approach you dislike and disagree with? What?