Expats from Abroad in the U.S.A.:
Six Steps to Effective Integration

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Assignees from abroad entering the U.S. business environment -- especially those from Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, the Mediterranean area, and, to a lesser extent, Europe -- share certain striking similarities in their initial reactions to the way we Americans do things. We work with these newcomers frequently, and the complaints we hear from them often go something like this:

> The Americans who received me on Day One were friendly, welcoming, and warm, but this didn't last. I've pretty much been alone in my cubicle since Day Two. They've been giving me very little guidance, yet they expect me to accomplish useful work almost instantly. They say they need me to "hit the ground running." But how can I do this? I have no idea how to find out what I need to know in order to be effective here. My questions to American colleagues yield only snippets of information. The smiles of my co-workers do nothing to reverse my deepening sense of isolation. This undermines my ability to be productive and it emotionally depresses me as well.

What's going on here? Explanations alluding to any individual's ignorance, apathy, or ill-will simply won't do. We're talking about people who, in their native lands, were stars. What's going on here is a type of cross-cultural difference that undermines the effectiveness of day-to-day communication between assignees from abroad and their American colleagues.

More Miscommunication Examples

Following are four additional examples of miscommunication occurring across national and cultural boundaries. Two are business-related; two are not. We view *all* of these as stemming from the same type of cultural difference.

1. An American colleague of ours reports that she does not know how to interpret her Chinese-born (male) partner who, when presented with two alternative courses of action, sometimes responds by saying simply, "O.K."

2. An Asian employee of an American firm was threatened with termination. The reason given was that he asked too many questions. He was deeply bewildered by this criticism and couldn't fathom how to change his ways.

3. A French colleague of ours who lives in the U.S. derided an American TV program about how to bake bread. He noted that the TV chef had described a step in the process thus: "Cover the rising dough with a *clean* cloth."

4. The American customer service manager in the U.S. subsidiary of a Japanese firm faxed a brief request to the Tokyo HQ asking for an item of information needed for a potential client. The item was not sent. He faxed the request, marked urgent, a second time. Again, the item did not appear.

We will comment on each of these cases near the end of this article.

The Context of Communication

A particular approach to describing communication patterns has proved very useful in enabling the two of us to understand -- and to remedy -- the type of mismatch we're alluding to. Developed in the 1970s by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, it highlights differences in the "context" of communication. Hall says that people in certain cultures tend towards *high context* communication, while people in other cultures tend towards *low context* communication. High and low context are not a dichotomy, but rather the two poles of a continuum. On this continuum, the U.S. places towards the "low" end.

When employees from high- and low-context cultures work together, their attempts to exchange information hit snags in spite of everyone's sincere efforts to communicate well. These snags occur because of three types of differences: "direction," "quantity," and "quality."

Direction differences: People brought up in relatively high-context cultures learn to orient their daily lives toward in-group members such as life-long friends (often former school classmates), close colleagues at work, and family members. High-context people draw a sharp distinction between in-groups and out-groups, directing very little communication to out-group members, even those in their vicinity. High-context cultures are group-oriented or "collectivist."

People brought up in relatively low-context cultures learn to orient their daily lives toward a broad range of people. For them, the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups are weak, porous, and shifting. They respond to others more on the basis of personal characteristics and situational need, less on the basis of group affiliation. Low-context people expect themselves and others to be self-reliant. Low context cultures are ego-oriented or "individualist."

Quantity differences: People in relatively high-context cultures spend a great deal of time and energy talking with, writing to, or otherwise communicating with members of their in-groups. The quantity of their in-group communication is very high. As noted above, they communicate very little with out-groups.

Conversely, people in low-context cultures have a communication pattern that's relatively broad and diffuse. The quantity of their *in*-group communication is low in comparison with that of high-context people. The quantity of their *out*-group communication is high in comparison with that of high-context people.

Quality differences: People in high-context cultures grow up learning to exchange detailed information about a very broad range of topics. Their communication is particularly rich and thorough regarding all sorts of events, personalities, trends, political maneuverings, etc., within their in-groups. The outcome is that everyone within an in-group is kept constantly up-to-date on everything that's going on.

In contrast, people in low-context cultures grow up learning to exchange information about a relatively narrow range of topics. Their communication tends to be driven by the practical need to get something done or to deal with a particular situation. They don't see the point of *constantly discussing everything* going on in their environment. (They tend to dismiss such conversations as "gossip" or "small talk.")

During a recent cross-cultural program for a Brazilian employee, his spouse, and their children, our coaches participated in a touching demonstration of high-context communication. The program is quite personal and supportive, but of course our coaches were strangers. Soon after the day began, the family asked our coaches to join them in a leisurely review of the family's photo album.

We believe the album session was the family's attempt "to high-context" the coaches, to raise their knowledge of family goings-on so that the coaches, as new in-group members, could be more appropriately supportive. From a strictly low-context point of view, looking at the album was not task-focused. From a high-context point of view, however, the album session laid emotional groundwork for the very productive day that followed.

Some Comparisons between High- and Low-Context

Let's make some clear distinctions between high- and low-context cultures, keeping in mind that we are describing the polar extremes of a continuum:

HIGH-CONTEXT CULTURES	LOW-CONTEXT CULTURES
High orientation to in-groups	Low in-group/out-group distinction
Discussions very wide ranging	Discussions usually task-focused
Mutual expectations very accurate	Mutual expectations less accurate
Meanings may be conveyed indirectly	Meanings must be made explicit
Emphasize relationships & processes	Emphasize practical outcomes
Supportive relationships common	Individual self-reliance common

Within an exceptionally high-context system such as that of Japan, communication tends to be very efficient. Whenever a particular issue comes up for discussion or resolution, the *pre-existing* sharing of a wide range of information among in-group members makes it likely that everyone involved *already* possesses relevant information. Their mutual expectations are accurate; their shared knowledge is comprehensive. So whatever needs to be done can be done very efficiently. Conversely, in a low-context system much relevant information first needs to be gathered and shared among the affected parties; only when everyone is "on the same page" can the issue be addressed.

Which brings us to meetings. In low-context U.S. culture, a key purpose of meetings is to disseminate knowledge among attendees so that decisions can be made. In high-context cultures, however, most or all of the knowledge already is disseminated. The decisions may already be made. A key purpose of a meeting is likely to be the formal announcement of a decision, the promotion of group solidarity, the demonstration of respect for the leadership, or the "giving of face" to each other.

You may be wondering how, in high-context groups, all that knowledge gets disseminated. We learned about one way recently when one of our trainees, a Japanese man who had recently come to the U.S., complained to us that he simply could not figure out what was *really* going on at his office. We found that what he missed most in the U.S. was the Japanese practice of going out with his office mates to drink and chat until the wee hours. This is what he expected to do four or five evenings each week even though he'd come to the U.S. with his wife and child. That's how important he considered the gaining of information. Just imagine how much information must be exchanged among office mates who spend 15 to 20 hours every week in socially-lubricated discussions! How much more is that relative to the information we Americans customarily exchange as we labor away in our cubicles, then go home?

A final difference deserving mention is the degree to which a member of a working group is supported by other members. A feature of high-context cultures is that they tend to minimize the possibility of an individual's publicly failing and thus losing "face." One way this is accomplished is to give newcomers detailed and sustained guidance so that, when they finally perform, they do things well. Consequently, high-context newcomers in the U.S. are eager to receive explicit instructions about what to do *and how to do it*.

By way of contrast, in low-context cultures, a premium is placed on self-reliance. Too much dependence on others, or too much *being depended upon* by others, is undesirable and negatively perceived. This

explains why recent arrivals in the U.S. often complain about being expected to perform without sufficient guidance from the boss, or anyone else for that matter.

Why High-Context People Founder in a Low-Context System

The fundamental problem is that high-context people are seriously information-deprived in a low-context system. Perhaps you've already pieced together why this communication mismatch occurs. Here's our summary:

The newly arriving assignees expect their American colleagues to constitute an in-group within which a huge quantity and diversity of information is constantly exchanged within an emotionally enveloping "collectivist" atmosphere. Only rarely is this the case. Furthermore, the newcomer hits a snag when he or she asks questions. No American colleague can provide the new arrival with all the information the latter needs. Why? Because no American knows *everything*.

If you are the high-context new arrival, the problem actually is more serious than an absence of information. For you soon get a sinking realization that you are *not* going to be absorbed into a warmly supportive working group. Instead, you're going to need to become *self-reliant*. That sounds fine to Americans, but to high-context newcomers it sounds a lot like "become isolated." Edward Hall, the originator of "context," once noted that "In high-flow information cultures, being out of touch means that essentially one ceases to exist." This can be emotionally devastating to a relationship-oriented collectivist.

The Four Miscommunication Examples Explained

Earlier, we offered four short examples. Here's how each of them is related to the differences between high- and low-context communication:

1. The Chinese-born partner in this relationship assumed that enough information was *shared by both of them* that his "O.K." was a sufficient response. But the American required an explicitly stated choice.

2. The employer of the inquisitive Asian expected every employee to be self-reliant, to be able to act independently after receiving initial instructions. It's not that the Asian employee misunderstood the initial instructions. Rather, he needed frequent relationship-maintenance and process-checking to occur.

3. Our French colleague's comment was, "Does the TV chef really think I'd use a *filthy* cloth?!" Like many high-context people in the U.S., he views much explicit low-context communication as insulting to his intelligence.

4. The American customer service manager's faxed request was brief and left out a great deal of "who-when-where-what-why-how" information that would have created a context for the Japanese. All the Japanese received was, "Please send this item at once." But who needed the item? Why was it so important? What might be lost if the item wasn't sent at once? People in high-context cultures often are not motivated to act in cases where they lack the larger context in which the precise request for action occurs.

Six Recommendations for Effective Integration

1. People on *both* sides of the context barrier must be trained to make certain adjustments. This is the most important step toward rapid and effective integration of high-context assignees from abroad into the low-context U.S. business system. Most firms train only the newcomers, and you can get away with this if you don't care much about coming up to speed really fast. We hope that this article has helped you see that the communication mismatch is no one's "fault," and that communication congruence is more likely to occur, and to occur sooner, if adjustments are made by natives and newcomers alike.

We don't believe that any training session will be able to miraculously transform self-reliant individualists into the kind of all-around supportive, information-rich collectivists that high-context newcomers would be

delighted to find here. But a few changes in approach should be possible for the Americans. The next three steps address what they can attempt to do.

2. Americans need to simulate certain behaviors of group-oriented people. To begin, they can decide, *before a newcomer arrives*, who will be the members of his or her in-group of colleagues. Perhaps this in-group could include the boss, the secretary (a key member!), two or three colleagues whose duties most closely mesh with those of the newcomer, and one or two people whose offices or cubicles are nearest the newcomer's. These people should think of themselves as a team whose mission, to be achieved over *months*, is to insure that the newcomer receives the type of guidance and support that's appropriate from a high-context point of view. Team members should meet socially prior to the assignee's arrival (to raise their own context level).

When the assignee arrives, meeting him or her must be a *team* function, beginning with airport greeting and continuing with direct settling-in assistance to both living quarters and working environment. This direct, personal support needs to be warmly delivered constantly over *several* days, with frequent checking-in thereafter. Ignore your typically American urge to respect the newcomer's independence. You are *not* dealing with an American!

Over the next months, involve the newcomer in collective events organized by the support team. We recommend a relatively formal team dinner, held in a home or restaurant, to "officially welcome" the assignee. Invite one or two additional people whom the assignee needs to know, remembering that the farther up the corporate hierarchy you go for your guests, the better. And try to come up with other collective events of a social nature. Museum visit? Riverboat cruise? Bicycle excursion? Do not choose entertainment such as a film, though, because these diminish opportunities for informal chats.

3. Americans need to present information differently to high-context newcomers. We're not going to recommend a complete make-over of the way you present information, offer guidance, or try to persuade. But we do have one suggestion that is easy to recall and simple to implement: Provide a high degree of background information -- context! -- when you are explaining anything to a high-context person. The old who-when-where-what-why-how rule, mentioned earlier, is a start. Don't forget the history of whatever you're discussing, the personalities involved, the false starts and mistakes, and the amusing anecdotes that give more reality to the basic data. And don't forget to put sustained emphasis on "how," the focus of our fourth recommendation.

4. American managers need to give more explicit, process-oriented guidance to newcomers. This means treating the newcomer as though he or she is *not* self-reliant, something we're reluctant to do. Americans bridle when expected to do "hand-holding." But what we demean with the pejorative "hand-holding" is viewed as appropriately supportive elsewhere. It's what prevents high-context people from losing "face" due to public failure or inadequacy. They *want* their superiors to give explicit instructions not only about objectives, but also about process -- about *how* we do things around here. They *want* their superiors to monitor their progress over time to insure a successful outcome. So keep on offering helpful guidance and answering those interminable questions throughout the life of the project.

A typical objection from American managers to these three recommendations is that they require too much time to implement. Our response is always to ask about whether the manager's deepest concern is efficiency or effectiveness. What we recommend here sacrifices short-term efficiency for long-term effectiveness.

Let's turn, finally, to what can be done by assignees from high-context cultures who will soon work, or recently began working, in the United States.

5. High-context assignees need to learn to ask questions constantly and widely. We said, "No American colleague can provide the new arrival with all the information the latter needs." Should the newcomer give up questioning? Exactly the reverse! He or she must ask questions, especially open-ended ones, all over the place! Asking *numerous* Americans is the substitute for the impossible dream of finding a few who can fill one in on everything. And the newcomer shouldn't stay close to home all the time. Encourage him or her to ask questions outside your department and outside your function.

6. High-context assignees must make the effort to become more self-reliant. We've portrayed American self-reliance as a problem for newcomers. Are we Americans capable of changing this? No. It's the new arrivals who must adjust. They must self-reliantly learn to ask questions of everyone, which is so critical that we've recommended it separately. They must begin taking the initiative in thought and deed, not awaiting directives from the boss. (For some, this brush with initiative-taking fills them with a sense of freedom of expression that can make it painful for them to return to their native cultures.)

Finally, high-context newcomers must come to terms with American-style teamwork. In the U.S., teamwork often means that individuals focus more or less as usual on their restricted range of responsibility, but coordinate more closely with other team members than they did before "teamwork" became a corporate buzzword. For the expat, "coming to terms" means learning to view as workable, if not necessarily ideal, the American penchant for competitive work relationships measured by personal achievement and acknowledged by individual rewards and advancement.

Reiko Makiuchi contributed ideas for this article.

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