



Presented by



Webinar: Cross-Cultural Communication in Federal Planning

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Introductions

Diana de Gonzalez, AICP

Assistant Vice President Federal Programs



Cris Carlone, PG MSc

Program Manager US DOD Europe



Agenda

- What is Cross-Cultural Communication?
- Cross Cultural Factors* to Consider (U.S. to HN, within USG Agencies, within disciplines)
 1. Low versus High Context
 2. Direct versus Indirect Feedback
 3. Empirical versus Theoretical Thinking
 4. Egalitarian versus Hierarchical Thinking
 5. Consensus versus Individual Decision-Making
 6. Cognitive versus Personal Trust
 7. Open versus Avoidant Disagreement
 8. Time Perception

Each Cultural Factor will be presented, followed by 3 minutes for discussion.

Please write your comment in the chat, followed by raising your hand if you would like to talk further about your comment.

*Based on the work of Erin Meyer's book *The Culture Map*

What is Cross-Cultural Communication?

Cultural patterns of behavior impact what we see, what we think, and what we do.

Effective communication skills vary dramatically from one culture to another.

Differences are often wrapped up among organizations, industries, and professions too.

Benefits

- Establishes trust through transparency
- Clarifies roles and project scopes
- Improves stakeholder engagement and feedback
- Builds consensus
- Avoids scheduling delays

What is Cross-Cultural Communication?



Each cultural factor has a set range of acceptable behaviors, and within that range each individual makes a choice.

What matters is not the absolute position of a particular culture on a scale but rather their relative position to one another.

Activity Questions (pasted in chat)

- How has this affected communicating with colleagues in Europe? Specific countries?
- Do you find that American colleagues who have been stationed longer in Europe have changed their communication style or are able to better code-switch or something else?
- Do you see this occurring within USG interagency communication? Among interdisciplinary communication?
- How have you worked around these differences?

1. “Good” Communication: Low versus High Context

Low Context

- Clear, precise, simple, understood at face value, repeated
 - Say what you mean and mean what you say
 - Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you’ve told them
- Accountability of message transmission is on the communicator

High Context

- Subtle, layered, sophisticated, nuanced, implied
 - Make a problem known so that it can be seen if it wants to be seen
 - Focus on how something is said and on what is not said
- Accountability is shared between transmission and receipt, listener must read between the lines

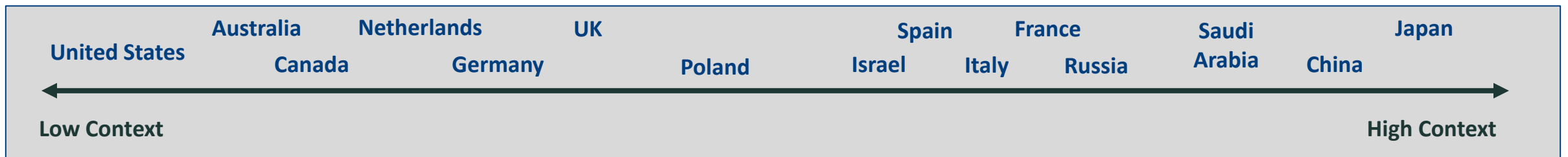
1. Low versus High Context

Low Context

- Cultures often consists of melting-pot cultures
- Greater tendency to document everything in writing, which can be perceived as lacking verbal trust
- Verbal communication can be perceived as condescending, patronizing

High Context

- Cultures often have a long, shared history
- Spoken agreements are considered enough
- Verbal communication can be perceived as secretive, untrustworthy



1. Low versus High Context

Lessons

- Identify the low versus high context potential challenges in a project Communication Plan
- When miscommunication occurs, state clearly that you do not understand and request assistance
- Meeting Recaps:
 - Rotate one person to recap key points orally
 - Each person summarize their action items
 - Rotate another person to recap key points via email

Quiz: For which scenario is a misunderstanding most likely to arise?

- A. Low-context person communicating with someone from another low-context culture
- B. High-context person communicating with someone from a low-context culture
- C. High-context person communicating with someone from another high-context culture

2. Constructive Criticism: Direct versus Indirect Feedback

Direct

- “Honest assessments are helpful for improvement”
- Provide feedback immediately, regardless of audience
- Can criticize passionately, provide positive feedback sparingly
- Upgrader language
 - Absolutely, totally, strongly
- Can be perceived as rude

Indirect

- Avoids embarrassment
- Never criticize someone openly in front of others
- Wrap positive messages around negative ones
- Downgrader language
 - Kind of, sort of, a little, maybe, slightly
 - “No big deal,” “Just a small thought”
- Can be perceived as false, confusing, and demeaning

2. Direct versus Indirect Feedback

Lessons

- Everyone wants to be constructive and considered polite
- Accept criticism in a positive manner
- Don't try to be more direct to direct cultures
- Give positive and negative feedback privately to indirect cultures

Quiz: What do these mean?

“Please think about it some more.”

- A. It's a bad idea. Don't do it.
- B. It's a good idea. Keep developing it.

“Consider doing that differently.”

- A. Change your behavior right away.
- B. You only need to think about it, but it is not necessary to do anything differently.



3. Persuasion: Empirical versus Theoretical Thinking

Empirical

- Example case studies preferred over concepts
- Need to focus on the HOW, as explanations can be considered a waste of time
- Begin with an executive summary or bullet points, and append concepts later to explain the conclusion as necessary
- Engineering culture?
- More often from Anglo-Saxon countries

Theoretical

- Concepts preferred over example case studies
- Need to understand the WHY behind a request, otherwise tasks are considered demotivating, disrespectful
- Analyze all conceptual data and define parameters before deciding on a course of action
- Planning culture?
- More often from Latin Europe, Germanic countries, and Latin America

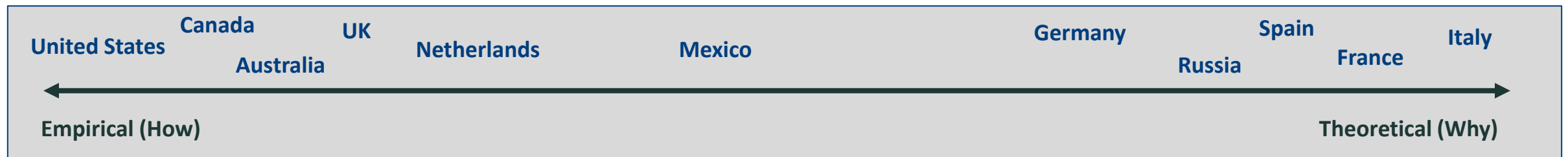
3. Emails: Empirical versus Theoretical Thinking

Empirical

- BLUF
- The more detailed, the less response expected

Theoretical

1. Introduce topic
2. Build argument, appeal to sense of logic (existing constraints/opportunities, alternative analysis)
3. Address most obvious concerns (risks, gaps, unknowns)
4. Explain conclusion and ask for support



3. Empirical versus Theoretical Thinking

Lessons

- Provide extra time, since decision-making can be much slower. Be patient since most people are unaware of the logic pattern they use, and they can be judgmental of other logic patterns.
- Cycle between concepts and practical examples. Avoid temptation to push away conceptual questions, even if some stakeholders get bored.

Quiz: What happened to the Asian and Middle Eastern countries on the scale?

- A. They are not relevant.
- B. They use a third system, focusing on context and holistic interdependencies before considering either concepts or case studies.

4. Respect: Egalitarian versus Hierarchical Thinking

Egalitarian

- The boss is a facilitator among equals, part of the team.
- Problems are pushed down to the experts.
- Team morale is important. Organizational structures are flat.
 - “How can my team move ahead if they cannot figure things out for themselves?”

Hierarchical

- The boss is an authority figure, set apart from the team.
- Problems are pushed up the chain of command.
- Status is important. Organizational structures are multilayered.
 - “Who told you to do that?”

4. Egalitarian versus Hierarchical Thinking

Lessons for Project Kick-offs

- Is it ok to disagree with the boss in front of others?
- Do you need their approval to move ahead, or do you only need to keep them aware of the direction?
- Can anyone email experts or is there a POC for distributing questions?
- Will stakeholders speak freely if their boss is in the room? Do stakeholders expect to be invited to speak?

Quiz: Does history still influence military branch communication?

- Roman armies built hierarchical structures and heavily centralized systems for managing their vast land empire. Socioeconomic classes were strict.
- Vikings established democracies where they conquered, inviting communities to debate in town halls and vote with each person's opinion carrying equal weight.



5. When to Decide: Consensus versus Individual Decision-Making

Consensus

- More time is spent soliciting group feedback and coming to a group agreement before a locked-in, committed decision is made
- Time-consuming upfront, rapid implementation
- Planning studies?

Individual Decision-Making

- The person in charge makes flexible decisions quickly for the group, which can alter based on new information as it arises
- Rapid upfront, time-consuming implementation
- A-E straight to design?

5. Consensus versus Individual Decision-Making

Lessons

- Be available to provide your input during the consensus period or the adaptable period, as necessary.
- Cultivate informal contacts within the team to determine when feedback is most effective.
- Be ready to follow decisions where your input was overruled.



6. Business Relationships: Cognitive versus Personal Trust

Cognitive

- Business is business
- Based on the confidence you feel in someone's accomplishments, skills, and reliability
- Mixing practical and emotional is perceived as unprofessional and risks conflict of interest
- Work relationships are based on practicality, functionality, and consistent good work
- Friendly is not the same as friendship

Personal Trust

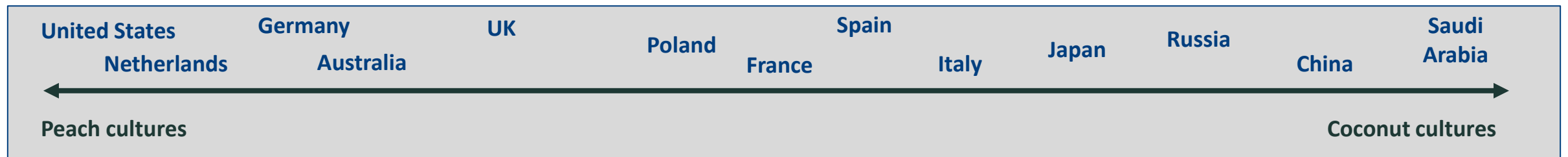
- Business is personal
- Based on feelings of emotional closeness, empathy, or friendship
- Mixing practical and emotional is perceived as being sincere and loyal
- Work relationships are based on personal, socializing activities, and are built slowly over the long-term
- Loyalty is to the individual, not the company
- Friendliness without friendship is “fake” or “hypocritical”

6. Peach & Coconuts: Cognitive versus Personal Trust

Lessons

- Investing extra time building relationships is always beneficial, but when to do so differs
- Choose communication media wisely
- Icebreaker and “relationship building” activities in personal-trust cultures are rare since they inauthentic
- Clients and team members from personal-trust cultures are more likely to follow staff who leave a company

Quiz: How many friends do you have who had been let go from your current organization?



7. Group Dynamics: Open versus Avoidant Disagreement

Confrontational

- Degree of confrontation is unrelated to emotional expression
- Disagreement is positive for the team relationship
- Encourages fresh thinking
- Ideas are debated because they are interesting, people are not disapproved of

Harmonious

- Disagreement is negative for the team relationship
- Dissent is a threat to unity
- Attacking an idea is also attacking the person
- Behavior toward those with an in-group status (personal trust relationships) may be different than behavior toward those with an out-group status (fierce competition in large populations)

7. Open versus Avoidant Disagreement

Lessons

- Build trust in a relationship before openly disagreeing
- Prepare read-ahead questions so stakeholders don't feel called out on the spot
- Separate ideas from people expressing them (e.g. idea mapping post-it notes)
- Conduct smaller meetings before the bigger meeting
- Avoid upgrader/downgrader language

Quiz: what happened in a good meeting?

- A. A decision was made.
- B. Various viewpoints are discussed and debated.
- C. Formal approval is made for a decision that was made before the meeting.



8. Time Perception

Linear Time

- Time is tangible and concrete, scheduling is used to order life
- Emphasis on promptness and organization over flexibility
- Project steps are sequential, one thing at a time, no interruption, focused on the deadline
- Cutting in line is rude

Flexible Time

- Appointments are not taken seriously and are an approximate meeting slot
- Take the time needed to do what needs to be done right now
- Project steps are fluid, changing tasks as opportunities arise, focused on adaptability
- Relationships are prioritized over the clock
- Lines are not necessary, branching in new directions is acceptable

8. Time Perception

Lessons

- Both sides find the other side inefficient
- People are adaptable to scheduling scales if the expectations are clearly set

Quiz: how much more time do you have to talk today?



Thank you!

Danke!



Contact Details

Diana de Gonzalez, AICP
Assistant Vice President
Federal Programs - Master Planning Services
M +1.917.763.3389
Diana.degonzalez@wspfedolutions.com

Mike Urbach, PE
Deputy Program Manager - Europe
M +49.1517.2202042
michael.urbach@wsp.com

Margaret Burcham
Senior Vice President
Federal Programs – U.S. Army Portfolio Director
M +1.513.203.3730
Margaret.Burcham@wsp.com

