# Hall's Hidden Culture

During a career spanning most of the 20th century, anthropologist Edward T. Hall identified numerous ways in which culture informs human behaviour. Collier (2009, p. 280) observed that Hall's work was "noteworthy because he brought attention to face-to-face interaction between members of different cultural groups and also introduced the importance of nonverbal forms of communication".

Hall focused on **intercultural communication**, when members of different cultural groups interact with each other. Previous anthropological research had either investigated one cultural group at a time, or made **cross-cultural** comparisons of communication patterns in one cultural group with those in another group.

## Hidden Culture

Hall (1990, p. 32) investigated "what people do and the hidden rules that govern people". He suggested that people remain largely unaware of this hidden culture because it operates below the level of consciousness. Hall's cultural framework is complex, but may be distilled down to four basic components relating to communication style, relationship context, time context and space context (Adair et al., 2009). The following sections describe three sets of concepts identified by Hall that are relevant to aviation communication: **high-/low-context**, **monochronic/polychronic time**, and **action chains**.

## High-Context and Low-Context

Hall (1976) contrasted high-context cultures with low-context cultures. People in high-context cultures have deep relationships and share information using messages that are superficially simple but actually rich in meaning. People in low-context cultures are not bonded tightly and make less distinction between insiders and outsiders. The United States is an example of a low-context culture, while Japan is a high-context culture.

Hall cautioned that interactions between individuals from high- and low-context cultures could present problems. Difficulties may arise due to differences in expectations or the norms for acceptable ambiguity:

> People raised in high-context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems. When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly – this keystone – is the role of his interlocutor. (Hall 1976, p. 113)

Applying these concepts to communications, Hall stated that high-context systems are fast and efficient because pre-programmed information is contained in receivers and settings, with minimal information in messages. Low-context communications, by contrast, encode most of the information in messages, with very little in the internal or external contexts.

The standard phraseology used by pilots and controllers in aviation is an example of a high-context communication system (Hall, 1976). It is essentially a collection of pre-fabricated phrases used for typical flight situations. Considerable time must be spent training operators to use the system, but the payoff is that information can be exchanged quickly and efficiently. It is possible that individuals with a predisposition for low-context communications will require more training to master this kind of system than those already familiar with high-context communications.

The constructs of high-context and low-context *cultures* are problematic. With specific reference to French and Japanese people, Hall (1976) stated that an individual may exhibit both high-context and low-context aspects depending on the situation (Hall, 1976). Scollon et al. (2012) resolved this dilemma by proposing that the constructs of high- and low-context be applied to particular speech events or situations, but not used to describe entire national groups.

## Monochronic and Polychronic Time

A second cultural scale described by Hall (1983) differentiates between mono-chronic people, who like to do one thing at a time, and polychronic people, who prefer doing several different activities at once. Interactions between the categories may again lead to problems, with polychronic behaviour liable to disorientate monochronic people. This has implications for flight crew composition. For example, a monochronic American captain and a polychronic Latin American first officer may adopt different approaches to the same task. In the context of international business interactions, Hall (1969) suggested that judicious office design could ameliorate such problems. In aviation this is currently not a viable option on the confined flight decks of passenger aircraft.

Hisam and Hampton (1996) noted that monochronic people are vulnerable to interruptions. In airline operations it is commonplace for disturbances, such as unexpected calls from air traffic control (ATC), to put task completion at risk. Loukopoulos et al. (2009) studied dozens of incidents in which American flight crews experienced disturbances. They stressed the importance of crew resource management (CRM) training using techniques for managing workload effectively. Techniques for dealing with interruptions would seem to be especially important for monochronic personnel. There does not appear to have been any aviation-related research conducted on the effects of interruptions on monochronic versus polychronic people. However, instruments for measuring polychronicity have been applied to other organizational contexts (Bluedorn, 2002).

## Action Chains

An action chain is a sequence of actions that two or more individuals carry out in order to complete a task. Action chains play a vital role in the work of airline pilots. One example is found in the formulaic exchanges that characterize radio communication between pilots and ATC. Another example is in the standard operating procedures (SOPs) which describe tasks that pilots have to complete in each phase of flight. Hall (1976) noted that monochronic people tend to focus on completing tasks, whereas polychronic people place more emphasis on maintaining good human relations.

Misunderstandings may occur when monochronic and polychronic people work together on the same action chain. An illustration of such a misunderstanding comes from the 1990 crash of Avianca Flight 052 at Cove Neck, New York, in the United States. Shortly before the crash, one of the Colombian flight crew commented that an American air traffic controller was angry. In his analysis of the accident, Helmreich (1994) interpreted this comment as indicating a failure of the flight crew to focus on the task of safely landing the plane. However, a polychronic interpretation suggests the crew member was not neglecting the task of landing, but instead expressing concern about the human relations involved in the situation.

## Criticism of Hall's Concepts

As mentioned above, Scollon et al. (2012, p. 40) were "reluctant to label cultures or discourse systems as high context or low context". They pointed out that the degree to which individuals rely on context for meaning varies depending on the situation. They proposed that these constructs should not be applied to cultures, but should instead be used to analyse "high context and low context situations".

Hutchins et al. (2002, p. 26) were more outspoken in their criticism of Hall's work. They stated that much of it was "based on rather dated and over-simplified models of the role of cultural and linguistic knowledge in thought". Additionally, they warned against regarding culture as a set of traits exhibited by all members of a group, and they stressed the importance of cultural variability within social groups. This charge, while important, may be equally directed at many other studies of national culture.

Nakata (2009) commended Hall's concept of high- and low-context for being more nuanced than Hofstede's cultural dimensions. However, she suggested one reason for Hall's concepts not being applied more widely was the lack of quantitative instruments. The standardized scores and survey tools produced by Hofstede lend themselves to quantitative research studies in a manner not yet possible for Hall's concepts.

Notwithstanding these limitations, researchers in aviation, organizational studies and intercultural communication continue to make use of Hall's concepts (Dahlstrom & Heemstra, 2009; Hisam & Hampton, 1996; Scollon et al., 2012).

## Implications for Aviation

Dahlstrom and Heemstra (2009, p. 83) reported on the training of pilots at a large multicultural airline. They emphasised the value of facilitated discussions about cultural factors in providing newly recruited pilots "with an awareness of this new environment and advise [sic] on how to navigate it safely". They noted that Hall's concepts (eg: high- and low-context, monochronic and polychronic time) may be used as an alternative to Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

In a paper about airline training, Hisam and Hampton (1996) commented that the concepts of high- and low-context had implications for several aspects of flight operations including briefings, conflict resolution, communications and teamwork. They added that, although existing CRM training was appropriate for communication in the United States, it might not be appropriate for other cultures as it did not "take into account the additional variables created by high-context communications" (Hisam & Hampton, 1996, p. 11).

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