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# *Diagnosis of Communication Context in Companies*

Diagnoza kontekstu komunikacyjnego w przedsiębiorstwach

**Keywords:** organizational culture; communication context; communication; company

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura organizacyjna; kontekst komunikacyjny; komunikowanie; przedsiębiorstwo

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## Introduction

Organizational culture and communication are interrelated. Organizational culture fundamentally influences processes and forms of communication in an organization, and communication processes exert an impact upon organizational culture. Most of cultural behaviors reflect and entail communication. Such a perception of the nature of these phenomena is evident in definitions of organizational culture. Hall claims that culture is communication and communication is culture [Hall 1976]. Organizational culture as a system for identifying and processing information is also defined by Kostera [1999, p. 10]. According to Moran, Abramson and Moran, "any culture is primarily a system for identifying and processing relevant information so most cultural behavior entails communication whether we realize it or not" [Moran, Abramson and Moran 2014, p. 35].

The expression of the relationship between culture and communication is also the function that is attributed to organizational culture in terms of communication. Furnham and Gunter argue that culture offers a common system of meanings that

forms the basis of communication and mutual understanding [Furnham and Gunter 1993, pp. 70–71]. Sikorski calls facilitating communication among members of the organization a factor integrating its culture [Sikorski 2002, p. 17]. Discussing the importance of culture in the work environment, Jemielniak and Koźmiński emphasize its uncertainty-limiting role, because it allows for quick, efficient and clear communication between participants in the organization, which makes them understand each other well [Jemielniak and Koźmiński 2011, pp. 286–287]. This approach is also presented by Schein. According to the author, problems of internal integration are limited because culture develops and defines a common language and conceptual categories – if its members cannot communicate with each other and understand each other, the group cannot exist as defined [Schein 1985, p. 66].

The relationship between organizational culture and communication is indisputable. "Culture is group membership and the inherent map for life that goes along with that membership, whereas communication like a legend on a map is made meaningful by the map and can be used instrumentally to navigate according to that map" [Hall 2014, p. 67]. However, according to Keyton, the statement that culture is communication and vice versa is no longer so obvious and it is related to the place of organizational culture in this relationship. If culture is assumed to be first, it exists and can be formed, then communication is part of that culture. Changes in culture cause changes in communication. The style, form and course of employee communication is the result of culture. The second approach places communicating before organizational culture that changes under the influence of communication. "How individual organizational members communicate matters; they are viewed as having agency in creating the organizational culture, and culture is seen as an outcome of communication". On the other hand, the third type of relationship between culture and communication presupposes that both phenomena exist simultaneously and interact. This means that communication is stimulated and constrained by organizational culture, and culture strengthens or inhibits any new interactions [Keyton 2011, p. 45]. In literature, these approaches are still debated. The view that organizational culture constitutes a variable shaping the communication characteristics of the organization is predominant.

Communicating is one of the many issues that diagnose organizational culture. In most cultural models, however, it is not a separate cultural value but a manifestation of the other value. In Hofstede's model, communication in an organization is an element of the analysis of distance to power [Hofstede 2000], and in Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars' model – the partiality and wholeity. Rarely in the developed models are there proposals for cultural dimensions that are strictly relevant to the issue of communication in the organization [Hampden-Turner and Trompenaar 2002]. The only proposals are models by Gesteland [2000] and Hall [2014]. The former author proposed cultural dimensions of expressiveness/restrictiveness of nonverbal behavior. They present a wide range of verbal and nonverbal messages such as loudness and tone of speech, the use of interruptions between consecutive speeches, interruption of speech during discussion, distance, physical contact during conversation, visual

contact [Białas 2013, p. 32]. On the other hand, Hall [2014] focused on the study of organizational cultures for the purposes of verbal or nonverbal communication. This value was defined by the communication context.

## 1. Cultural dimension of low and high communication context

The cultural context that describes the organization's relationship to communication is the communication context. Communication context is analyzed in terms of the extent to which information is communicated through verbal communication and encoded in the context of the physical message or certain rules relating to the way the message is communicated. When verbal communication is preferred, non-verbal, situational, and occasional elements are treated secondarily. Organizational culture is then described as low-context. In the opposite situation, there is a high-level communication. "Contextuality is not just a determinant of the way we communicate, it is also the basis of all other behaviors" [Białas 2013, p. 28].

A sender in low-context culture assumes that the recipient does not have all the necessary information to properly understand the content of the message. In the process of creating and interpreting messages and choosing the method of communication, employees do not derive from the common experience resulting from their own communication context. "The cultural environment is less important, non-verbal communication is most often ignored, so people need to communicate more directly" [Mead and Andrews 2011, p. 53]. They prefer clear, accurate, verbal communications, organize speeches, detail and segment sources of information and cite facts and figures in support of speech. "Most communication information is transmitted in words and in a target-oriented sequence" [Kostera and Śliwa 2010, p. 95]. Interlocutors portion information according to needs and expect a reliable response from their co-interlocutor. The purpose of the conversation is to explain all the details. It is supported by such features of the low communication context as the small distance between interlocutors, direct communication, visual contact and the possibility of touching the speaker.

In the low-context communication culture, employees focus on their own businesses, build their own identity, while calling for the need for autonomy. Communication is treated as a means of distribution or competition. The style of communication can be defined as controlled or confrontational, determined by decisions. Direct communication styles, words are most important [Mullins 2010, p. 29].

The culture of low communication context has the following features:

- relationships between individuals are relatively short and deep emotional ties with others are less appreciated;
- messages must be clear and their sender cannot expect the recipient to easily read their content from a particular context; members of these cultures are less likely to use non-verbal signs in the communication process;

- bureaucratic power is dispersed and it is difficult to identify responsible persons;
- contracts are more often in a written rather than oral form; members of low-context cultures treat contracts as final and legally binding and are less likely to renegotiate;
- the initiated and outsiders are not differentiated, it means that foreigners are much easier to adapt to the environment;
- cultural patterns are subject to faster change [Mead and Andrews 2011, pp. 54–55];
- reliance on unambiguous (literal) communication;
- separating work from interpersonal relationships;
- valuable individual initiative and decision-making;
- perceiving the employer-employee relationship as impersonal;
- relying on facts, statistics, as well as other proven information;
- preferring the style of direct written and oral speech;
- linear thinking;
- following the letter of the law [Reynolds and Valetine 2009, pp. 46–49].

It is impossible to understand a language well without communication context [Ferraro 2000, p. 47]. Culture of high communication context appreciates the word and directness in the conversation to a lower extent. On the other hand, special attention is paid to cultural considerations and differences in the way we communicate. Members of high-context cultures strongly depend on common experience and the perception of their own cultural environment in the process of creating and interpreting messages [Mead and Andrews 2011, p. 53]. Therefore, in high-context cultures "the context of communication is valued, and their representatives use non-verbal messages of concealed meaning" [Reynolds and Valetine 2009, pp. 40–41]. Most of the content of the message is contained in non-verbal messages, the reception of which is based on the ability to interpret information by the recipient. In high-context culture, the employee devotes a lot of energy to observing his supervisors, intuitively sensing their needs, and planning appropriate responses based on past experience [Mead and Andrews 2011, p. 144]. Members of high-context cultures rely upon extensive information networks and close personal contacts with others to obtain information [Kostera and Śliwa 2010, p. 96].

The culture of high communication context is described by the following features:

- a high proportion of information is uncoded and internalised by the individual;
- indirect communication style, words are less important;
- shared group understandings;
- importance attached to the past and tradition;
- diffuse culture stressing the importance of trust and personal relationships in business [Mullins 2010, p. 29];
- subordination of activities to interpersonal relations;
- appreciating collective initiatives and making decisions;

- perceiving the employer-employee relationship as a personal relationship;
- higher reliance on intuition and trust than on facts and statistics;
- preferring the style of indirect written and oral speech;
- non-linear thinking
- following the spirit of the law [Reynolds and Valetine 2009, pp. 42–45].

## 2. Research methodology

The paper presents results of a study on low and high cultural contexts. The identification of the analyzed values was based upon the communicative context of the message, the relationship between the employer and subordinates, group or individual preferences, attitude to cultural patterns and the nature of employees.

Questionnaire surveys were used to diagnose low versus high contextual communication. It contained questions regarding manifestations of the analyzed cultural value. Respondents responded to 20 statements describing manifestations of the communication context, with the possibility of marking a positive, negative and neutral response.

The study was conducted among 52 Polish companies that carry out diversified business activities. 951 managers and specialists participated in the study.

## 3. Research results

Diagnosis of cultural value of low versus high communication context was based upon a dozen or so manifestations. The obtained results indicate that in the studied companies there are signs of both low and high communication contexts. In the final assessment, the advantage of low-context organizational culture should be noted (Figure 1).

Symptoms that have been used to test the communication context reflect several issues. Firstly, they refer to the form of messages that show the degree of verbal formulation of speech. Research results indicate that communication between employees is based primarily upon verbal communication (73.9%), and open speech is commonly practiced (52.8%). In the interpretation of the message, the recipient uses little intuition (43.9%). The effectiveness of the interview is rarely determined by the analysis of the context of the sender's speech (39.1%). Summing up this group of manifestations of the communication context, it can be stated that in the studied companies low-contextuality exists.

Further research on the context of communication is associated with individualism or collectivism that affect the degree of application of group codes of communication. Recognition of a low vs. high context of communication is based upon the individual's priority over the group and the degree to resign from one's own independ-

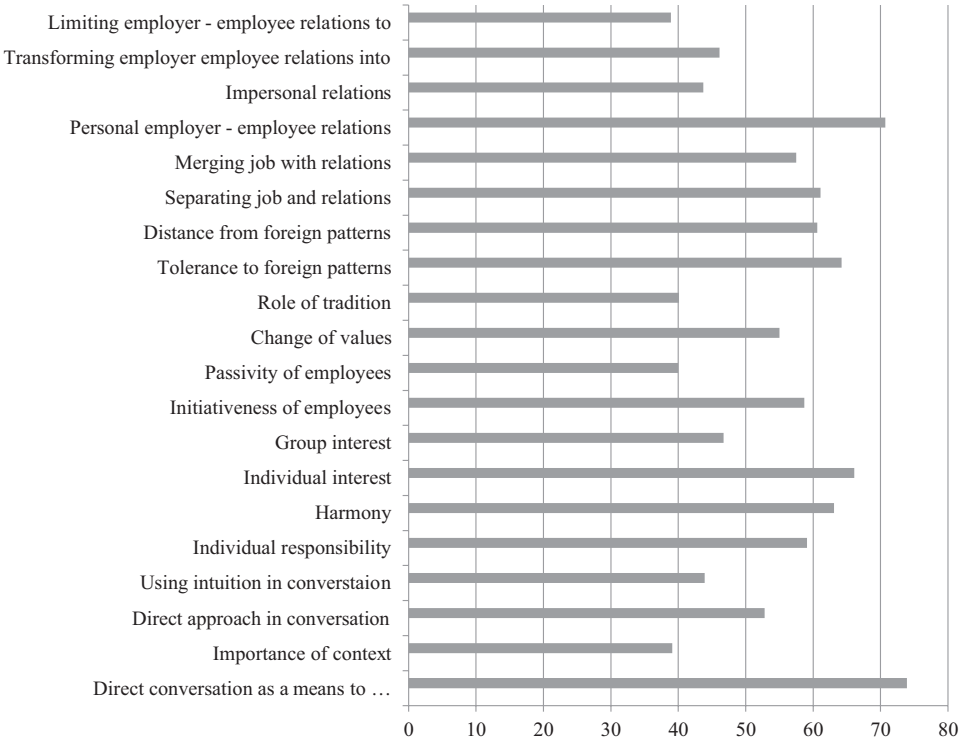


Figure 1. Manifestations of communication context (%)

Source: Author's own study based on research results.

ence for the benefit of the group. Individualism is supported by low willingness to cooperate if this means resigning from own independence (66.7%). Employees value individual work and individual responsibility (59.1%). They appreciate harmony, lack of conflicts (63.1%), but they rank their own interest over group interest (46.7%). In the final assessment, the advantage of individualistic behavior can be found, which is evidenced in low-context organizational culture in the studied enterprises.

The next group of manifestations of the communication context is the relationship between the employee and the employer. To assess this phenomenon, the cultural value of the distance to power was taken into account, and the following issues were analyzed: types of relationships and the distance between managers and subordinates and the level of sense of subordination. The low level of power is attested by the peer-to-peer relation (70.7%) and the transfer of business contacts outside the workplace (46.1%). The distance to power was defined at an average level (43.7%), while accepting the transfer of work relations outside the workplace was considered unacceptable for 38.9% of the respondents. In the final evaluation of the analyzed group of manifestations of the communication context, one can conclude

the domination of the personal relationship between the employer and employees, which proves the low-context culture.

Attitude towards existing cultural patterns was another manifestation of the cultural context. It was diagnosed by taking into account the role of tradition in the life of the organization, the stability of cultural patterns and openness to other cultural values. The research results show that tradition is important as a benchmark for decision-making and action for 40.1% of respondents. Most of them opt for changes in cultural patterns (55%) and are open to accepting them from the environment. They show high tolerance for different values (64.2%), while applying distance to new patterns (60.6%). Summing up this group of manifestations of the communication context, bias towards and tolerance for the future and new values can be affirmed, which characterizes the culture of the low communication context.

The nature of employees' actions was also taken into account in diagnosing the communication context. This illustrates the degree of separation of work from interpersonal relationships and the activity and initiative of employees. Subordination (57.5%) and separating work from interpersonal relations (61.1%) were rated very similar by the respondents. Employees of the surveyed companies were rated as active, self-initiating (58.7%). Passivity in action characterizes the minority (40%). Based on the results of the study it can be stated that employees of the surveyed organizations subordinate their tasks to goals and objectives, demonstrating individual initiatives and decision making. This demonstrates the culture of the low communication context.

## Conclusions

Organizational culture of the studied enterprises is characterized by a low cultural context. Vast majority of responses proves the preference for encoding and decoding the content in a form of verbal communication and limiting communication based on non-verbal codes, intuition, guesses. Employees recognize direct conversation rather than basing their own experience, group codes, or cultural contexts as a more effective way of communicating. They use facts and statistics to be perceived as a reliable source of information and the same is also expected from the interlocutor.

The material, business, intentional nature of low-context communication translates into meaningful interpersonal relationships or their weakening. Employees separate work from interpersonal relationships, subordinate it to tasks. This activates their independence and initiatives. They focus on their own tasks. They look forward to the future, they do not feel attached to cultural patterns, they treat them in an instrumental way.

By analyzing the results obtained, it can also be stated that the identified low level of contextuality is not only a determinant of the way of communication. It influenced active, individual, subordinated work, impersonal behavior.

The results obtained do not constitute grounds for generalizations. However, they may be a starting point for further research into the relationship between organizational culture and communication.

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### Diagnosis of Communication Context in Companies

Organizational culture is an important aspect of organizations. It is a set of cultural values that reflect these aspects and relationships between them. One of these aspects is communication in an organization that includes verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The cultural value describing the organization's relationship in communication is the communication context. Contextuality level is not only a determinant of the way of communication, it is also the basis of all other behaviors. Hence, diagnosis and description of the communication context of companies constitutes an interesting research problem. The main objective of the paper is to present the results of research on the communication context describing the surveyed companies.

52 Polish companies and 951 respondents participated in the study. The diagnosis was based on a survey. The survey questionnaire contained questions regarding manifestations of cultural values which include the communication context. Research results indicate that the organizational culture of the surveyed companies is characterized by low contextuality. Dominating verbal codes in communication have translated into active, individual, impersonal, task-oriented behaviors of employees.

**Diagnoza kontekstu komunikacyjnego w przedsiębiorstwach**

Ważnym aspektem życia organizacyjnego jest kultura organizacyjna. Jest ona zestawem wartości kulturowych odzwierciedlających te aspekty i relacji między nimi. Jednym z nich jest komunikacja w organizacji, która obejmuje werbalne i niewerbalne zachowania. Wartością kulturową opisującą stosunek organizacji do komunikowania się jest kontekst komunikacyjny. Poziom kontekstowości nie jest wyłącznie determinantą sposobu komunikacji, stanowi również podstawę wszystkich innych zachowań. Stąd ciekawym problemem badawczym jest zdiagnozowanie i opisanie kontekstu komunikacyjnego przedsiębiorstw. Celem głównym artykułu jest przedstawienie wyników badań dotyczących kontekstu komunikacyjnego opisującego badane przedsiębiorstwa. W badaniach uczestniczyło 52 polskich przedsiębiorstw i 951 respondentów. Diagnozy dokonano w oparciu o badanie ankietowe. Kwestionariusz ankiety zawierał pytania dotyczące przejawów wartości kulturowych jaką jest kontekst komunikacyjny. Wyniki badań wskazują, że kultura organizacyjna badanych przedsiębiorstw charakteryzuje się niskokontekstowością. Dominujące werbalne kody w komunikowaniu się przełożyły się na aktywne, indywidualne, bezosobowe, podporządkowane zadaniom zachowania pracowników.