

The image shows the cover of a spiral-bound notebook with a blue textured background. At the top, the silver spiral binding is visible. The title is written in white, bold, sans-serif font. The word 'Point' is split by a blue circle, and 'Across' is preceded by another blue circle. A blue line starts from the left side of the first circle, loops around the top and right, and ends at the bottom of the second circle. A third blue circle is positioned below the second one.

# Getting Your P●int ●Across Cultures

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# Are you going abroad?

Yes?

Wonderful!

Do you like the taste of foot in your mouth,  
or feeling embarrassed due to cultural  
missteps?

No?

Even better! In that case, this eBook is for you!

# Here's what we'll cover:

(if you don't want to spoil the surprise, just read on through!)

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# All About Language

English is the official language in 87 countries.

If you're moving to mainland Europe, the Middle East, or South-East Asia, it may not get you very far.

Sure, English is the language of business, but is that all you do?

“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.”

Anthony ‘Tony’ Robbins, American motivational speaker

# All About Language

## Top Five Reasons To Learn It

It's easy to forget the fact that you won't be in your office or surrounded by English-speaking colleagues 24/7. What about the weekends? You'll want to learn the local language to:

1. Show respect
2. Understand what's happening at your kids' parent-teacher conference
3. Negotiate purchases at the farmers' markets
4. Get a proper haircut
5. Make local friends and meaningful connections

# All About Language

Language is an essential ingredient to the expression of culture.

Most expat couples I work with take a cross-cultural training because they want to feel more prepared for what's ahead. Even more than that, they don't want to inadvertently offend anyone.

Recognizing that you're a guest in their country is the first step. It would be a mistake to assume everyone speaks your language.

# All About Language

Learning to dominate a foreign language can take years of intensive study. Unless you're a perfectionist or plan on staying for a long time, that won't be necessary.

Three months of daily practice should give you a decent working vocabulary and the ability to conjugate the top 10 verbs in their present, maybe even past and future tense.

Immerse yourself to accelerate learning. I'm not saying avoid all other expats, just make sure you speak the local language with them, too.

You'll be amazed how fast your children will pick it up, especially when you make it a game. Why not have all dinners in the new idiom?

# All About Language

Top Five Tips How To Learn A New Language  
(when your relocation company doesn't sponsor a tutor):

1. Invest 1 hour a day in a self-study program like Rosetta Stone.
2. Sign up for a language class at your local college.
3. Find someone in the host country to do an exchange class with.  
(Check university language boards and Irish Pubs for ads!)
4. Start by reading children's books and bi-lingual poetry or novels, then work your way up to glossy magazines and the newspaper.
5. Watch TV with subtitles, and chat with locals whenever you can.

**Bonus Tip:** Get over the fear of making grammar or vocabulary mistakes. You're supposed to, you're learning.

# What To Talk About

**Safe topics** are always going to be the host country itself. Ask about its history, its culture, its people, and you'll be richly rewarded. Famous exports, celebrities, or sports figures are effective conversation starters.

**Avoid discussions** about politics, religion, sexuality, abortion, the death penalty, guns, and drugs until you are well acquainted. These topics cause most conflicts today; no need to fan the fire.

Expats should also be aware that not everyone believes in openly criticizing their Government and leaders. Well-intended suggestions for improvement may easily be mistaken for a sense of superiority.

# One more thing:

You'll probably be super-tired during the first few weeks of your relocation. When at home you were able to work all day, go to the gym at night, and meet friends for dinner or a movie after that, now you may find yourself nodding off on the couch at 8 pm.

This is normal.

It's hard work for your system getting used to the new environment.

It's even harder work for your brain to constantly hear people talk without understanding what is being said.

Don't force yourself. Give it a few weeks for your energy levels to go back to normal.

# It's Not All About Language

Even more so than grammar and syntax, our cultural programming heavily influences our communication style.

As Philippe Rosinski describes in his book, *Coaching Across Cultures\**, research has shown that our preferences how we communicate fall somewhere along a spectrum within four pairs of opposing preferences.

\*Rosinski, Philippe: *Coaching Across Cultures*, 2003 – Nicholas Brealey Publishing [www.philrosinski.com](http://www.philrosinski.com)

# High & Low Context

Context describes how much information is taken for granted.

If it is high, the message may get communicated primarily through gestures, posture, and vocal inflection (how you say it).

If it is low, the message may get communicated primarily through the actual spoken words (what you say).

Very broadly speaking, Northern and Western cultures tend to operate in low, Southern and Eastern cultures tend to favor high context communication.

Low Context

Switzerland ✈️ Germany ✈️ USA ✈️ Mexico ✈️ UAE ✈️ Japan



High Context

# High & Low Context

Watch out for high context in business situations.

Your contact may be reading between the lines and have certain expectations. The name of the company you're representing may open or close doors (How long has it been in business? Are the directors involved in any lawsuits?)

Everything sends a message, including the meeting location: is it a fancy hotel lobby, or a company meeting room with wobbly chairs? Where would you feel more respected?

“One cannot not communicate.”

Paul Watzlawick, Austrian–American psychologist & philosopher

# High & Low Context

No matter where you're from, context will be higher if the speaker and listener know each other well, or have had dealings in the past.

Just think of the wordless communications that happen between a husband and wife, or mother and child – a raised eyebrow sometimes says it all!

Keep in mind, no one person or one country is only on one extreme. Everyone can communicate using both styles in any given situation. There's simply a preference for one side.

# Example

I'm from Germany. When we lived in Mexico, I asked our gardener, "Can you come back next Tuesday?"

"Yes, of course, if you wish..." he replied, inclining his head to the side and taking a step back.

I only heard the word "yes" (low context), and didn't pay attention to his body language or the qualification of the yes (high context), later wondering why he didn't show.

My neighbor eventually explained that our gardener can never make Tuesdays.

# What happened?

When operating in high context cultures, use open-ended questions.

I should have asked, “when can you come back?”

My closed question only gave him a “yes” or “no” option, and an explicit “no” would be considered rude.

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

1925 Nobel Prize for Literature recipient,  
George Bernard Shaw, Irish Playwright

# Direct & Indirect

During a conflict or challenging situation, a direct style aims to resolve it head on.

An indirect style focuses on preserving the interpersonal relationship and not causing offense. Even if it risks a potential misunderstanding.

Remember my gardener?

He told me what I wanted to hear.

# Direct & Indirect

From his indirect perspective, saying “no” might have damaged our relationship. Had he spoken with a client with a similar indirect and high context style, the message would have been transmitted perfectly, as both are prepared to read between the lines.

From my direct perspective, a “no” would not have been offensive, on the contrary: it would have saved me time waiting for him.

## Tip

Repeat back what you think you heard and ask for feedback to see if your message came across correctly as well.

# Affective & Neutral

Affective communication uses emotion and warmth to help nurture personal relationships (who).

Neutral communication focuses on precise data and is more task-focused (what).

I first noticed affective communication in Scotland, where the checkout ladies at Tesco's, a supermarket chain, called everyone "hen", "pet", and other terms of endearment.

Finally, after years of being addressed as "Frau Fuellgrabe" I was welcomed to join the "sweethearts" of this world!

# Affective & Neutral

It's a little embarrassing to admit it took me a while to realize not all Spaniards were trying to flirt when they called me "guapa" (beautiful), but hey – there's a learning curve to everything.

As you can probably tell, European "political correctness" is not practiced with the same vigor as it is in the USA.

## Tip

Remember to adjust your lens and view the communication and interaction through the local communication style preference.

Not all emotion has a feeling component: energy may represent passion, not a finalized decision. Pauses may denote contemplation, not uncomfortable silence.

# Formal & Informal

Formal communication observes protocol, rituals, and includes titles and accomplishments when addressing individuals.

Familiar and spontaneous interactions are more common in Informal communication cultures.

Many languages make a grammatical distinction between speaking to someone older, further up in the hierarchy, or whom you've never met before (last name, polite) and colleagues or acquaintances (first name, casual).

English only has the one "you", underlining the equal nature of all partners.

# Formal & Informal

Granted, the first-name basis is more common in European business now, too, but as an expat you may want to wait to be offered it. Especially when working with the baby boomer generation.

## Tip

Make an effort to learn how to correctly pronounce the last names and titles of your contacts in the new country. It will be highly appreciated and considered a sign of respect.

# Small Talk

US Americans love it, Germans generally don't get it. Why?

“What's the point?”

The more formal, direct, and low context the culture is, the more communication is expected to follow a framework and serve a purpose.

Small talk eases us into conversation, and it fills the time when waiting in line. It often only contains the middle portion, e.g. “nice weather today!” or “that's a nice scarf on you!” missing a distinct opening or introduction, and conclusion.

When you're not used to small talk, it may take some practice to respond with a simple “thank you” or “ok, have a nice day!” For example, it took me ages to figure out that “how are you?” actually only means “hello” and that I'm not supposed to share my recent medical history.

# Not-So-Famous Last Words

If you're wondering where these different communication styles come from, I believe our orientation to the concept of time plays a big role.

Northern and Western cultures (again, broadly generalizing) tend to view time as something finite. Since there isn't a lot of it, it has to be treasured, and should be saved, not wasted. We take care to be precise in our word choice. Be direct. Be clear. Get to the point. What's the bottom line? Cut to the chase!

In the South, the days seem longer. Take "mañana". That's Spanish for "tomorrow", i.e. the sun will rise again, there will be more time, another whole day in fact, and you know what that means? There is truly no need to cram it all in right this minute.

# Not-So-Famous Last Words

Or how about the Italian “dolce far niente”, the “sweet art of doing nothing”? You can almost hear the onlooking American or German shout, “don’t just sit there, do something!”

When there is little time, the goal takes center stage. When there is lots of time, it’s easier to take a break, have a cappuccino, and chat over the water cooler with the new colleague.

When we become aware of our own communication style, we gain the choice to flex into the opposite preference.

When we learn to appreciate that all communication styles are effective depending on cultural context, we become less judgmental in our dealings with others.

And that will help us get our point across.

# Not-So-Famous Last Words

Now it's your turn to try out both ends of these spectrums!

## When working in Low Context, Direct, Neutral, Formal Cultures

- Accept literal meaning
- Start with bottom line and prioritize
- Respect allotted meeting times
- Communicating via brief email messages is the norm
- Saying "no" is not considered offensive

## When working in High Context, Indirect, Affective, Informal Cultures

- Ask open-ended questions
- Follow up & use demonstrations
- Allow for sufficient time to build trust
- Face-to-face communication is preferred
- Become aware of non-verbal cues

# Tell Me What You Think

I hope you read some things you didn't know before, and that you remember them next time you're talking with someone from another country.

Find yourself in a head-scratcher of a situation, figured something out, or simply had an awesome day?

I want to hear all about it:

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