

# Embracing 'high-context,' 'low-context' cultures

Small Canadian businesses have a real challenge growing internationally. Unlike large corporations that have established reputations and are well-known within the international arena, small companies struggle to even be acknowledged.

Also, large corporations can hire foreign agents to establish connections within other countries. These agents are familiar with the local cultures and usually know key people there. Smaller firms typically don't have the money or talent to do this, so they must do it themselves. Not only does this take them away from their duties back home, but they must operate in an unfamiliar culture.

How can we do this most effectively? Stephen Miles of Harlequin Enterprises thinks the best way to approach this is to first understand how the culture of the country in question affects its communication style.

After accumulating more than two million Air Miles points and a plethora of passport stamps, Miles succinctly concludes that in order for small Canadian businesses to establish a successful presence in any foreign country, they "must adapt to the cultural structure of that country."

Every country has its own cultural traits. We in Canada see subtle differences between our American neighbours and ourselves; the same goes for England and us. The



**Morgan Smyth**  
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contrast is even more pronounced between the West and eastern cultures such as Japan, China and India. Edward T. Hall, in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*, defined these traits in terms of "high-context" and "low-context."

Canada is considered a low-context culture. Our communication with each other is, for the most part, straightforward. When we say something, our meaning is largely self-evident: "How much of a discount will you give me if I pay cash?" or "Would you like that in blue or red?"

High-context cultures base their communication systems more on background information, tradition or rituals. For instance, in Japan, the word "yes" may mean "Yes, I hear you" or it could mean "Yes, I agree" as we know it. You have to be acutely attuned to the culture in order to detect these differences.

This is one of the reasons why it

is so important for Canadian firms wishing to expand internationally to be very cognizant of target countries' cultures. Misinterpretation of a phrase or even a single word could determine the mission's success or failure.

Another factor to consider when venturing into foreign countries is time. Time perspectives vary among cultures. In North America and Europe, time is treated as a commodity: "Time is money," "Do it now." Our view of time is very linear.

In Latin countries, such as Spain, Italy, Mexico and those in South America, time is looked upon as what we're working on and with whom we are working. Therefore, it is important to be flexible with time because relationships are more important.

In Asian countries, time can be considered "circular." Issues are revisited several times. People prefer to "walk around the pool" several times to ensure the right decision is made. These circular events may include tea ceremonies with the Japanese or visits to the Great Wall with the Chinese before any discussion about a business venture is even mentioned. You have to be patient and respectful of their processes, which are based on harmony and Confucian and Buddhist philosophies.

Another aspect of diverse cultures is the way workers interact with each other. In western cultures,

particularly the U.S. and Canada, we tend to be individualistic. We pride ourselves on the amount of responsibility and authority we have, as discussed in Geert Hofstede's model *Power Distance*.

In Latin and eastern cultures, it's the opposite; they tend to value group participation and achievements. Brainstorming sessions typically don't work there because people don't publicly volunteer their ideas because they could be perceived as mavericks. Subordinates rarely question their superiors openly. Malcolm Gladwell says this may be why Korean Air, in the late 1990s, had so many crashes — the reluctance of co-pilots to countermand or even question pilots' decisions.

Miles states the three key ingredients for success with any foreign culture are to be aware of its nuances, appreciate its beauty and elegance, and embrace it — enjoy it and learn from it. By employing this approach, we become more aligned with new foreign partners and significantly improve our potential to grow and succeed in new and thriving markets.

*Morgan Smyth is an SCNetwork thought leader and a change management consultant who launched his own IT services company which soared to Profit Magazine's 50 Fastest Growing Companies. He is based in Toronto and can be reached at [msmyth@braegen.com](mailto:msmyth@braegen.com).*