



## Contributions of Edward T. Hall

...for AFS  
& Friends

**T**he current field of intercultural communication is the result of numerous theorists; however, contributions by Edward T. Hall strongly shaped the field and **led it to be what it is today.**

Hall's intercultural theories combine ideas from the worlds of linguistic relativity (the idea that different languages impact how different cultures think and act; Whorf-Sapir), psychoanalytic theory (Freud), as well as biology and ethology (the study of animal behavior). And, borrowing from traditional anthropology, Hall used the concept of culture as a system of patterns that are learned and analyzable, and applied those patterns to the way we communicate. Following are some of Hall's key contributions:

### HIGHER AND LOWER CONTEXT COMMUNICATION

Hall believed that **context and meaning are interrelated** and he placed different cultures on a continuum of high to low context according to how people from those cultures interpret and/or perceive the information that surrounds an interaction or event.

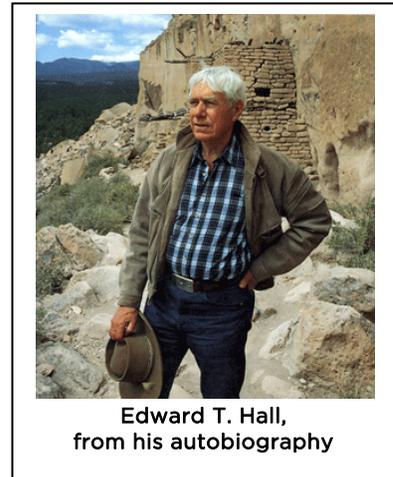
In high-context communication, most of the information is taken from the physical or social surroundings. **Higher context** cultures do not rely on verbal communication to convey all of the meaning in an interaction. Such cultures are typically found in the **Middle East, Asia, Africa and South America.** People in these cultures generally have extensive information networks and many close personal relationships. Not a lot of verbal background information is needed in daily interactions, nor is it expected, as people share many similar experiences and expectations for how the world functions.

A low-context message, on the other hand, is one in which most of the message is transmitted explicitly through words. Lower context cultures rely almost entirely on the verbal message, rarely scanning the surrounding environment for additional meaning. **Lower context** cultures are found in much of **Western Europe,** as well as the **United States and Canada.** In these cultures, personal relationships tend to be determined by involvement in certain activities and are not as interconnected as relationships in higher-context cultures. Therefore, there is a greater need for background information to be provided explicitly and by spoken or written communications in daily transactions.

### NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The majority of Hall's intercultural theories fall into the category of nonverbal communication. Hall believed that most of what people communicate they do **unconsciously.** For Hall, non-verbal behaviors include facial expressions, movement, and proximity, among other things, and vary not only from country to country, but also regionally.

Hall's primary academic fascinations have been with **time and space.** He realized that people's use of time and space differed from one culture to another.



Edward T. Hall,  
from his autobiography

## USES OF TIME: *MONOCHRONIC & POLYCHRONIC*

Hall noted that people perceive the passage of time on a continuum, with monochronic on one end and polychronic on the other. In **monochronic systems, time is compartmentalized** or broken into discreet units and people complete one thing before moving on to the next. Hall believed that it can be unsettling for monochronic cultures if they have to confront more than one thing at a time. On the other hand, **polychronic systems have numerous interactions and/or activities occurring at the same time**. This theory of time was first presented in Hall's book, *The Silent Language*.

## USES OF SPACE: *PROXIMICS*

Hall stated that **people perceive space through at least four of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, and touch**. He determined that every culture has implicit rules for how space should be used and that these rules vary from one culture to the next. These unspoken specifications regulate where one works and where one plays, territorial distinctions for different social units (e.g. family, neighborhood), as well as acceptable uses of space for men, women, and children.



Use of Space in a Classroom

**Territoriality** relates to the organization of physical space, e.g., in an office. Does the president have a large, corner office and does he or she sit behind a large desk, or does the president share the same workspace as his or her staff? If the president has a private office, are staff allowed to occupy it when the president is not using it?

**Personal Space** is the distance from other people that one needs to maintain in order to feel comfortable. Hall described personal space as a "bubble" each person carries around with her- or himself at all times. This bubble changes in size according to the situation and the people with whom one interacts (e.g., close friends are allowed closer than strangers) and varies by culture.

## "INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION" & EDWARD T. HALL

By analyzing the term *intercultural communication* in relation to Hall's contributions, one can immediately see how central his theories have been. Hall began his career as an anthropologist and in anthropology people generally study all aspects of a culture (e.g., food, dress, lifestyles, etc.), but they only study one culture at a time. These are called *macro-monocultural* studies. However, Hall popularized the idea of comparing specific aspects of different cultures (e.g., use of space in different cultures). These studies are called *micro-intercultural* studies and they are the type of studies that the field of intercultural communication uses today.

### Edward T. Hall...

- ✓ profoundly influenced the field of intercultural communication through his studies on verbal and non-verbal communication.
- ✓ introduced the terms: *higher and lower context cultures, monochronic and polychronic time*.
- ✓ popularized *proxemics* (territory and personal space) as a form of non-verbal communication.

### Books by E. T. Hall

*The Dance of Life*  
*The Hidden Dimension*  
*The Silent Language*  
*Beyond Culture*