

Intercultural Communication Styles

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING, ADAPTATION,
AND STRONGER CONNECTION



What feels clear, respectful, or efficient to one person
may feel abrupt, vague, overwhelming, or incomplete to another.

This guide helps you notice your default tendencies, understand four
common communication patterns, and identify ways to adapt across difference.



NOTICE

Identify your usual
communication
preferences.



UNDERSTAND

Learn four common
communication styles
and how they may
be interpreted.



ADAPT

Use practical strategies
to communicate across
difference with greater
clarity and respect.



CONNECT

Build stronger
relationships and
create more inclusive,
collaborative spaces.

• Awareness is the first step. Connection is the goal. •

Communication Preferences

DIMENSION 1: CONTEXTUAL, DIPLOMATIC, AND EXPLICIT COMMUNICATION

Communication differs in how directly meaning is stated.



CONTEXTUAL

Meaning is conveyed through context, tone, timing, relationship, and what is left unsaid.



DIPLOMATIC

Meaning is softened through respectful, relationship-conscious language.



EXPLICIT

Meaning is stated clearly and directly.

SITUATIONAL EXAMPLES ALONG THE SPECTRUM

SITUATION	 CONTEXTUAL	 DIPLOMATIC	 EXPLICIT
 1. Disagreeing in a meeting	<i>"That is certainly one way we could approach it."</i>	<i>"I wonder whether there might be another way to think about the timeline."</i>	<i>"I disagree with that approach because it may increase the timeline."</i>
 2. Giving corrective feedback	<i>"I wonder how this might read to someone encountering the topic for the first time."</i>	<i>"There may be an opportunity to strengthen the evidence and make the organization a little easier to follow."</i>	<i>"The report needs stronger evidence and clearer organization."</i>
 3. Declining a request	<i>"There seem to be several priorities converging this week."</i>	<i>"This week is already quite full. I'm not sure I could give that the attention it deserves."</i>	<i>"I'm not able to take that on this week."</i>
 4. Expressing concern	<i>"Perhaps we should see how things develop before moving ahead."</i>	<i>"I'm wondering whether we may want a little more time before launching."</i>	<i>"I'm concerned that we are not ready to launch."</i>
 5. Requesting clarification	<i>"There may be another layer to this that I'm not yet seeing."</i>	<i>"I may be missing part of the picture. Could you say a little more?"</i>	<i>"I don't understand what you mean. Can you explain it?"</i>
 6. Inviting participation	<i>"There are a few voices we have not heard from yet."</i>	<i>"I'd be interested to hear any thoughts you may have."</i>	<i>"What is your opinion?"</i>

 *The same message can be communicated in different ways. Awareness helps us recognize intent and adapt across difference.* 

Communication Preferences

DIMENSION 2: CONCISE, EXPLANATORY, AND EXPANSIVE COMMUNICATION

Communication also differs in how much detail, explanation, and context a speaker includes.



CONCISE

Communicates the central point with minimal detail.



EXPLANATORY

Provides enough context or rationale to support understanding.



EXPANSIVE

Adds background, examples, nuance, and relational context.

SITUATIONAL EXAMPLES ALONG THE SPECTRUM

SITUATION	 CONCISE	 EXPLANATORY	 EXPANSIVE
1  Giving a project update	The project is on schedule.	The project is on schedule. We completed the first two phases and expect to begin testing next week.	The project is on schedule. We completed the first two phases, including the stakeholder review and content revisions. The team worked through a few early challenges, but those have now been resolved. We expect to begin testing next week, and I can walk you through what that process will involve.
2  Explaining a decision	We selected the second option because it is more affordable.	We selected the second option because it is more affordable and can be implemented within our current timeline.	We selected the second option after comparing cost, timing, and staff capacity. Although the first option offered a few additional features, it would have required more funding and a longer implementation period. The second option gives us what we need now while leaving room to expand later.
3  Giving feedback	The presentation needs a clearer conclusion.	The presentation needs a clearer conclusion that summarizes the main point and identifies the next step.	The presentation has a strong opening and several helpful examples. As I listened, though, I found myself wanting a clearer sense of how all the ideas came together at the end. A conclusion that restates the main point and identifies the next step would help the audience leave knowing exactly what to do.
4  Requesting help	Can you review this by Friday?	Can you review this by Friday and let me know whether the recommendations are clear?	Would you have time to review this by Friday? I am especially interested in whether the recommendations are clear and whether the transition between the second and third sections makes sense. You have worked closely with this audience, so your perspective would be especially helpful.
5  Sharing an opinion	I prefer the first option.	I prefer the first option because it is easier to navigate.	I prefer the first option. When I looked at both versions, the first felt easier to navigate and made the most important information visible immediately. I also think it would be more intuitive for someone visiting the site for the first time.
6  Answering a question	Yes, the deadline is Friday.	Yes, the deadline is Friday at 5:00 p.m.	Yes, the deadline is Friday at 5:00 p.m. We chose Friday so the team would have time to review everything before Monday's meeting. Submitting earlier is welcome, but Friday is the final deadline.

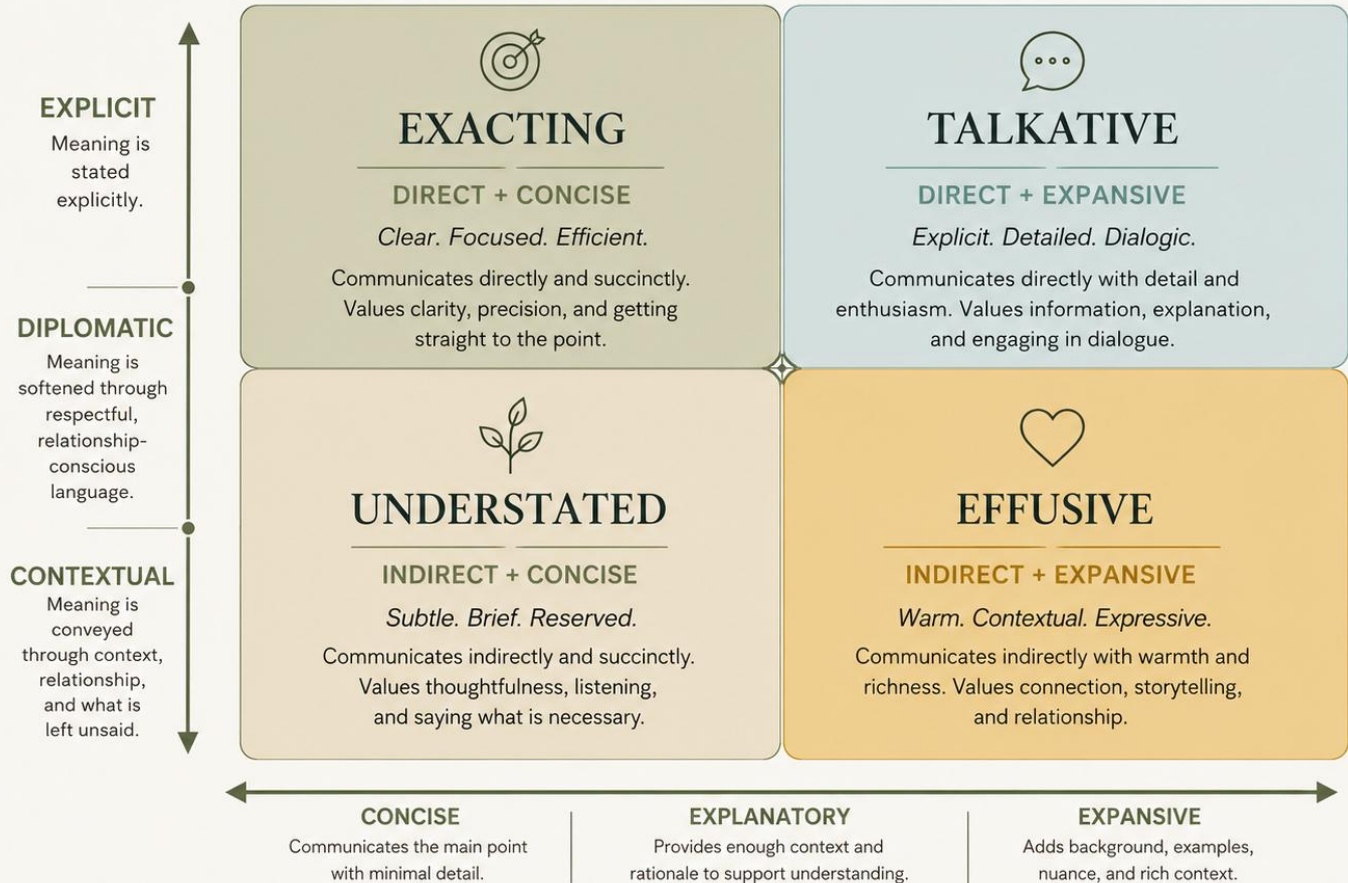


*Different levels of detail can all be appropriate.
Awareness helps us adapt to the needs of the conversation.*



THE COMMUNICATION STYLES GRID

🌿 HOW WE EXPRESS IDEAS AND ENGAGE WITH OTHERS 🌿



*Most of us use all four styles depending on the person, situation, and cultural context.
 Awareness helps us adapt and connect across styles.*

Communication preferences are not fixed. Most people move among styles depending on the situation, relationship, level of trust, power dynamics, and cultural context.

Notice Your Patterns:

- Which communication style do you tend to use most often: **Exacting, Talkative, Understated, or Effusive?**
- Which style do you tend to use when you feel confident and comfortable?
- Which style do you tend to use when you feel stressed, uncertain, or under pressure?
- Which style feels least natural to you? Why?

Intercultural Communication Styles



1 EXACTING

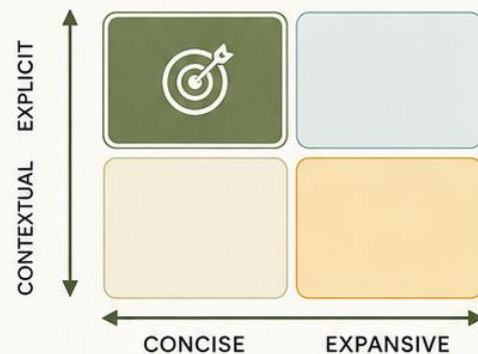
EXPLICIT + CONCISE

Clear. Focused. Efficient.

YOU TEND TO...

- ✓ State the main point clearly
- ✓ Value precision and efficiency
- ✓ Move toward decisions and action

WHERE THIS STYLE FITS



HOW OTHERS MAY EXPERIENCE YOU



Clear
Direct
Decisive



Abrupt
Blunt
Impatient



Overly
focused on
tasks



Insufficient
context or
connection

WHEN STYLES DIFFER, TENSION MAY EMERGE



You may seem
impatient.
They may seem
overly detailed.



You may seem
too blunt.
They may seem
unclear.



You may seem
cold.
They may seem
too emotional.

HOW TO BRIDGE THE DIFFERENCE



Invite context:
What else should
we consider?



Check for meaning:
Help me understand
what you're saying.



Add connection:
Acknowledge people
before the solution.



CLARITY WITH CARE. DIRECTNESS WITH RESPECT.



Intercultural Communication Styles



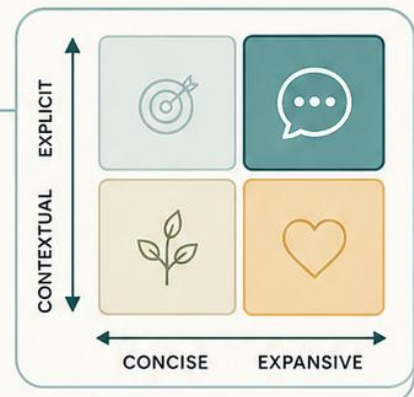
2 TALKATIVE

EXPLICIT + EXPANSIVE

Detailed. Dialogic. Engaging.

YOU TEND TO...

- ✓ Share information and context
- ✓ Engage others in dialogue
- ✓ Ensure full understanding



HOW OTHERS MAY EXPERIENCE YOU



Engaging
Open
Informative



Wordy
Long-winded
Hard to follow



Too much
detail



Hard to
get to the
point

WHEN STYLES DIFFER, TENSION MAY EMERGE



WITH EXACTING

You may seem too long.
They may seem impatient.



WITH UNDERSTATED

You may seem overwhelming.
They may seem disengaged.



WITH EFFUSIVE

You may seem too logical.
They may seem too emotional.

HOW TO BRIDGE THE DIFFERENCE



Lead with the point:
“Here’s the main
idea...”



Pause for others:
Create space and
invite input.



Read the room:
Share what’s helpful,
not everything.



INFORMATION WITH INTENTION. ENGAGEMENT WITH FOCUS.



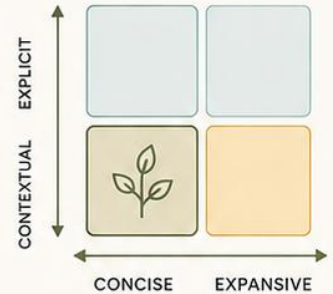
Intercultural Communication Styles



3 UNDERSTATED

CONTEXTUAL + CONCISE

Subtle. Brief. Reserved.



YOU TEND TO...

- ✓ Communicate thoughtfully
- ✓ Value harmony and discretion
- ✓ Say what is necessary

HOW OTHERS MAY EXPERIENCE YOU



Thoughtful
Calm
Careful



Unclear
Hard to read
Withholding



Not engaged
or unsure



Agreeing
when you may
disagree

WHEN STYLES DIFFER, TENSION MAY EMERGE



WITH EXACTING

You may seem vague.
They may seem
too blunt.



WITH TALKATIVE

You may seem quiet.
They may seem
overwhelming.



WITH EFFUSIVE

You may seem distant.
They may seem
too expressive.

HOW TO BRIDGE THE DIFFERENCE



State your meaning:
Add a direct
clarifier.



Make engagement
visible: Signal
that you're with
the conversation.



Share earlier:
Don't rely only on
context or hints.



THOUGHTFUL AND PRESENT. CLEAR ENOUGH TO CONNECT.



Intercultural Communication Styles



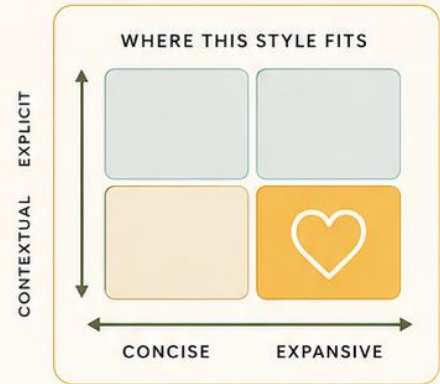
4 EFFUSIVE

CONTEXTUAL + EXPANSIVE

Warm. Relational. Expressive.

YOU TEND TO...

- ✓ Build connection and trust
- ✓ Share stories and context
- ✓ Value people and meaning



HOW OTHERS MAY EXPERIENCE YOU



Warm
Relational
Authentic



Too much
emotion or
information



Unclear on
the main
point



Indirect or
hard to
interpret

WHEN STYLES DIFFER, TENSION MAY EMERGE



WITH EXACTING

You may seem indirect.
They may seem too direct.



WITH TALKATIVE

You may seem overly
personal. They may seem
too logical.



WITH UNDERSTATED

You may seem too intense.
They may seem
too reserved.

HOW TO BRIDGE THE DIFFERENCE



Name your point:
Signal the why
behind the story.



Check the need:
Ask what others
need from you.



**Balance heart
and clarity:**
Connect and
communicate clearly.



CONNECTION WITH PURPOSE. WARMTH WITH CLARITY.



Apply It & Continue Your Learning

Awareness becomes most useful when we apply it to real conversations
and continue growing in how we communicate across difference.



1 APPLY IT TO ONE CONVERSATION

Think of one upcoming conversation in which communication differences may matter.

	1. The conversation Who do you need to talk with, and what needs to be discussed?		
	2. Your likely style	☐ Exacting	☐ Talkative
		☐ Understated	☐ Effusive
	3. Their possible style What style might they prefer? What cues have you noticed?		
	4. Where meaning could be missed <i>How might you misinterpret each other?</i>		
	5. Choose one adaptation	☐ Make the message more explicit ☐ Use more diplomatic language ☐ Add more context ☐ Lead with the central point ☐ Add explanation or rationale ☐ Add warmth or relational acknowledgment ☐ Pause and invite response	
	6. Rewrite one sentence <i>What could you say differently to make your message easier for this person to receive and understand?</i>		

*Adaptation does not mean abandoning your authentic voice.
It means communicating in ways that increase the likelihood that your meaning will be understood.*



2 CONTINUE YOUR LEARNING

Awareness is a powerful first step. Keep growing your intercultural communication skills with practical support and ongoing learning.

INTERCULTURAL GROWTH COACHING

Work one-on-one with an experienced coach to build confident, culturally intelligent communication skills you can apply in real life.

- ✦ Personalized guidance
- ✦ Actionable strategies
- ✦ Support for real-world situations

LEARNING LABS

Join interactive group sessions to deepen your understanding, practice new skills, and learn alongside others.

- ✦ Live, engaging sessions
- ✦ Practical tools and frameworks
- ✦ Connect and learn in community

Both coaching and learning labs are designed to help you grow with clarity, confidence, and connection—at your own pace and in the way that fits you best.



Ready to keep growing? Explore Intercultural Growth Coaching and Learning Labs
at interculturalleadershiplab.org.



— T H E —
INTERCULTURAL
— L E A D E R S H I P L A B —