Narrator: Have you ever noticed that in America we tend to be a fairly open culture regarding what we are willing to share with others? Of course this notion of openness and willingness to self-disclose depends on both personality structure and culture. But Americans more so than most other cultures tend to be willing to share intimate details of their lives with near total strangers.

Most of us can probably think of a time when someone, either a friend or stranger, shared information with us that seemed very intimate or sensitive in nature. We might have even thought to ourselves “too much information” as this person continued to talk to us. Thus it is important for us to remain cognizant of the fact that communication styles tend to differ across cultures in that some cultures are very direct and explicit while others are indirect and vague.

Edward Hall referred too many of these differences as characterizing high context and low context cultures. In high context cultures, we tend to say more with fewer words because there is a deeper sense of connectedness between members of the culture and expectations about behavior, speech, and general communication are well understood.

If you’ve ever been part of a club, society, or close-knit organization, like a sorority or fraternity, weekly book club or so on, you’ve likely experienced high context culture. There are rules about the way we interact; things we say and how we behave, and there are often running jokes or common understandings that are easy for in-group members to understand, but that would take considerable explanation for out-group members.

In contrast, a low context culture is one in which members have less connectedness with one another and thus must explain things in much greater detail for complete understanding. In low context cultures it may be necessary for us to explicitly state how to interact and behave in contrast to high context culture in which such an understanding is deeply engrained.

Narrator: When we think about language and communication, we often focus more on verbal and written language than other aspects of communication. When we have important or crucial conversations with others, we may spend a while finding the right words or series of words that we believe adequately expresses our thoughts or feelings.

Some would argue, however, that the physical behaviors, or non-verbal behaviors we use to express ourselves are just as important as, if not more important than what we are trying to convey verbally. Nonverbal behavior can refer to gestures, gaze, facial expressions, interpersonal space, body posture and vocal characteristics, among others.

Some researchers have claimed that nonverbal behavior can account for 70 to 80% or more of the manner in which we tend to communicate. If you’ve had an important conversation with someone by
email, text, or on the phone you realize how difficult it can be to communicate clearly because we’re not able to monitor the nonverbal behaviors of others. Frequently in such interactions comments and statements are completely misunderstood because we do not have a physical context to help us derive meaning.

Slide 3

Title: Communicating Within and Across Cultures

Slide Content:
[Image of two human figures shaking hands]

Narrator: Because language and communication are indigenous to our culture it is often difficult to those outside of our culture to understand what we are trying to communicate, both in terms of verbal and nonverbal communication.

When members share the same culture, they can focus on the content of the message because the boundaries of communication are clear. However, when we interact with members of a culture different from our own we may not be sure what the ground rules are, or the boundaries of communication are, thus leading to confusion about the message sent.

Let’s take an example. The process of communication is a complex process of encoding a message, sending signals through one or more channels, which are then received by the decoder who uses his or her culture to decode the message.

Imagine for a moment that you’re visiting a small island in the south pacific populated by the indigenous people called the Whatatoo. When you step off the boat your Whatatoo host immediately greets you softly with a “hello, we are pleased to have you here”, while turning his head, refusing to make eye contact and refusing to shake your hand.

In this intercultural exchange you may have been sent a series of signals, both verbal and nonverbal through a variety of channels, primarily visual, auditory and callisthenic, that you must now decode. What sense do you make of this interaction? If you’ve been living in American culture you may perceive a mixed message. On the one hand this man says he is very glad you are visiting, but on the other hand his nonverbal behavior may suggest just the opposite. So rather than greeting him like you normally would according to American culture you are forced to spend cognitive processing time trying to determine the meaning behind his verbal and nonverbal actions. This interaction may lead to either uncertainty or ambiguity, and even to a misunderstanding or conflict.

End of Presentation