
HRM304 · SESSION 3 OF 11

Communication & feedback

across cultures, across channels

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Today, in three parts

Where meaning sits

And how language itself shapes what can be said.

Feedback as a cross-cultural skill

Face, attribution, architecture — and a real practice round.

Language policy is HRM

Who gets heard, in which words, on which channel.

CHUNK 1 OF 3

**Where meaning
sits, and how
language shapes it**

PAIRED SHARE

配对分享

05:00

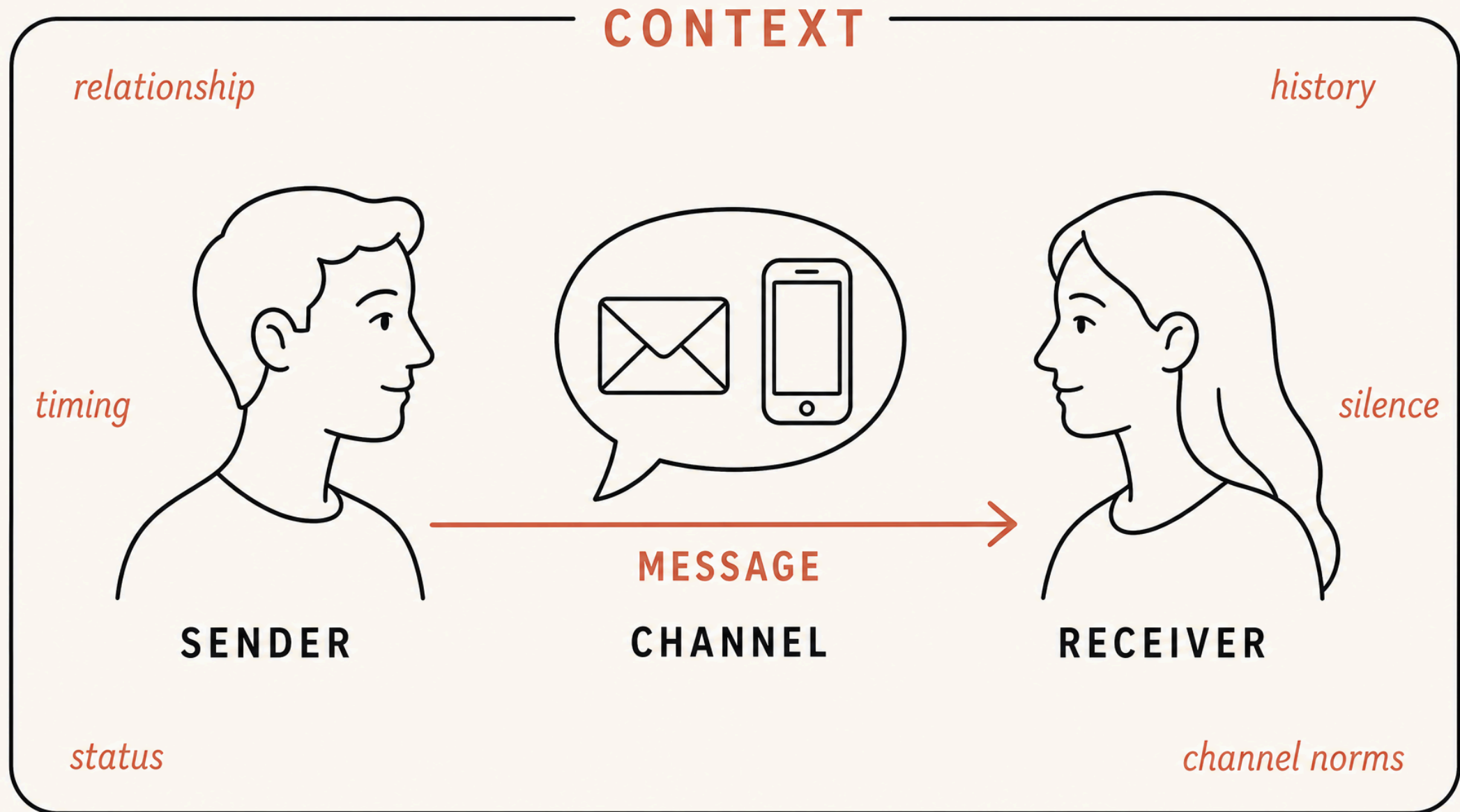
DISCUSS

A time you misunderstood someone — or they misunderstood you — in a team, group project, or at work. **What was not said?**

WHAT TO DO

- 1 Pair with the person next to you.
- 2 2 minutes each way.
- 3 I will call on 2–3 pairs to share.

The textbook model — and what it misses



Where does meaning sit?

Low-context • — in the words

Explicit content, definitions, written rules.

What's typed in the email body.

What's signed in the contract.

High-context • — around the words

Shared history, channel, timing, tone.

Who else is on the email. What the manager said last Tuesday.

Silence — a pause can carry agreement, doubt, dissent, or careful consideration.

Most workplace messages sit somewhere in between.

Does Hall's high-/low-context map hold up?

The classifications wobble

[Kittler et al. \(2011\)](#): country assignments to high- vs low-context contradict each other across studies, often resting on a single anecdote.

Meta-analysis: weak support

[Cardon \(2008\)](#) reviewed 224 articles. The most-cited Hall claims — especially around directness — were among the least empirically supported.

Take-away

Keep the **question** — "where does meaning sit?" — it travels well across teams, channels, and relationships. Drop the country league table. Same move as Hofstede.

Language itself carries hierarchy

Korean & Japanese

Every verb ending encodes the speaker's relationship to the listener. You cannot say "give me the report" without choosing a power register. Hierarchy is grammatical, not optional.

German, French, Mandarin (& many others)

Formal vs informal address forms: Sie / du, vous / tu, / . Choosing one is a public statement about the relationship; switching is meaningful.

English

No formal/informal "you"; first-name norms widespread; titles often dropped. Often experienced as neutral and modern. That neutrality is itself a position.

Most languages mark hierarchy. English is unusual in how little it marks.

"Professional" English is not neutral

Self-promotion norms

CV conventions — lead with achievements, quantify outcomes, active verbs — reflect Anglo norms. The same prose can read as boastful in another register.

Email & reply norms

Short paragraphs, "Hi X," quick "thanks." Different from Mandarin or Japanese registers that often lead with context, season, or relationship.

Address erasure

First-name norms strip cues that /
/ / Professor / Direktor carry. Status information that other languages encode gets silently dropped.

When a firm "goes English," the English brings a register, not only a vocabulary.

YOUR TASK

Three workplace messages. Read each one twice — once as a **senior trusted colleague**, once as a **brand-new junior**. In one line each: does that make a difference?

(a) WeChat from your line manager, Sunday evening

"see me tomorrow."

(b) Director two levels above you, in a project meeting

"Interesting approach."

(c) Email sign-off from HR after you flag a problem

"We'll discuss."

WHAT TO DO

- 1 Paper grid: message · senior colleague · new junior.
- 2 For each message and recipient: what do you understand by it? Why?
- 3 Pick a spokesperson for a brief share-back.

REPORT-BACK

反馈

30s per group

SHARE

What made the biggest difference?
Medium, tone, relationship?

Those were workplace messages in general.

*Next: what happens when the message is explicitly about **your**
performance.*

CHUNK 2 OF 3

Feedback as a cross-cultural skill

Feedback positions someone, as well as informing them

Face — how a person is being seen: status, credibility, respectability, relational standing.

Criticism is never only information. It is also a (public) statement about the receiver.

This is true everywhere, not only in China — though the registers differ.

Four ideas about feedback

Feedback lands when face is saved

Specific, face-saving feedback drives learning. Vague or face-threatening feedback gets defended against, not absorbed.

Directness is a style, not a moral virtue

Clear $\neq$ harsh. Tactful $\neq$ dishonest.
Two separate questions.

Developmental over evaluative

Developmental feedback predicts work-role performance and thriving at work in Chinese samples
(Hu et al., 2024).

Strength-based feedback empowers

Naming what someone does well lets them build on it, rather than converge on a single template. Especially valuable in loose/individualist cultures.

A key framework: SBI

Situation	When and where the behaviour happened. A specific moment, not "always" or "in general."
Behaviour	What you observed. Concrete terms. No speculation about motive.
Impact	What effect it had, on you, on the work, on others.

NOT SBI	<i>"Your reports are too long."</i>
SBI	<i>"In Tuesday's project review, the update section ran to 6 pages, and we ran out of time to discuss the open questions, which were the part the client cared about."</i>

One tool, not the only one. You'll use it when we practice.

When workers evaluate their managers — a China field experiment

2016–2017 · Chinese passenger-vehicle plant · 1,250 workers across 76 production teams ·

Cai & Wang (2022), Quarterly Journal of Economics

The intervention

Anonymous **monthly paper forms**. Workers scored their managers across five dimensions.

Organisation · fairness · openness to suggestions · adaptability · empathy.

Half of teams treated. Worker scores counted for 20% of the manager's monthly review.
Aggregated results posted publicly on the team board.

What changed

Workers in intervention teams were **6.2 pp less likely to quit** — a 50%+ relative reduction.

Team KPI attainment rose **2.3%** above a 97% control baseline.

Workers reported higher happiness and life satisfaction.

Managers were reported to encourage more, criticise less, and respond more on WeChat.

*The **architecture** — anonymity, cadence, structure, paper — did the work.*

Not "more Western" or "more Chinese" feedback.

GROUP TASK

小组任务

08:00 · in pairs

YOUR TASK

In pairs, draft one piece of **SBI feedback for me** about a specific behaviour you have observed in Sessions 1–3. Volunteer to read it aloud, or hand it in and I will read it.

SITUATION when and where

BEHAVIOUR what specifically

IMPACT what effect

WHAT TO DO

- 1 Discuss in pairs. Pick one specific behaviour. Use SBI.
- 2 Write on paper. Keep it brief, 3-5 sentences.
- 3 Volunteer to read your note, or pass it forward.

What just happened

The notes that may change my behaviour were specific — a moment, a behaviour, an impact.

The option of anonymity removed face risk (I hope). That's the **architecture** point.

The framework gave you a way in. The relationship and the room shaped what got said.

Next chunk: who decides the language all of this happens in?

CHUNK 3 OF 3

Language policy is HRM

Working language decisions are "political"

A working-language policy redistributes...

Opportunity

Who gets put on global projects, and who doesn't.

Status

Whose ideas are heard at full speed, without disfluency or translation loss.

Cognitive load

Who does two jobs at once: the work, and the translation.

Voice

Who can challenge a superior, and who decides it isn't worth the difficulty.

Tools can shift the load: translation, captions, LLMs. But who builds them, in which languages, with whose accents? What gets lost in translation?

The cost of working in a second language

Cognitive load

Even high-proficiency speakers process more slowly, miss nuance, and make more conservative choices when working in L2.

Status compression

Fluency becomes a proxy for competence. The most articulate voice in the meeting is heard as the most expert one.

Self-silencing

Non-native speakers ask fewer questions, push back less, and contribute less in unstructured meetings, even when their views matter most.

A measurable HR cost, borne unevenly (Tenzer et al., 2014).

Can be overcome with lots of practice — but functional bilingualism is hard.

Rakuten: costs and benefits of an English mandate

*March 2010 mandate · 5-year study, 650 interviews across 8 country sites · 3,000+ surveys
· 20,000+ pages archival · Neeley (2017)*

The mandate

CEO Mickey Mikitani: company-wide English — "Englishnization." All employees, all roles.

Initial expectation: learn it yourself.

Early progress so poor that "learn it yourself" became "learn it with company-paid time, classes, and tools."

What it cost, what it bought

Supported international acquisitions, faster post-merger integration, a broader global talent pool.

Also: documented stress, demotion, and self-silencing in the transition.

Three populations took shape in the workforce: Japanese staff forced into English (linguistic expats), Anglophones embedded in a Japanese workplace (cultural expats), and those facing both at once (linguistic-cultural expats).

A universal mandate is the most expensive way to do this. It can work. The cost is mostly paid by individual employees.

Huawei: a different model for internationalisation

2020 policy · cross-cultural training infrastructure · WeLink translation tooling

Functional, not universal

Only Chinese employees in roles that face global markets are required to use English with certification. Most Chinese employees never need it.

Plural, not English-only

In non-English-speaking regions, certification can be in the local language. A Huawei manager in Germany can certify in German.

Infrastructural, not aspirational

Multilingual tooling built in: **WeLink Translate supports 60 languages.** Mandatory cross-cultural courses for Chinese expatriates; onboarding courses for non-Chinese new hires.

By end-2020: 8,300+ Chinese employees and 2,200+ Chinese managers certified; operating in 170+ countries.

YOUR TASK

Design a one-page language-and-feedback policy for your assigned scenario.

SCENARIO 1**European retailer
in Chengdu**

180 staff. UK HR director wants quarterly feedback in Teams. Local managers say corrective feedback should be private and in Chinese.

SCENARIO 2**Chinese EV
supplier in
Hungary**

Shenzhen HQ wants written project reviews in English. Local supervisors say shop-floor coaching only works in Hungarian. Real-time chat translation available but lossy.

SCENARIO 3**Beijing tech firm
with global teams**

No formal English-only policy. Teams across Singapore, Dublin, San Jose, with some complaints about exclusion. In-house interpreters; mixed Lark, WeChat, and English email.

DECIDE AN APPROACH, PLUS A RISK & MITIGATION

YOUR TASK

Send **one person** to another group. They present your policy; the host group gives **one strength** and **one question or area to improve**.

AS YOU LISTEN, ASK

- ① Who gains voice under this policy? Who loses it?
- ② What happens to a brand-new junior employee?
- ③ Is the cognitive load shared, or does it fall on one group?
- ④ Are tools effectively used? Are there any risks?

Visitor: carry the feedback back to your group.

REPORT-BACK

反馈

~3 min

SHARE

Three groups present & raise the question

HOW WE'LL DO IT

- ① I pick one group per scenario
- ② Original group: 1 minute — your approach.
- ③ Visitor: 30s — the strength and question you brought back.
- ④ Original group: any initial response?

Three things to take into Session 4

Communication

A system, not just words. Content, channel, relationship, and the language itself all carry meaning.

Feedback

An architecture. The system around the comment — anonymity, cadence, framework, follow-up — matters more than any single comment.

Language policy

An HR decision. Choosing a language chooses a power structure. It also chooses who benefits most.

Threads return in Sessions 4 (leadership), 7 (performance management), 8 (institutions), 10 (AI).

Looking ahead

Practice

Cross-cultural feedback role-play in a future session. You'll use SBI in pairs, in two framings.

Reflection

Remember the reflection prompts — best written while it's fresh. Feel free to email me ONE draft to see if you are on the right track.

Presentations

Your groups and cases are now online. First milestone: a 1-paragraph problem statement, due by session 6 (first session next week).

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