Working well with Japanese business people

Learning about traps and hints for seamless collaboration

Part 2
Do the Japanese value more the process than the result?

- No, they don’t.
- Japanese people value the process as much as the result. Some European cultures may value more either of the two, while Japan usually cares for the process in order to grant for the result, in a way that everybody and anybody can repeat the operations under a common method for the same or better collective result.
Questions from Part 1

About sticking to the rules, which “side” can do it better ... the Japanese or the European one?

• It’s true that Japanese way of living and working bases on clear though tacit rules: *education and training* on the job both aim to a progressive skill-up on that.

• Depending on each European national culture rules are more or less definite and valued.

• Learning to comply with rules can be difficult to the Japanese as to anybody else, but they feel really uneasy where no rules are given, or if rules are very loose and uncertain.
Why this focus on Japan
What are the key challenges for Europeans and Japanese business people?

**European managers** dealing with Japanese counterparts report that their biggest challenges include:

- meetings in Japan are often inefficient and unproductive,
- it’s very difficult to discuss, especially prickly topics,
- answers to specific questions are unclear and non-committal,
- wonder why sleeping at meetings: is it due to myself? …to the topic?
- it’s so difficult to get whether they agree or disagree,
- much planning against no strategies,
- no decisions are being made or they take too long time,
- get frustrated for obsessive checks (lack of trust),
- no one reacts… it’s really hard to know how to proceed,
- …

**Japanese managers** dealing with European or US counterparts especially report the following challenges:

- it’s hard to join meetings unprepared,
- it’s hard to contribute with no clear process and planning,
- get disoriented about unnecessary details,
- everyone wants to speak, even though not requested,
- teamwork is not given for granted,
- it’s hard to cope with sudden requests against no clear objectives,
- much discussion, yet too little context,
- get frustrated about reworks. What’s wrong with preliminary checks?
- so many… too many surprises,
- deadlines are hardly met
- …
Follow up question

Choose up to 3 options relevant for you

- meetings in Japan are often inefficient and unproductive,
- it’s very difficult to discuss hard topics,
- answers to specific questions are unclear and non-committal,
- it’s difficult to know whether they agree or disagree,
- much planning against no strategies,
- no decisions are being made,
- get frustrated for obsessive checks (lack of trust),
- no one reacts... it’s hard to know how to proceed
- sleeping at meetings... Is it due to myself? ...to the topic?
- does “yes” also mean “no”?,
- others...

Go to www.menti.com and use the code 67 38 72

Here are your answers:
How to compare cultures
The research by E. Meyer as a reference

Many researchers and professionals based their work on Mr. Geert Hofstede’s studies since the 1970s. In this short view of cultural differences as related to business activities, no charts of his will be shown though taken into account as concepts in my studies.

Please find in later pages some charts from the studies of Ms. Erin Meyer – professor with the INSEAD Int’l Business School – who has been delving for many years into thinking and behavior of people across cultures.

Examples in this material are taken from publications and from experience as well. Where taken from other authors, the source of information and images is given at the bottom of the related page.
How can I give a negative but not too rude feedback?

8 cultural dimensions

- Communication
- Evaluation (feedback)
- Leading (power distance)
- Decision making
- Trusting
- Disagreeing
- Scheduling
- Persuading

E. Meyer points out 8 aspects of difference and plots the touch points and distances.

- Direct negative feedback
  - Negative feedback to a colleague is provided frankly, bluntly, honestly. Negative messages stand alone, not softened by positive ones. Absolute descriptors are often used (totally inappropriate, completely unprofessional) when criticizing.
- Indirect negative feedback
  - Negative feedback to a colleague is provided softly, subtly, diplomatically. Positive messages are used to wrap negative ones. Qualifying descriptors are often used (sort of inappropriate, slightly unprofessional) when criticizing.

Negative feedback from/to Japanese people

Generally speaking, negative views about the work content are accepted, while on receiving and giving negative feedback relating to people the common sensitiveness is higher.

- Collective thinking &
- Focus on the achievements of the group

is preferred in Japan instead of stressing the good and bad of individuals.

Feedback for running the PDCA wheel

Even though cautious about feedback, the Japanese can accept a negative remark and intend it as part of the continuous improvement process.

TIP

Showing your interest in collective improvement and asking for collaboration in further achievements is a good ground for understanding and growth.
Japanese are natural and educated double checkers

Implicit knowledge
High-context communication
Uncertainty avoidance orientation

Social awareness

Lead to an educated skill of

DOUBLE CHECKING

- Plans and schedules
- Figures (budgeting, financials)
- Appointments
- Working conditions
- Deadlines
- Procedures and processes
- Agreements
- ...

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If high-context communicators show opposite feedback patterns

**High-context communicators / indirect feedback type**  
(e.g. Japan)

should avoid trying to be really straight when conveying a negative feedback to direct communicators (e.g. North Europeans, Russians) before learning the right extent. Otherwise the effect might become weird or unkind, up to spoil the relationship.

- Negative feedbacks have better be delivered in one to one conversations.
- Adopting softeners may help the comprehension while saving the relation (face).

**High-context communicators / direct feedback type**  
(e.g. Southern Europe)

have better take care of their words be not too harsh, too: even though they are said to be good “air readers”, they read in their context and may be not so effective in other contexts.
Deduction is preferred by the implicit communication of Japan

How the implicit expression fosters our deductive skills

... In negative feedback, especially

Explicit

- Why didn’t you plan?
- You are a bad analyst
- Be patient!
- You failed the targets; you’re fired.

Implicit

- Planning is so important.
- We should improve our expertise with analysis.
- Wars can be won by patience, you know.
- At this company those missing all the targets get fired. (Unfortunately your targets are unachieved).
Time consuming decision making? Here is why

8 cultural dimensions

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MIND MAPS

Does hierarchy mean top down?

8 cultural dimensions

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About meetings

Meeting sessions in Japan may cause bafflement in Westerners because:

• basically, all that could be disruptive of the harmony of the meeting flow has already been dealt with, in a preliminary creation of informal consensus (nemawashi), starting days or weeks before the meeting date.
• meetings in Japan are often meant to announce and ratify the agreements or policies worked out before.
• Europeans consider meetings the place to discuss and plan.

TIP

there is a time during the meeting sessions when the Japanese members expect either to speak or be requested to speak: do not miss asking for an opinion/ view/ position even if they’re silent!
About disagreeing and changing one’s mind

If you want to express your disagreement when working with Japanese or at a Japanese company, the following suggestions may help:

1. **Take your time** to consider the others’ views and your response.
2. **Take a logical approach.** If you don’t agree with their argument, give the logical reasons behind your argument.
3. **Keep emotions separate.** Showing emotions within a Japanese company is seen as negative and can affect how your perspective / argument is viewed.
4. **Don’t be afraid to change your mind.** If the other party offers a logical perspective superior to your own, why keeping a stubborn fix position and not accepting a better way to go?

※Source: www.daijob.com
FUNDAMENTALS

Give face (顔を立てる):
To help and build up a person in front of others. E.g.: the VIP treatment that Japanese reserve to honored guests and high-ranking people.

Lose face (メンツを失う)
To disagree with someone in public, thus causing them embarrassment.

Save face (顔を保つ):
Worrying about someone’s feelings helps keeping good relationships and harmony in a team, so as to grant for new opportunities and mutual support.

@ a meeting with Japanese executives

the newly appointed Mr Lancetti was acting in the way that he had been encouraged at his previous Italian employer - Mrs. Rossi, directly challenging the senior executive when he said something that she disagreed with.

All the participants were shocked, because he had violated an unwritten rule of Japanese culture, which says: “never disagree with a senior person in a group setting such as a meeting.”

The executive was extremely displeased at being challenged in this way by a junior employee, and reacted angrily, which in turn was upsetting to the Italian employee.
Scale item: trust

8 cultural dimensions

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NOMIKAI

Off-site drinking parties

According to a survey by JMA (Japan Management Association), 94.2% of freshmen believe that drinking parties are an effective means for new employees to build relationships with their bosses.

If you ask to elderly employees, the same answer is given by the 77.7% of the respondents.

A difference is measured also in the money expenditure per each drinking “session”, in a downsizing trend for the latest 10 years.

Other means of creating and maintaining good relationships among workers are the following, rating below the ”nomikai”:

- Corporate tours (73.5%)
- Having lunch together (65.2%)
- Corporate events /sports (57.4%)

*KANPAI, cheers, cin cin, ura*

※Source: JMA Management Review/2020
**TIPS**

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**Yes & No**

- **Yes (OK)** means:
  - It’s correct.
  - I got it (I understand what you’re saying)

Can be either “I understand and agree”, or “I understand and disagree”
It does NOT mean “I agree”.

- **No**

  Japanese people prefer not to say “NO” directly, though they say if needed.
  Other expressions are preferred and often used instead:
  - It’s difficult.
  - I will think it over.
  - Needs some more discussion.
  - I’m not sure whether we should… etc.

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*Image source: soranews24.com*
In general, when speaking

Speak slowly and punctuate the words
For a Japanese, foreign speakers may be difficult to understand, in reason of the speed especially.

Isolate the questions
- Avoid placing more than one question in a sentence.
- Give the Japanese a chance to answer one question at a time.

Speak one at a time
- Do not talk overlapping with others
- Wait a few seconds between one statement and the following.

Write down the numbers while you read them
- The number writing & reading system is different from the western one.
Reading through the behaviours of your meeting partners

Here are some observation results from negotiation experiments (US)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bargaining Behaviours (per 30 minutes)</th>
<th>JPN</th>
<th>KOR</th>
<th>RUSS</th>
<th>FRN</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>BRZ</th>
<th>GRM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘No’s – Number of times the word ‘No’ was used</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Periods – Gaps of 10 seconds or longer</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational Overlaps - Number of interruptions</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial Gazing - Number of minutes negotiators spent looking at opponent’s face</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touching – Not including handshaking)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The importance of emptiness (and silence)

Emptiness in is what gives prominence to the full.
Harmony is given by the balanced combination of the two.

The importance of emptiness with Japanese culture is in

- pictorial arts, where shape and color are defined by the empty space around
- music, obtained by pauses /silence
- conversation, by breaks (the time for listening and thinking)

Western preferences:

- ceaseless speaking
- all painted canvas
- houses full of furnishings
- walls full of paintings
Thank you

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