Working well with Japanese business people

Learning about traps and hints for seamless collaboration

Part 1
Macro-trends in the relationship between Europe and Japan
How we know each other

Today Europe and Asia – Japan especially – know each other far better than 20 or even 10 years ago. Much has changed in both business and non-business relationships.

In latest years the interest of Europeans for Asia and Japan especially has been increasing. Mutual interest is about the sense for art and beauty, food culture, fashion, tourism, etc., but not least for the industrial traditions and strengths, management thinking and practice.

Much has still to be mutually unveiled and cannot be given for granted. Working together after M&A deals, in trade partnerships, research projects, cross border committees, etc. needs awareness about culture similarities, and differences especially.

Politics (EPA agreement),
Trade (Globalization, Expo), Sports, Media, M&A and Global industrial strategies,…

force and encourage us – now and in the future – to set out of our boundaries.
Apart from the due COVID limitations of this year, chances to cooperate and get in touch are and will be again a huge number in all fields.
The more we can develop mutual sensitivity and understanding, the more pleasant and successful our projects can be.
What is your native national culture?

Go to www.menti.com and use the code 18 40 09
How to compare cultures

The research by G. Hofstede and later studies

- One of the first persons who cared about intercultural differences and management in modern times ('60s), Mr. Geert Hofstede published the results of his study work comparing at first 4 «dimensions», later become 5 and more recently 6.

- Many researchers and professionals based their work on his considerations and data in the following years, but their still a valid reference to date.

- On of those we find of high accountability is the set 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 our experience as well.
Individualism v. Collectivism – the IDV Score

**Individualism** Approaching the job/business from an Individual perspective, i.e. “my” view or point first

**Collectivism** Approach to the job and business in a Social perspective, i.e. aiming to keep harmony first

Individualism v. collectivism

Example of communication for motivational purpose

What could be the difference of **explanation** when taking into account key **cultural differences**?

<manager to E: operator>
if you do a good job, everybody will see **how skilled you are** and your work can be a **model** for the whole department.
If you solve issues at your stage, the result will be superior **thanks to you**.
I know **you can** achieve this result and be **recognized** as the **best in class**.

<manager to J: operator>
The output accuracy should be checked out at each stage.
By so doing, **we will** prevent the colleague downstream from being **bothered** by unresolved issues coming from a bad job done upstream.
The final performance of each **team** will get higher and **we will achieve the target all together**.
Uncertainty avoidance - the UAI Score

※Source: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/
Where people are more comfortable sharing their own data

Key points

This social observation result can be applied to business, too.

Japan is closer in ranking to Germany than to other Asian cultures, like China or India.

Privacy is highly valued in Japan.
New idea/ project proposal

Assume that you had a great idea and want to submit a proposal for a new project to your boss.

You (from Europe) : I have a great idea for …, which is …

Boss (from Japan) : I see.

You: What do you think about?

Boss: I feel that it will be a bit difficult.

What does it mean?

What you get is that it will be a hard challenge. Of course it requires to wait or to delve into more study, but it’s not a refusal. You take it as a first step and think you will go again to his place.

Actually, your boss feels very uncomfortable. Why? At this stage it’s not a matter of persuasion on contents. You are asking suddenly to one person, forcing him. It’s rather because of a lack of objective, sharing and procedure, which all together grant for meaningful engagement and risk minimization.

Then, it becomes a matter of content: quality, cost, time,…
**MIND MAPS**

**Different way of looking at things/phenomena**

New situation/object’s perception:
... seems nice.

- What is that meant for?
- Seems nice/tasty...
- How could I use that?
- What kind of issues could it solve?
- I’ll tell about it to...

New thing

What are the positive aspects?

What might be NG with this?

New situation/object’s perception:
... what’s it?

Is there any risk if I use?
Could it cause any damage/loss?
Whom should I involve/ask to?
Can it be fine also for...?
How can I check?

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What are the key challenges for Europeans working in Japan or with Japanese people?

Managers of European companies 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,
- get frustrated for obsessive checks (lack of trust),
- no one reacts… it’s really hard to know how to proceed,
- …
What are the key challenges for Japanese managers working with Westerners?

Managers of Japanese companies 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 but no clear objective,
- 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
- others.
MIND MAPS

About the said and the unsaid

8 cultural dimensions

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

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

**KY . Unable to “read the air”**

The following is the comment that one Japanese HR executive who had lived in Europe gave at one conference as a contribution to discussion about intercultural communication.

“In Japan we implicitly learn, as we are growing up to communicate between the lines and to listen between the lines when others are speaking. Communicating messages without saying them directly is a deep part of our culture...

... To give an example, every year in Japan there is a vote for the most popular new word. A few years ago, the word of the year was KY.”

*Source: E. Meyer, <The Culture Map>, Public Affairs Publisher, NY (2014), p.33*
High context and Low context communication traps

Body communication

Position, age, rank, situation, genre, past occurrences and objectives should all guide the choice of our way to approach our business counterparts, including salutation, welcome and farewell manners.

Too informal!

Too formal!
High context and Low context communication in practice

- Formality and thought is given to seating positions for a meeting.
- Generally, the highest ranked person is seated farthest from the door.
- Entering and elevator o is also given formality based on the hierarchy.
- Generally, the highest ranked person enters first and stands in the most inner part of the cabin, farthest from the door.

Etiquette is a piece of non verbal communication

Business manners include the compliance of rules for taking one’s seat at meetings, in the elevator, in vehicles, at restaurants, etc.

If you enter a room you can rapidly get who is the highest in rank just by observing his/her seat position.
Sometimes messages up-front are not “the message”

Mr. S (Spanish): … some of us are going to have to be here on Sunday to host the client visit
Mr. C (Chinese): I see
Mr. S: Can you join us on Sunday?
Mr. C: Yes, I think so.
Mr. S: That would be of great help.
Mr. C: Yes, Sunday is an important day.
… It’s my daughter’s birthday.
Mr. S: How nice. I hope you all enjoy.
Mr. S: Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.

Do you think Mr. C is going to join or not? The reply is no, he is not.

Because:
Yes and no are usually referred to the speaker (Yes= I understand) and not to the sentence. The Western listener is usually unaware, though.

Asian polite indirect expressions … may fail to convey the message

TIP

Do not hesitate to ask for confirmation.

• It’s not your fault as a low context listener if your understanding is not 100% correct.
• However, be sure that high context speakers are not omitting information on purpose.
Paraphrasing

**EU case**

- Can you repeat, please?
- Can you say again, please?
- Can you repeat more slowly, please?

**EU/Japanese case**

- So, If I understand correctly, you just said... (repeat what you think you’ve heard)
- Are you saying that ... (repeat what you think you’ve heard)
- Are you agreeing that ... (repeat what you think you’ve heard)
**Communication channel preferences**

When dealing with individuals from other national cultures, what is the most effective channel for business communication needs?

**Face-to-face and e-mails**

**Example:**
For crucial meetings with Japanese counterparts, flying to Japan can be a key success factor.

For other needs, email is preferred: collectivism and the orientation to uncertainty avoidance usually make it preferred to phone calls.
Direct v. Indirect communication

Indirect communication does not mean avoiding risky talks or situations. Nor it means skipping problems.

This may occasionally be an aim, but it’s not the same thing.

Talking indirect helps showing sensitiveness, but it can result confusing and unclear.

Will you marry me?

You know...since I was a child my dream is to live on a private island far away: just a drink, a book and a palm tree. Isn’t it the best of dreams?
Communication style across cultures

Down-graders for “safe landing”

In 1982, a British Airways plane flew through a cloud of volcanic ash over Indonesia and lost power to its engines. The British pilot, Eric Moody, calmly informed the passengers: “Good evening again ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain here. We have a small problem in that all four engines have failed. We’re doing our utmost to get them going and I trust you’re not in too much distress and would the chief steward please come to the flight deck.”

Fortunately, the plane was able to glide far enough and make a safe landing at a nearby airport.

Beyond translation

The use of linguistic down-graders (softeners) or upgraders usually reflects the culture and may help to understand the real importance or urgency of a matter if we can put them in relation to the culture of the speaker.

※Source: https://www.erinmeyer.com/2015/09/giving-negative-feedback-across-cultures/
TIME perception, value and usage

Four key dimensions:

a) Time keeping: stick to your promise

b) Long term / short term vision and scheduling

c) Take your time: what is needed, when it is needed in the quantity needed

d) Time perception: look back and move forward
Time keeping

- Meetings or events
- Business trips
- Promise to the time
  (e.g.: emails, payments, office hours)
- On-time delivery

\[ \rightarrow \text{Punctuality} = \text{Reliability} \]
Long v. Short time orientation - LTO Score

Source: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/
MIND MAPS

About interruptions and more

8 cultural dimensions

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Spinach ... HŌRENSŌ (報連相)

- **HŌ** (Hōkoku): Inform of the progress of your assignment. Before being asked: "How does that matter proceed?" provide with a report on your own initiative. Do that as frequently as possible.

- **REN** (RENraku): Transfer the necessary information to all the members of your team, and even if information is related to minor details. (Follow the 5W1H rule).

- **SŌ** (SŌdan): Ask for advice to those who succeed better. Always consult in case of doubt. Getting caught up in doubts like "they will make fun of me if they hear this" is a waste of time. Problem would rather occur if you do not ask and any mistakes or troubles arise.

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**Kaizen, skill-up and risk avoidance**

Japanese way of working entails the concept of improvement (kaizen) whatever the job relates to and whoever the persons involved are.

On reporting and asking for advice, the feedback activates new know-how and improvement opportunity, in consideration of the past experience and the knowledge available with the group.
Time perception

Circular time perception

振り返り・前向き
Look back and move forward

Straight line time perception

前向き
Move forward
Kaizen is always translated as IMPROVEMENT or CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:

Characters are saying
- Anew, again
- Good

Continuity is in the never-ending “anew” of the first character

The essence of kaizen permeates the education as a fact before being a definition.

The social education to such value has been also an “imprinting” that has been shaping the management and organization of industrial environments in the last 70 years.

One for all the Toyota management style known as Toyota Way, or Toyotism: the philosophy based on improvement, innovation and reformation, whose way of thinking has been of reference for millions of organization in the world to date (see also: lean thinking).
Thank you

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