

Experience of Global Working--A Japanese cultural example

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ABSTRACT

Technological development has made today's global business environment possible while each culture and people's minds haven't changed as rapidly as technology. Normal business approaches or practices in one culture might get perceived as totally odd behaviors on the other side of the world. There are many misunderstandings in the day to day business due to cultural differences. Taking a country's culture into account is a key element for operating a global business efficiently and successfully.

INTRODUCTION

Each country has its stereotype. For example, while English people are taking noon to 1pm sit-down lunch Americans like to continue with business during lunch, or the French take 2 hours for lunch with a glass of wine. Germans submit a protocol of strike in advance and follow the order. Japanese complain but continue working since they are workaholics. Some of this contains at least a small element of truth because each cultural value and characteristic are embedded in the stereotype. Now we are working in a multicultural environment, stereotypical differences are happening in day to day business settings. Learning other cultures and addressing each challenge due to cultural difference are the keys to improving effectiveness at work.

MY BACKGROUND

I was born, raised, educated and worked in Japan. To make my life more exciting, I moved to the US, re-entered university, finished graduate school, and worked with Americans. After 12 years, I moved to Switzerland and currently I am working for Novartis Pharma AG. Taking advantage of my background, I was assigned to a "Japan-Interaction" project - to assist Novartis Japan in moving forward to the global way of conducting business. Having a chance to see Japan from outside, there are obvious differences in work styles in Japan and the rest of the world. I have realized all differences are due to cultural values.

JAPANESE CULTURAL VALUES

Harmony is the most important value for Japanese, and this idea is embedded in all Japanese characteristics. The most peculiar characteristics are group-oriented and the fear of being ashamed.

GROUP-ORIENTED

In contrast to American individualism, Japanese are group-oriented. Japanese do not like to be alone or to do things differently from others. They stick together: eating, working, or traveling in a group [1]. Being part of a group and sharing responsibility is the right thing to do for them. For example, with the current drink-driving law in Japan, if the driver is found to be under the influence of drink, the passengers in the car are also guilty.

FEAR OF BEING ASHAMED

Not only for Japanese but also for all human beings is the fear of being ashamed, but the Japanese fear is stronger than any other cultures. Haji (shame) is said to form the core of Japanese culture. Japanese culture is described as "shame culture" in contrast to Western "guilt culture". The feeling of guilt in the west is an internal feeling; the feeling of shame in Japan is an external feeling. This is not to suggest that the west is shameless, but rather that historically, Japan, has placed a great deal upon the feeling of shame. One can look to the samurai period for an example of shame. For a samurai, being put to shame in front of the public was as good as death[2]. One of reasons of current high suicide rate in Japan is still due to losing face and shame.

WORKING WITH JAPAN

The following are the real three real world examples that show Japanese traits.

GROUP DECISION

Situation:

- Japanese associates discuss among themselves in order to make decisions during meetings.

Reason:

- Sharing respect, Sharing responsibility, Interpersonal harmony.

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- Making sure everyone understands
- English and its contents of meaning

Challenge:

- Longer TC/meeting.
- Cannot make decisions by oneself

Approaches:

- Use clear language.
- If decisions need to be made in the meeting → Let them know in advance to prepare
If questions are raised in a meeting → ask them to discuss it and send the answer afterwards by e-mail.

CANNOT SAY "I DON'T KNOW", OR ASK FOR HELP

Situation:

- Ask Japanese associates to perform a task they are not familiar with, the associates will not say "I don't know how to do this" nor ask for help, they will try to find the solution by themselves.

Reason:

- Saying "I don't know" = lacking of ability → shame
- Negative answer may disappoint the person = destroy the harmony

Challenge:

- Takes time

Approach:

- When you request Japanese associates to undertake a task, tell them to let you know if they have a problem or give them written materials first.
- Making sure if they understand explanations, use clear languages

PRIORITIZE DEMAND

Situation:

- Asking a task without setting a due date, Japanese associates tend to do it immediately, even working overtime.

Reason:

- Respond to the person immediately = Keep harmony flowing.
- Finish the task early → Feel good = Maintain inner harmony.

Challenge:

- Increased overtime and stress.

Approach:

- When you ask a task, set a due date → but still they might give you the result earlier than the due date.

WORKING WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD

In the same way, there are many challenges for Japanese due to cultural differences.

The followings are the differences that Japanese people realize when they work with people outside of Japan.

MEETING

Situation:

- People don't have much preparation for meetings. Sometimes agenda is sent out in the same day of the meeting.

Reason:

- Row: Meetings for discussion and coming to agreement → More spontaneous discussions.
- Japan: Meetings for a confirmation of the agreement → Scenarios are all set, not much to discuss.
Discussions are done in pre-meetings before the meeting.

Challenge:

- Spontaneous discussions in English is very tough to do for Japanese people.
- Any decisions will not be made in the meeting.

Approach:

- Have the chair of a meeting to set goal statements along with the agenda to make it clear what to achieve in the meeting.
- Have own opinions and prepare for any possible spontaneous discussions.

TASK ASSIGNMENT

Situation:

- Functions are divided by tasks and each function does only specific tasks, and people don't have much knowledge about outside of their responsibility.

Reason:

- Row: Clear boundary of each role (Vertical division) → More specialists.
- Japan: Broad knowledge of each task (Horizontal division) → Can see a big picture of a process. Minimize

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delay due to absence of a person in charge.

Challenge:

- Takes time to Find out the right person to ask questions.
- When a person in charge is absent→People have to wait until that person comes back.

Approach:

- Know who does what and who to lead in the beginning of the process/project.
- Ask for the back up person (if any) before the person is away from work.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Situation:

- Compared to the office in Japan, generally, less formal work environment, people are casually dressed. People do social talks more often in the office.

Reason:

- Row: Casual→ Comfortably working. Enjoying working space.
- Japan: Formal→ Showing respect to the working place and people. Social talk in the office is not respectable. The office is very quiet.

Challenge:

- Too relax
- Noisy

Approach:

- Listen to music with ear plugs to avoid noise
- Don't need to follow ROW way...being serious is nothing bad!

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Differences always have both benefits and challenges.

WORKING WITH JAPAN:

	Benefits	Challenges
1. Group Decision	• More thoughtful decisions • The plan is unlikely to change • Good in team work	• Longer meeting/TC • Cannot make decisions by oneself
2. Cannot say "I don't know"	• Gain abilities of self learning	• Takes time to figure out
3. Prioritize Demand	• Loyalty • Responsibility	• Increases stress and overtime

WORKING WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD:

	Benefits	Challenges
1. Meeting	• Less politics • The decision is representing each individual's opinion.	• Difficulty in spontaneous discussions. • Any decisions will not be made in the meeting.
2. Task assignment	• Create specialists. • No redundant work.	• Taking time to find the right person to ask questions. • Need to wait a process when a person in charge is absent.

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3. Working environment	• Positive environment • Less tense	• Noisy • Too relax
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CONCLUSION

Cultural differences cannot be judged, neither good nor bad. They are just different. If there are cultural differences, efforts should be made to unify. To achieve this, having mutual respect and patience are important. Also, we need to take account of how hard it is to work in a second language. If we can find the right approach for minimizing challenging issues, we can maximize the benefits of working in a multicultural environment , which will lead not only to individual growth but also will lead to global organizational success.

REFERENCES

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[2] Namiko Abe, Guide to Japanese Language, About.com.

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