

Business culture in japan



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Class Discussion Compare the business culture of the UK with that of Japan. How would business negotiations between delegations from the two countries be affected, and how would you advise a UK team to prepare for the negotiations? “ Nihonjinron”, literally “ the Theory of the Japanese”, has been of fascination for both Japanese and foreigners alike, and the industrialised world seems acutely aware that the Japanese are very different to Westerners, in ideology, religion, and business strategies. There are countless books, articles and websites which attempt to teach people how to communicate with the Japanese in business negotiations.

However, these sources can cause further alienation, where the numerous rituals we have to memorise make the Japanese seem obsessively picky or just plain difficult. This may be because we naturally interpret these behaviours through the lens of a Western Christian culture and remain relatively unaware of the religion and history of the Japanese. This essay will examine how UK delegations can better understand and negotiate with the Japanese by learning about both the Japanese and their own national culture and history through literature, folktales and religion.

Through this preparation a UK team can discover commonalities between the two cultures, which can help to strengthen the relationship, as well as identify differences that need to be discussed. The article will utilise the information given, along with stories about cultural origins, to give advice to a UK team preparing for negotiations. It will be strongly suggested that they learn about both themselves and the Japanese, and from this understanding to draw out similarities as well as identify differences, as this will help dissolve the concept of the “ foreigner”.

Nihonjinron From studies by various anthropologists, it is clear that there are many differences between the UK and Japan in the way they conduct business. Moreover, there is a clear link between business and everyday behaviours, strongly suggesting that business culture is closely tied to national culture. Following the concept of the interdependence between business and national culture, Hofstede (1993) made a study of 64 nations, from which he created a set of cultural dimensions arranged along bipolar scales, which he argues broadly encapsulates national preferences.

They include: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Long-term versus Short-term orientation. It is also necessary to fully understand the complex relationship between national culture and religion, which can often be found in culture-specific literature. The Holy Bible, for example, aids in explaining how the contemporary British think. Japanese culture, according to Buruma (1995), is affected by a number of religions, from the indigenous Shinto to the imported Buddhism and Confucianism.

Buruma and Cleary (1991) discuss a number of tales derived from these religions, which revolve around the search for the “ Way”, to help explain Japanese culture, from the adherence to a rigid hierarchical system to avoiding direct criticism. Bow, Shake Hands When the East and West collide in the boardroom, the immediate observable differences between delegations can be a little surprising to say the least. Morrison et al. (1994) list but a few of the extensive number of British and Japanese behaviours (Fig. 1). * Swirls from Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (1994)) The Action titles in bold, including gestures, emotion and dress, indicate similarities

between the two cultures' manners, which suggest that both the British and the Japanese are quite formal and restrained in their business conduct. This concern for formality suggests that both peoples can respect the other's rituals, as they will already have established some common ground on which to work. However, there are abundant differences, the reasons behind which need to be addressed. Fig. presents a table of Hofstede (1993), Trompenaars (1993), and Hofstede and Bond's (1988) scales, which compare the UK and Japanese in terms of general cultural preferences, helping to explain the reasons behind the actions described in Fig. 1. (*Hofstede (1993), **Hofstede and Bond (1988), ***Trompenaars (1993)) Power Distance: Japan scored highly in the Power Distance dimension, which correlates with the strict hierarchical system at the negotiating table, from bowing to seating arrangements. On the other hand, the UK scored lower and, although important members are recognised, it is not as important.

Individualism/Collectivism: The British are highly individualistic in their thinking, displayed by their using inner judgement to make decisions. In addition, a sequential form of thinking, such as discussing issues by their individual parts, points to an individualist culture. The Japanese scored lower on this scale, identifying their collectivist tendencies and explaining their consensus-based decision-making and tackling problems holistically. The strict rituals they follow may be linked, as a group mentality enforces conformity to social rules.

Their diffuse manner of speech is also indicative of a collectivist demeanour, as there is more risk in causing insult when addressing a group, rather than an individual. If one person is offended, the whole group, in turn, is offended.

With regards to actions, if one does not exchange business cards with individuals in the proper manner, this can be taken as an insult to the whole group. Masculinity/Femininity: The Japanese appear to be very masculine in cultural preference, which may be for example expressed in the hierarchical system observed in the seating arrangements.

This implies a paternalistic culture, where the leader is a father figure, both commanding and protecting his subordinates (Cleary, 1991). The UK is still fairly less masculine, but less so as indicated by the more relaxed approach to a hierarchical system. Uncertainty Avoidance: The Japanese appear to be very risk adverse, perhaps due to their collectivist nature and subsequent stringent rules, as more people need to be taken into account when taking risks. The British have lower uncertainty avoidance, implying that they are more likely to take risks.

This may be linked to their individualist manner, as they perhaps do not have to consider the resulting effects on other people to the same extent as the Japanese. An individualistic culture also has fewer social rules to follow and thus fewer to break. Orientation: The sequential thoughts of the British, of tackling issues in smaller parts and resolving negotiations as quickly as possible, may be a symptom of their short-term orientation, as "saving time" is given precedence. The Japanese seem to be far more long-term orientated.

This is manifested in their holistic, group-orientated thinking, which requires more time and patience for the group, rather than an individual, to agree on the whole issue (Buruma, 1995). Universalist/Particularist: The British are

universalist in nature, as they follow established regulations and live by concepts of absolutes, such as good and bad, which apply to all situations. This both explains the formal behaviour of the British and highlights the superficiality of the similarity with Japanese formalities, which are based on stringent social rules.

Cleary (1991) compares the universalist behaviour to the Japanese, who place more of an emphasis on the group and building mutually beneficial relationships, meaning that rules are likely to be more particularist to accommodate constantly changing social situations. Specific/Diffuse: The British are reportedly direct in speech, first discussing the topic at hand and working outwards to less relevant points. As above, the British are also individualistic, meaning that there is less risk in direct criticism.

The Japanese have a diffuse approach to speaking, discussing the history and background surrounding the problem and gradually working towards the main issue. The pre-eminence of the group over the individual also means that Japanese have greater consideration of others, meaning that they avoid direct criticism. Cleary (1991) relates this to the Japanese concept of inside ("ura") and an outside ("omote") (Cleary, 1991 pg125), which is encountered in every aspect of Japanese life.

Saving face, from not being directly criticised for example, is extremely important, as the outside antagonising remark can damage the inside of the group. Confucian Dynamism: Japan scored very highly indeed, pointing to a historical reason behind some of this people's actions when conducting business. Hofstede and Bond (1988) discuss Confucian teachings, which

enforce the honouring of unequal relationships and emphasise the needs of the group. This, at least in part, explains the strict hierarchy and collectivist behaviours of the Japanese in the boardroom.

It is interesting to note that, although scoring low, the UK had some elements of Confucian Dynamism. These observations may be due to the similar formal behaviour displayed during negotiations; however, as has been explained, these behaviours are derived from written law, rather than Confucian teachings. The above information describes the differences between the UK and Japanese business cultures and it has been noted that negotiations may go more smoothly if common ground can be found. Explanations for the differing attitudes of the two nations have been observed via their relation to national cultural traits.

However, the analyses only give an overview of cultural preferences. Even armed with this knowledge, negotiations from both British and Japanese delegations would be stunted, as the findings do not include information as to why these cultures have adopted specific attitudes. The fact that Hofstede and Bond realised that Confucius' teachings still influence contemporary Japanese behaviour implies that there are more historical and religious reasons behind both British and Japanese business cultures.

Thus a UK team preparing for negotiations with Japan should perhaps focus on learning the context in which both their own and the other's culture have been formed, in order to find similarities, which should aid in developing successful business relations. The Truth vs. the Way " Your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Genesis, 3: 5) In

the beginning there was God. And He created Adam and Eve, who cared for and lived in the Garden of Eden. But Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, as did Adam, and once they became aware of their nakedness they were expelled from the Garden by God.

In preparation for negotiations, the first thing that a UK team should do is understand their own cultural origins and how they influence business conduct. Christianity's core text, The Holy Bible, lays the foundations for a set of values particular to the Western world, which include the search for absolute Truth, which exists outside humans (Cleary, 1991). For example, the truth of what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong; the West evaluates issues in terms of absolutes and fixed goals.

This helps explain Trompenaars' conclusion that the UK is a universalist culture, with its people abiding by absolute laws and rules. Thus during business negotiations, Britons tend to rely on legal contracts and focus attaining the " Truth", or the goal of the meeting. The second piece of advice for the UK team would be to then study Japan's cultural origins. The Japanese have a more complex religious history, comprised of an interrelationship between the indigenous Shinto, and the Chinese-imported Buddhism and Confucianism (Buruma, 1995).

According to Shinto mythology, Izanagi and Izanami (Adam and Eve equivalents) created the Japanese islands and the rest of the Earth. In giving birth to the gods of clay and metal, Izanami became polluted and died (Buruma, 1995). As a result, Buruma (1995) argues that the concept of absolute sin does not exist in Japanese thought, only in degrees. One can

become polluted, or behave badly in a situation, but one can also wash off the pollution in the next. This story, at least in part, explains why the Japanese are particularist (Trompenaars, 1993), neither following universal laws, nor preaching abstract morals.

For them, “morality is a matter of time and place and nothing is absolute” (Buruma (1995), pg9). Thus in business negotiations, the Japanese are less concerned about contracts and laws than the British, and do not think in absolutes or goals. Although the Japanese have a very different attitude to good and evil, it can be observed that the two “origins of mankind” stories have similar structures, of the woman falling from grace and bringing some kind of negativity into the world. As a result, it may help the UK team in understanding the reasoning behind some of Japanese thinking.

This state of mind can also be related to Buddhism, which encourages people to strive for inner enlightenment and a harmonious “Way” of life, rather than a search for an external “Truth” (Cleary, 1991). In fact, the terms “to” and “do” (Hendry, pg105) such as Shinto and Bushido (the way of the Samurai, who followed Confucius’ teachings) mean “the way”, a path, rather than a goal (Hendry, 1991). In the boardroom, then, it makes sense that the Japanese think holistically, carefully considering all the available options before coming to any decision.

They focus on the path rather than the goal, while maintaining interpersonal harmony by thinking as a group. In addition, as has been discussed, Confucian teachings focus on loyalty to a group, leading to the Japanese viewing the negotiations in multiple ways, where the strengthening of

interpersonal relationships are intertwined with, if not more important than, the topic of discussion. Shinto encourages people to be both grateful for and grateful to the world (Cleary, 1991).

This emphasis on harmony with one's environment appears in Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism, suggesting that the importance of a holistic approach to the world is three-fold in Japanese culture. It seems that there are no end goals, but a continuing process of developing and maintaining harmony: the "Way". This explains much of the data in Fig. 1, such as gift-giving, wherein the Japanese concept of debt and gratitude "On" (Buruma, 1995, pg150) maintains harmonious relationships with reciprocity (Buruma, 1995).

In addition, during the Tokogawa reign, the samurai followed the Way of the Sword (Kendo), as well as that of Confucius, which taught that one was to not show any emotions in battle, as this would enable the enemy to see a weakness (Mushashi, 1982). Indeed, in business the Japanese avoid excessive expressions of emotion, whereas in the UK, the "Englishness" concept of the "stiff upper lip" restrains the Brits from openly emoting during negotiations. Thus the UK team should conclude that while the British concentrate on the goal, the Japanese focus on the journey.

It is the Christian Truth versus the Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucian Way. Learning about both countries' cultural tales and religions means that the UK team should be better able to comprehend the meanings behind Japanese business culture. Conclusion Seeing actions without any explanations can make a person from another country seem totally alien; however, learn

about their country or better yet, their cultural origins and their actions begin to make sense.

It has been shown that there are an enormous number of differences between UK and Japanese business cultures, and that they are tied to differing national cultures, which are in turn rooted in unique “origin of mankind” stories and religion. In order for business to be conducted smoothly, the UK team preparing for negotiations could be advised to first study their own cultural origins, as people sometimes judge others through the lens of their upbringing, perhaps without knowing it.

Learning more about one’s own culture also serves as a springboard for finding similarities, or at least more fully understanding differences of other cultures. Thus the second part of the preparation is to become knowledgeable about Japanese history and religion, as it provides an interesting and not so unfamiliar comparison. As a result, a deeper understanding of the Japanese people can be reached, causing any cultural barriers to breakdown, or at least become transparent and understood.