

Cross cultural communication between japanese and western businessmen essay sampl...

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What are the most important communication differences to be aware of in order to carry out successful business with the Japanese? Introduction Cross cultural communication can be defined as a “ process of sending and receiving messages between people who are in different cultural contexts”. It is a difficult task to deal with business counterparts across cultures considering the different perspectives of different societies. Businessmen and negotiators need to be aware of national cultures along with culture dimensions and different business traditions. Japan has a long and meaningful cultural history, but from the aspects of traditional culture it is rather unique.

One of the reasons could be that immigration and foreign impact has always been limited in Japan. Even though it went through seven years of American occupation, it did not seem to have influenced the Japanese communication style much. Japan’s economic boom along with the US impact and the widening business relations with the West certainly introduced business negotiations in Japan, but there are still vast differences between the structure and the mechanism of Japanese and Western businesses.

In this paper I am going to introduce the cultural differences that could hinder business communication between Japan and modern Western countries. I’m aiming at covering areas such as differences between business structures and negotiations, different customs, traditions, expectations, different meanings of non-verbal communication and body language.

Japanese traditions and body language Before getting involved with business negotiations in Japan, Western businessmen need to be aware of the unique

style of communication in general. Gestures and traditional customs might have completely different meanings than those in modern Western countries, such as Western Europe, Australia, North America or Canada. Therefore, prior to engaging into business with Japanese companies, business people need to adapt to completely different communication styles.

In most of the Asian cultures high emphasis is put on non verbal communication and body language. Variations in information requirements are closely related to high and low contexts. Nonverbal communication differences can be interpreted in particular contexts. High context cultures such as Japanese rely on facial expressions, vocal cues and silence in interpreting messages. Continuously low-context cultures, as most of the Western cultures are holding unspoken cultural rules of conduct and communication on “ need to know” basis, knowledge importance, and detailed background information. The latter is less aware in interpreting unspoken language rather than high-context residents. Therefore, not being aware of the meanings of Japanese body language can result in huge misunderstandings and even in the loss of a potential business.

Before examining the Japanese etiquette we need to be aware of one’s position in society and in the family. In Japan there is an important ranking system, which interferes with how the people behave with each other. It is very important to know others’ social background in order to use the right type of communication. Moreover, there is a high respect for elderly people in Japan. They are perceived as the people with wisdom as learning and practising process is relatively long in Japan. Therefore, Western

businessmen very often find themselves negotiating with much older business partners than they are used to in their own territories.

As it has been mentioned before, body language is highly emphasised in Japan. Additionally, different signals mean different messages in the West and in Japan. In many cases the Japanese use non-verbal signals instead of words that show their approval or dissatisfaction. The mostly used signs include inhaling through clenched teeth, frowning, tilting the head, or scratching the eyebrow.

One of the most important non verbal messages to mention is the use of silence. Silence means respect, therefore at meals and at business negotiations people are not supposed to speak. In many cases during Japanese business meetings opinions are expressed straight away, in which case silence means the understanding and the acceptance of the others' message. Gestures in Japan also have different meanings to those of the West. The meaning of respect of a bow at first encounters is quite well known, but not many Westerners know that it is considered rude to look into the others' eye, especially considering persons having higher rank or age. In the West, eye contact means courage and motivation, whereas in Japan it is considered to be disrespectful in terms of not giving privacy to the other. Smile (besides displaying pleasure) is used for hiding feelings of antagonism or deeper unhappiness. Laughter can display sympathy with embarrassment which others are assumed to feel when they meet with some sudden contretemps, such as tripping and falling down.

In business meetings people are expected to wear dark, formal clothes. The exchange of the business card takes place in sort of a ceremony and it is always given by two hands to show respect. Paying attention to non-verbal signs is very important as Japanese people have difficulties with saying “no” again out of respect. It is best to phrase questions to which they can answer “yes” (for instance: Do you disagree with this?). Japanese people often remain silent and they often close their eyes while listening to presentations. This behaviour should not be interpreted as not paying attention, though; it rather shows deep concentration and meaningful thinking.

Negotiating with the JapaneseIn the recent years Japanese business negotiations have achieved an increasing role involving Japanese and non-Japanese businessmen. With a large scale expansion of the Japanese market more and more Japanese people are working abroad, especially as managers negotiating with local businesses. Japan is doing more and more business with Western countries, mainly with the US and the EU, therefore many Japanese and Western businessmen get together in business meetings and negotiations both in Japan and overseas. There has also been a significant increase in ongoing service relationships between foreign supplier companies and their Japanese customers.

As for business negotiations, the first important difference between Japan and modern Western countries is that negotiation, as it connotes confrontation, is a disagreeable notion to the Japanese. While foreign (especially American) negotiators develop strategic maneuvers prior to their negotiation, the

Japanese prefer to involve their business partners and listen to their views, and make decisions after long discussion periods.

Key dimensions in business negotiations There are four key impacts of intercultural business communication between Japan and modern Western countries that can hamper business from being carried out successfully. These are: language, time orientation, individualism vs. collectivism and power distance.

First of all, I have to mention language as it is a core element of culture and business interactions. Even though English is the international business language, not all businessmen speak fluent English. As the difference between Asian and European languages is certainly large, Japanese and Western negotiators need to be aware of occasional misunderstandings that could have vital influence in carrying out successful a business.

The idea of time and its value is not universal. As for time orientation, Asian cultures are more future-oriented than Western cultures that focus on the present. The Western approach to time with high importance on efficiency and punctuality is only a conceptual idea in most Asian cultures. Time is money only in the countries with a long history of industrialisation. Most Asian nations that traditionally place a higher value on interpersonal relations see time and its significance completely opposite to Western cultures. Time, business plans and schedules are usually placed behind the importance of group meetings and social outings. Time is a lot more flexible in the East, allowing people to divert from tasks. This can explain

interruptions, the seeming lack of concentration and non job-related conversations during meetings and negotiations. Such behaviour does not necessarily reveal a lack of interest or respect. One simply has to behave this way in order not to offend others who require attention.

The individualistic approach shows higher degrees of independence and self-respect, while collectivistic people prefer being within group, have tighter social networks and more family involvement in business. In the case of Japan and Western cultures we can state that this is one of the major differences that can cause misunderstandings. Western negotiators and businessmen are certainly individualistic, whereas Japanese rely on group work. Before making business decisions, Japanese negotiators get together and discuss all the different aspects carefully involving group opinion. On the contrary, in Western cultures businessmen tend to make individual decisions.

This contrast in business cultures can create huge misunderstandings during negotiation processes. As an example, let us suppose that a businessman from a modern Western country travels to Japan to give a presentation on his business. He will present in front of a part of the Japanese team that can consist of even only one representative. He has to be aware of the fact that no matter how interested and impressed the Japanese businessman is, it is not by all means certain that he will get a positive respond when it comes to making an agreement. In cases like this, the Japanese businessman goes back to the office, gathers the rest of the team and presents what he had previously heard. Afterwards they listen to every single opinion before

making the final decision, which can take several days or weeks, and can still result in a negative response. In contrast, in Western cultures it is quite predictable from the audience's behaviour whether they would engage in further business or not, because Western business environment does not have such tight dependence on each other.

Another important aspect in business communication is “power distance”. High score power distance cultures, like Japan focus on formal hierarchies; communication is expected to be formalised and restricted. Low power distance representatives such as Europeans and Americans are recognised as open and informal. Their informational channels are frequently unrestricted and functional, and they also have less autocratic leaders. The Japanese business system can be described as a strict “bottom up” approach, where formal communication goes through different channels according to the hierarchical ranking, in opposed to the Western approach, where communication is more direct and more informal. Japanese companies prefer to make decisions by consensus. Therefore, the decision making process begins at the middle-management level and then it must get the approval of certain departments before it proceeds to the top management for final approval. On the contrary, business communication in Western countries is much more informal and does not follow such strict hierarchical rules.

Building relationships In order to achieve success in Japanese business negotiations, the most important thing is to build a strong, personal, trusting relationship with the clients. The establishment of personal trust increases

cooperation. Even though Japanese business communications and negotiations take place in a formal manner, the relationship between business partners is rather informal. The Japanese find it extremely important to get to know their business partner personally and to develop a friendly relationship. It explains why attempts to contact Japanese without introduction or previous appointment do not normally work. The best way of approaching a Japanese businessman is through a so called “ middleman” who is well known and well trusted by the other side.

This way the middleman already gives a good reference with his representation, which can be a smooth entrance into an important negotiation process. The middleman can also be an organisation such as a trading company or a bank. In addition, the middleman can be used during business negotiations providing information and helping solve accruing problems. For example, if a problem persists the way to solve it in Japan is to go through the hierarchical channels until one reaches the top management. Usually Western decision makers are too impatient to go through this process; they would contact the top man directly, which can be perceived as a disrespectful behaviour. In cases like this, the solution is to use the middleman to smooth the difficulties by indirect contact.

Socialising In opposed to Western countries, in Japan family connections are strong and meaningful. That might suggest that the Japanese give high importance to strong and friendly connections with business partners. In most of the cases building a friendly relationship with Japanese business partners creates a more successful business than any presentation or sales

pitch. Traditionally in old Japan business meetings were held at tea houses being entertained by Geisha, which gave the negotiation a much more informal atmosphere. Even though Geisha entertainment is very rare today, business partners still socialise together. Therefore, if Westerner negotiators want to achieve a very successful business in Japan, they are recommended to visit a karaoke bar or a sumo wrestling competition with their Japanese partners.

This type of behaviour shows the desire of the Japanese to form strong emotional ties with the people they do business with. Revealing one's true personality is not common in the more and more formal business environment, therefore it is very much valued. On the contrary, in the Western society businessmen are aiming at covering up their real personality stating that business life should be separated from private life. Moreover, in today's rushing life businessmen do not have enough time to socialise for the sake of making a good business. The Japanese also use these informal outings for raising concerns or asking questions they would not be comfortable asking in front of the whole team in a formal business meeting (for example, price reductions or notifications concerning personnel).

Attitude towards written contracts One of the least understood aspects of Japanese business culture is the attitude towards contracts. As a result of building strong, personal, trusting relationships Japanese businessmen do not feel the need of any written agreement when a business takes place. Consequently, in many domestic Japanese business relationships written agreements are not used. Million dollars worth businesses have taken place

without any written contract. It also shows the depth of the trust in partnership. In Japan, contracts are mainly used in legal cases, therefore a Japanese business contracts (if made) are might not seem professional to Westerners as it only contains an outline of the most important elements of the business. On the contrary, in Western cultures contracts are one of the most important parts of the business, as without it the business might not even be considered done. In Japan it is much more important to negotiate in a friendly and open way rather than using power plays.

Slow transformation? It seems inevitable that with the emerging trade and business connections with the West, Japanese business traditions are slowly fading away. The Japanese are adopting the Western business style and a more legalistic approach to business dealings. Yet, it is still important to know that even though Japanese businesses are willing to negotiate the Western way, more successful business agreements can be carried out by adopting and showing respect towards the Japanese style of business negotiations.

Conclusion Business communication does not only relate to communicating while doing business. Western negotiators need to be aware of the different meanings of the communication styles and signs while carrying out business in Japan. Japanese tradition also has to be taken into consideration as most of the aspects of business communication originate from old customs behavioural expectations.

The cultural differences of doing business in modern Western countries and Japan are often restrained, but they are reflected in everyday business activities and may also affect negotiations and contracts between Western and Japanese enterprises. Since they are deeply rooted in tradition, they are not changed easily. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt to the way of thinking and acting in a different culture, in order to do successful business there. Negotiations, contracts and business between Western countries and Japan present an intercultural challenge. It is a challenge that offers not only commercial success, but also personally enriching experiences.

After all, it can be stated that in order to have an open and clear negotiation process between Japanese and Western businessmen, many concepts need to be taken into consideration. These concepts consist of the impact of language and time, the respect of traditions, emphasised power dimensions and hierarchy, the respect of personal relationships and group involvement in decision processes, psychical contact and the importance of nonverbal communication.

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