

ABCs of Communication Between Westerner and Japanese

Some Handy Hints on How to Overcome Frustrating but Not Unresolvable Cultural Differences

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take action.

A giant step in this direction is to master and utilize skillfully a little theory which I have conceptualized: "You must convince the Japanese on their terms, otherwise the difference in terms precludes reaching agreement on issues and substance."

This is really what the art of communicating and convincing is all about. But particularly in the case of the Japanese, this holds true because they are by and large quite convinced that they are basically different from other people in the world, and that their system, sentiments and emotions defy the understanding of non-Japanese.

Here the foreigner is at a tremendous advantage if a truly expert mastering of the Japanese language enables him to discuss all subtleties in flowing and natural Japanese. Then the foreigner enjoys two great advantages: (1) the burden of the communication is fully on his shoulders (he is aware of his own inadequacies and where he must follow up) and (2) if he does in fact come across acceptably close to the Japanese model, he has largely blown away the mist of cultural uniqueness which the Japanese sometimes feel more comfortable sitting behind, and has precluded the Japanese party from using the "because this is Japan" syndrome. Obviously, Japanese can't use this scapegoat when trying to score points among themselves.

Ambiguity, Flattery

Since most foreigners are not in a position to master Japanese, which in its process is very much the needed cultural and behavior exercise, let us define in English a few characteristics of the Japanese and offer some behavioral guidelines to reinforce communications effectiveness.

Foreigners are often critical of the Japanese for not saying yes or no clearly, and express-

ing negative feelings and opinions only implicitly. A non-Japanese businessman, for example, should use this to his advantage, realizing that the indirect refusal offers flexibility to both sides when negotiating. It allows time to feel out new ground and allows the other party (or yourself) to temporarily withdraw without losing face, or the business deal.

Non-Japanese are sometimes turned off by the appar-



ently meaningless flattery of the Japanese. Western "fact" does not include saying something that isn't true. Keep in mind that above all, Japanese fact emphasizes making the person feel good over the relative truth of the compliment. Japanese place more weight on trying to show their willingness to be friendly and trying to please, rather than on the actual words used.

Sometimes foreigners tend to feel that the humbleness which some Japanese seem to project in such a contrived and deliberate fashion, is really most hypocritical, especially when we know that the individual can be as proud and haughty as anyone we have met. The Japanese answer would be that it's a virtue to be humble, and even if one isn't, he makes it all the worse by not trying to act humble. Thus self-assertion is a respected character attribute in many Western and other societies, while self-deprecation is indeed the time-honored Japanese tradition.

The Japanese identify directness with rudeness. To them it's impossible to be both polite and direct. Maybe that's why there seem to be so many for-

mal and apparently meaningless, fixed greetings of "aisatsu" in so many routine daily encounters. If such "aisatsu" are not given, one will get few positive points for originality and individuality, and rather may be somewhat ostracized as being impolite and strange. Familiar expressions which won't shock or upset are more valued than original expressions.

While Western societies place value on mutual independence, the Japanese like the feeling of mutual dependence. A foreign business manager should be careful in trying to locate the top performer and bestow formal, public credit on him. Japanese often feel more comfortable when their idea becomes a part of the invisible whole. Their feelings of mutual dependence mean that thanks is expressed not only for specific favors, but also throughout the ongoing general relationship. Maybe that's why expressions like "okagesama de" ("thanks to you") are so often used even when no specific favors have been given.

Wait for Spokesman

I'm sure there are many foreign businessmen or English teachers who have faced a conference or a class, and asked the group a question. You got no response and were led to believe that the Japanese have no opinions, or must have nothing in their heads at all.

This is very much a problem in cross-cultural communication, for unless there is a most obvious group spokesman (perhaps someone much older or more senior than everyone else), no one individual is permitted to voice a view or even say yes, because to a Japanese this would mean that he is making himself the spokesman for the group. It is also regarded as impolite and poor form to show off ability or seize the spotlight in such a group context.

The foreigner working in any such situation should learn

to call on and select the proper, universally recognized spokesman, or should clearly indicate that he is seeking only an individual opinion and should call on specific participants.

Nosy or Just Friendly?

Have you ever been annoyed with the string of personal questions which an inquisitive Japanese can fire out within 30 seconds? While Westerners have an inherent and underlying respect for the privacy of an individual, personal questions are not at all taboo to the Japanese. In fact, they show friendliness and a willingness to place one in the all important "us" category.

While the Westerner can feel cornered or pinned down by a personal question such as "Do you own or rent your house?" a Japanese finds it difficult to start or continue a conversation without background information such as the group to which a person belongs, or his social, family and economic status. A Japanese apparently feels a compelling need to make some sort of a comparative crossover from the "them" to "us" category by way of such exploratory questions, and of course the exchanging of the *meishi* (calling card).

While the Japanese are very much open to private questions, they are closed to the ideological prying or the conceptual attacks which so many foreigners relish and engage in with near strangers.

Rather than simply saying that they are closed to someone tapping on or drawing out their philosophies, it might be more accurate to say that they don't particularly identify with the process, nor are they sure of where the foreigner is going, and frequently most unflattered when they have arrived, after what seems to the Japanese to be a rather pointless intellectual exercise. Japanese also dislike a game-like approach to arguing. They see it as unnecessarily flippant

and insincere.

While Westerners see confrontation as a catalyst, the Japanese revere apology as a lubricant. If everyone is constantly and immediately admitting their fault in any misunderstanding, it has a very defusing and disarming effect. One should always avoid confrontation — it never pays. The Japanese will merely think that you are immature, childish and not capable of controlling your emotions.

You may have noticed that the Japanese don't complain very much. They respect someone who perseveres patiently

and works with realities.

In Japanese society it can also be impolite to express one's personal preference. Thus it is not unusual to have a Japanese somewhat perplexed when the foreign hostess insists that he decide between coffee or tea. When Japanese make excuses not to attend a function, etc., they try and avoid expressing personal preference. It is not appropriate to bow out by saying that one would rather play tennis that day than go bowling, nor are family activities a suitable excuse. For this same reason you will rarely catch a Japanese praising his own family members, as it comes too close to self-serving and praise of oneself.

Some Advice

And now for the ABCs of communicating with the Japanese.

A. Attempt to understand, or have some gut perceptions of Japanese behavior and cultural characteristics as exemplified by the above. Don't try and unnaturally fall into and conform to these patterns, but be aware of their existence, be considerate, patient and sensitive.

B. Be a good listener and encourage open and frank communication from the Japanese. Remember that the conversational rhythm in Western conversation is too fast for the Japanese. The pace of give and take in conversational exchange is much slower between two Japanese. They will not as readily interrupt and contradict, so the foreigner should slow down and avoid giving away his views and making conclusions until he has heard from others. Constantly pause and throw out numerous chances for the listener to give his own views and feedback.

C. See ourselves as the Japanese see us. Remember that the Japanese find our unfamiliar foreign communication patterns just as strange and unique as we find theirs. Our

directness, confrontation, Western straight-line logic and tendency to demand quick and definite responses, etc., can leave the Japanese feeling embarrassed and frustrated. They can be made to feel that it is hopeless to make themselves understood by foreigners. Keep in mind that the Japanese have their own criticisms of Westerners and many may see us as childish and lacking self-control as well as too simple, immature and insensitive.

(The opinions expressed in the preceding article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of The Japan Times.)

I would really like us to place emphasis on similarities, not differences. But, having said that . . .

Just what are we dealing with? There are indeed some interesting customs or beliefs we can point out — most Japanese, afraid of infection, never wash their ears with soap and water and are shocked when they see foreigners sticking their ears into the shower.



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They can catch colds through their stomachs, and get a stomachache because it's cold. Many of them gargle away impurities (even water is OK), when they come into the house after a day "outside" of work or play. Many Japanese open the window (even in winter) in the morning when they make up the bed (or put away the futon) to let the dust out, even though the colder, denser air from the outside is clearly rushing in, etc., etc.

But we want to learn how to communicate with the Japanese. The Japanese can be the most stubborn people in the world. And worse yet, they have a way of making you think they are with you. In the long run, if a Japanese isn't convinced, it's virtually impossible to get him to do something he's not excited about. How do you get him excited? You have to bring him into the process, make him a part of it, and let him implement and