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## Working with the Japanese

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The Japanese are a culturally unique nation. This results from their historic isolation from the rest of the world, their homogeneous population, the geographic constraints upon them, their religion and their complex and subtle language.

Despite taking up only 0.3% of the world's land mass, Japan's people represent 3% of the world's population. The resulting crowded conditions mean that group conformity has evolved as the natural way of organising one's life and avoiding conflict. In Japanese society, there are many moral and social obligations to others in your group (whether family, school, university or company). Such loyalty takes precedence over personal feelings, as illustrated by a popular Japanese proverb: "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." Such is the interdependence amongst the Japanese that they can often understand one another's feelings on a tacit, unspoken basis.

For businesspeople working with the Japanese for the first time, they may find the decision-making process very slow and frustrating. The needs of the group mean that input from employees at all levels must be considered. The business process involves many face-to-face discussions and a potential contract must be approved at each level of the company. The Japanese want to become acquainted with you on a personal basis, to determine whether you are an 'honourable' person from a good company to do business with. Don't be offended by the many personal questions you may be asked, including your age, the university you attended and details about your firm. Your Japanese colleagues will appreciate you showing interest in their backgrounds too. Good topics of conversation include your reactions to Japan (of great interest to the Japanese), Japanese food, sports (especially baseball and golf), other countries you have visited and questions you have about Japan.

In many respects, one needs to achieve different standards of politeness from those considered acceptable or even exemplary in the West. Someone considered very polite in the West may be thought of as crude or boorish in Japan. The main thing to remember is that you should show deference and respect through your body language. Don't walk around with your hands in your pockets, whistle or lean on a table. You should show a respectable posture. Bow slightly, even when you shake hands, don't cross your legs as this shows disrespect to the person with whom you are sitting and remember sneezing or blowing your nose in public is also considered rude.

Punctuality is very important. Brief Japanese colleagues in advance on any forthcoming presentations or papers that you would like to discuss. Ideally, such papers should be translated into Japanese, allowing each team member to have a copy in advance and thus speeding up the decision-making process.

It is well known that Meishi koukan (business card exchange) is an important aspect of business etiquette. The correct way to present your card is with both hands and to bow slightly. You should receive business cards with both hands and take some time to read them before bowing or shaking hands. Put the card in front of you on the table for quick reference and as an additional sign of respect. Do not just put it in your pocket or worse into your wallet and back pocket, and then sit down. Similarly, do not write on business cards you receive as this too is considered extremely rude.

Whilst English is studied in Japan, the goal for many Japanese students is to pass an academic exam rather than communicate well. Use visual aids such as charts, drawings, slides and video in your presentation. Your Japanese colleagues may need lots of repetition and context during your presentation to help them fully understand your proposal. If you think you are having trouble communicating your ideas, you may find it

helpful to write down your questions, since Japanese people often understand written English more easily than spoken English.

There are often long periods of silence during meetings. In general, we are uncomfortable with silence and try to fill the gap by speaking, whereas, in Japan, silence indicates that businesspeople have not yet reached a decision and are still thinking (although it may also mean that something has been done to displease them). Be patient - allow your Japanese counterparts to speak first and be careful not to interrupt. You may even notice your Japanese counterpart has shut his or her eyes during your presentation. Don't worry, this doesn't mean they have fallen asleep but that they are concentrating on what you are saying!

Following a presentation, Westerners often try to get the Japanese to reach agreement quickly. Politeness leads the Japanese always to say "yes" when they may in fact mean "no". They will not offend you by showing open disagreement or refusal but, if you continue to press them for a decision, you will not succeed and may find you are unable to get in touch with your company contact thereafter.

In a survey contrasting British and Japanese values in the workplace, when asked "What makes a good manager" British delegates tend to answer that managers are technically competent, with the appropriate experience, education and skills to manage people and tasks. By contrast, the Japanese assess managers more on their ability to harmonize the workforce.

Sixty-four per cent of British managers believe a boss is characterized by doing his job more skilfully than others. Only 27% of Japanese managers think this, while 73% believe a boss is characterized by having power.

British managers take decisions with minimal consultation and difficult decisions can be resolved by voting. In contrast, Japanese managers take decisions after consultation with everyone; furthermore, Japanese managers may not be technically specialised but will be rotated through all departments of an organisation to see issues from as many different angles as possible. This takes time but that is not a problem as they usually stay with one company for many years.

British managers are promoted because of their achievements. Japanese managers may be promoted as a reward for long, loyal service.

When asked about "the role of the company" the majority of British managers (55%) see the company as a system for performing tasks, with people paid for the tasks they perform. Only 29% of Japanese see the company like this, whereas most see it as a group of people with social relations with other people and the organisation. Relationships are the key. These differing perspectives impact on many areas, e.g. new employees may be chosen to fit into the group rather than on the basis of skills, knowledge and "track record", which the British and Americans prefer.

When delegates were asked to name their preference for "profitability or market share" a third of British managers felt the real goal was profit. Only 8% of Japanese agreed - they were more concerned about employee welfare and customers, looking for long-term growth and market share.

Such differences in attitude lead to differing views about strategic direction and many other business decisions.

Finally, there is a very different approach to company loyalty in Japan. Whereas a western man may spend around 8 hours a day at work and 5 hours a day with his family, a Japanese man spends 12 hours a day with the company and very little with the family. The company is much more sacred in Japan. The company reciprocates your dedication by providing life-long employment and protecting people in many ways. The recent economic downturn in Japan has altered this picture somewhat, with large-scale redundancies featuring for the first time in post-war Japan, but company loyalty is still ingrained in the psyche of most Japanese businesspeople.