



Japan

Japan has the world's third-largest economy, having achieved remarkable growth in the second half of the 20th Century. Up until World War II, Japan was dominated by a small number of large companies known as the zaibatsu. In recent years the economy has become much more varied in terms of the size and structure of its companies, producing a complex web of inter-locking relationships between large and small firms. Competition amongst these smaller firms is very strong — therefore the concept of life-time employment enjoyed by the total workforce is, and has been for some time, a myth.

As 20% of the world's earthquakes take place in Japan, schools and office workers regularly take part in earthquake drills. Waiting for "the big one" is deeply engrained in the national psyche. The March 2011 earthquake unleashed a devastating tsunami and Japan is still coming to terms with its impact.

In Japan face and hierarchy are of paramount importance and the importance of long-term relationships is great. Patience is a virtue and the ability to remain calm and hide any frustrations is critical. In order to achieve success in Japan, it is important to put a significant amount of time and resources into the early stages of relationship-building even when a deal may seem a long way away.

Japanese companies, like Japanese society, are hierarchically organised with individuals knowing their position within a group and with regard to each other. It is this sense of belonging to the group that gives Japanese companies their strength and purpose. Group orientation and team working are not merely concepts and phrases in Japan but a way of life which permeates all aspects of corporate life at all levels.

Japanese hierarchy is based on consensus and co-operation rather than the top-down decision making process. This means that people feel actively involved and committed. It can also mean that decisions are slow and have to be based on deep analysis or large amounts of information.

Japanese management emphasises the need for information flow from the bottom of the company to the top. The key task for a Japanese manager is to provide an environment in which the group can flourish. He must be accessible at all times and willing to share his knowledge. In return, he expects his team members to keep him fully informed of developments. This reciprocity of relationship forms the basis of good management and teamwork.

It is also important that group members maintain 'face' in front of other group members, which amongst other things means that people must be seen to be modest and humble. Self-promotion in the western sense is seen as childish and embarrassing behaviour.

The concept of Wa (harmony), lies at the heart of the Japanese approach to meetings. No individual will offer a strong opinion which might cause a conflict and therefore affect Wa. Decisions are reached through a process of consensus-building meetings, each of which is concerned with the preservation of Wa. This means that the decision-making process can seem very long and drawn out. Patience is essential in these situations, as to show impatience could have an adverse effect on the all-important Wa.

In Japan, the concept of 'face' is possibly even more important than in other Asian societies. Reputation and social standing strongly depend on a person's ability to control emotions and preserve group harmony. The importance of restraint and tact cannot be overestimated.

'Giving face' is crucial to develop relationships. Showing great respect for and praising the group or organisation will be favourably noted. Never single out a Japanese person, whether for praise or criticism, in front of the group. Doing so embarrasses him or her and may cause the person as well as the group to lose face. The group identity comes first. Humility is valued very highly in this country, and foreigners are encouraged to show a similar attitude.

As saving face is so important, people will not openly admit it in front of others if they do not understand what you are saying. If in doubt, try writing down key points. When communicating in English, speak in short, simple sentences free of jargon and slang. Pausing as often as you can gives people a better chance to translate and understand what you said. Also, allow for frequent side discussions in Japanese.

The group or groups to which a person belongs are a life-defining set of relationships and the importance of these group relationships should never be underestimated. Therefore, Japanese businessmen (and women) will often socialise in teams after work. Dinner and drinks are an important work and social function and should be encouraged.

There are many communication difficulties in Japan. The combination of Japanese vagueness and lack of comprehension leads to enormous issues which make problem-solving and decision-making very difficult. The success of a relationship is often dependent on one's ability to read the underlying truth which may underpin the spoken rhetoric. It is best to check back several times for clarification of anything that remains unclear. In times of stress or difficulty, the Japanese will often become silent in order to release the tension and allow people to move away from the area of difficulty (to preserve harmony which is tantamount). Unfortunately many westerners are extremely uncomfortable with silence and feel the need to fill the silence with more discussion.

In addition, conversations may have extended periods of silence, sometimes as long as ten seconds or more. This signals neither agreement nor rejection. At meetings and when dining-out keep conversations at a quiet level. Loud and boisterous behaviour may be perceived as a lack of self-control.

Japan is still a strictly male-dominated society, and although roles have started to change somewhat, the concept of gender equality is foreign to the country. Some companies retain very traditional views, while others try to be more accommodating to women. Many women do not work, though, and those who do still have little opportunity to attain positions of similar income and authority as men. Japanese men who have not been abroad may not be used to dealing with women in business settings. The most promising way to overcome this is to make a concentrated effort to demonstrate skills and professional competence. As a visiting businesswoman, emphasize your company's importance and your role in it. A personal introduction or at least a letter of support from a senior executive within your company may also help. In addition, dress very conservatively and professionally.