Module 4 Assignment: Navigating Japanese Cultural Codes in Business

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With advances in communications technology and increased ease of travel, the globalized business landscape has underscored the importance of intercultural competence. While business professionals may feel they have a firm grasp on how to conduct themselves politely and professionally within their own culture, appropriate conduct, politeness, and ways of communicating differ greatly between cultures (Meyer, 2014). Meyer (2014) describes many of these differences. Meyer (2014) illustrates cultural differences between various countries on spectrums regarding methods of communicating, scheduling, making decisions, persuading, disagreeing, building trust, providing constructive feedback, and leadership. On several of these spectrums, the United States and Japan lie on opposite ends. This paper will outline Japanese cultural codes for business practice to assist American professionals in communicating and working effectively with Japanese team members and stakeholders.

The Cultural Tapestry

Japanese culture has been heavily influenced by its practice of Buddhism and Shinto beliefs. A foundational part of these practices is that all living things are connected, resulting in a pervasive sense of oneness (Yamamato & Lloyd, 2019). This cultural foundation leads to a focus on unity and emphasis on consideration of others over the self. Whether or not individuals practice Buddhism or Shintoism actively, the idea that being mindful of one's thoughts and actions when interacting with others is important to elevating the self has been accepted as a cultural norm (Yamamato & Lloyd, 2019). In Japanese culture, strong negative emotions are not often voiced, being argumentative is uncommon, and self-control regarding the expression of emotions is seen as beneficial, especially in business (Yamamoto & Lloyd, 2019).

On the Meyer (2019) communicating scale, the U.S. and Japan sit at opposite extreme ends of the low to high context spectrum. High-context cultures like Japan's require the receiver of a message to pull from cultural context to understand its intended meaning (Meyer, 2019). In Japanese culture, there are two contrasting communication styles: "tatemae" and "honne" (Takanashi, 2004). Tatemae refers to how one communicates under strict formal rules that dictate what is acceptable to say and do, whereas "honne" refers to communicating how one is truly thinking and feeling. "Tatemae" is used in business and formal situations and to some degree with strangers and acquaintances. "Honne" is used primarily with family and close friends (Takanashi, 2004).

When working with Japanese people or others from high-context cultures, it's best to be mindful that there is often a difference between what is meant and what is said (Meyer, 2014). With this in mind, it's best to ask clarifying questions and look for subtle cues that can indicate the intended message. If no clarifying questions are asked, the Japanese person will likely assume the message is understood fully (Kopp, n.d.). It's also important to note that in these cultures, requests are very rarely directly declined (Meyer, 2014). Meyer (2014), gives an example using the question, "Are you able to complete this project by next week?" If the answer is yes, but it's accompanied by disclaimers or qualifiers like, "I'll do my best," or "It will be difficult, but…" the intended message may actually be no. In situations where Japanese people do feel comfortable saying no, such as humbly denying a compliment, they may use a gesture waving an open hand back and forth, palm out, in front of their face (Chebbouba, 2023).

There are many other nonverbal differences between Japanese and American communication. While in American culture, handshakes and hugs are common, body contact is

much less common in Japan. In Japanese culture, people often greet one another with a nod or bow (Kam, 2018). President Barack Obama was criticized for combining a low bow with a handshake when meeting Japanese Emperor Akihito, which is not traditionally done in Japan (Sieg, 2017). According to Chebbouba (2023), Japanese culture also differs from American culture in their use of eye contact. While Americans and other Westerners tend to perceive eye contact as showing engagement with a conversation partner, eye contact can be perceived as aggressive in Japanese culture, and prolonged eye contact is perceived as rude. The norm in Japanese culture is to look slightly downward or away from the eyes of the other person (Chebbouba, 2023).

When indicating a specific direction, Japanese people use an open hand to gesture in the direction rather than pointing. Pointing with the index finger is seen as rude (Chebbouba, 2023). When accepting gifts, Japanese people see accepting the gift with both hands rather than a single hand as a sign of humility and respect (Chebbouba, 2023).

Another strong cultural difference between the U.S. and Japan is in the perception of tattoos. Though the culture is slowly beginning to shift among Japanese young adults, tattoos have long been a taboo in Japan associated with organized crime. This taboo has an associated cultural norm with using clothing or bandages to cover tattoos while conducting business or in certain establishments (Hida, 2022).

In cultures like Japan's that emphasize the collective rather than the individual, stepping outside unspoken societal rules causes much more distress than in individualistic countries (Gray, 2022). This extends to gender roles and relationship norms (Gray, 2022). Japanese culture

remains heavily oriented to a patriarchal structure with traditional gender roles (Gray, 2022). It's common for men not to be very involved in their families and instead dedicate themselves completely to their work (Gray, 2022). Traditionally, men are expected to be distant and not to cry or express negative emotions with the family while being successful at work and providing financial stability (Gray, 2022).

Despite government action attempting to remedy gender discrimination in the workplace, Japan has few women in management or leadership positions and has a pay gap of 30 percent between men and women (Kanoh, 2023). Women make up less than eight percent of corporate executives in Japan (Gray, 2022). Gender discrimination also occurs often to new mothers due to a cultural stigma around women who return to work after having children (Kanoh, 2023). Japan also has an ongoing problem with sexual harassment in the workplace (Kanoh, 2023). Same-sex relationships also remain highly taboo in Japan, and same-sex marriage has not been legalized in the country (Kanoh, 2023).

Some colors have unique symbolism in Japan. Red, one of the most prominent colors in Japan, symbolizes concepts including self-sacrifice, strength, passion, authority, and passion (Lewis, 2023). White symbolizes simplicity, divinity, humility, and mourning. In the past, it was worn to funerals and not typically worn otherwise. Today, Western influence has led to white being worn more often and black being worn for mourning (Lewis, 2023). Black symbolizes masculinity, formality, elegance, mystery, and night. It can also be used to symbolize unhappiness, evil, or misfortune (Lewis, 2023). In the past, Japanese culture didn't have a distinction between the colors blue and green, both of which are seen as lucky colors today.

Today, blue symbolizes fidelity, purity, and cleanliness, while green symbolizes growth, youthfulness, and vitality (Lewis, 2023).

Negotiating Business

Understanding how business is conducted in Japanese culture is essential to success in effective intercultural partnerships in the nation. While Japanese professionals won't expect foreigners to have a complete understanding of Japanese culture, a perception of indifference to Japanese business practices can be interpreted as a lack of commitment or respect that can result in miscommunication and lost opportunities ("Japan," 2024). This idea is consistent with the core of the Japanese business model, which is built around emphasizing harmony and reciprocity (Agekyan & Shaposhnikov, 2019). Japanese business culture prioritizes relationship and trust building through displaying loyalty and commitment ("Japan," 2024).

When visiting a Japanese company, there are several items to consider. The first is that gift-giving is a typical practice in Japanese business interactions ("Japan," 2024). Bringing a high-quality, though not necessarily expensive, gift is a sentiment that contributes to relationship-building in Japanese business culture ("Japan," 2024). When selecting a gift, consider a gift that can be shared among a group. Avoid items that come in sets of four as the number is considered unlucky as the Japanese word for "four" is a homonym with the word for "death" ("Japan," 2024). It's also best to bring a large supply of business cards, as exchanging them is also common practice in Japan ("Japan," 2024).

On a first visit, it's recommended to bring an interpreter as Japanese decision-makers often aren't fluent in English ("Japan," 2024). Requesting to only meet with English-speaking

individuals can result in missing opportunities to speak to high-level executives ("Japan," 2024).

The first meeting will likely be geared toward introductions and relationship building to evaluate

the company and its team members as potential business partners ("Japan," 2024).

When doing business in Japan or with Japanese professionals, it's important to

understand that decisions will likely be more time-consuming than the timeframe

American-based organizations are used to ("Japan," 2024). Though Japanese culture is very

much hierarchical in nature, the country differs from most other highly hierarchical cultures in its

emphasis on group consensus in decision-making (Meyer, 2014). Japan's bottom-up

decision-making process is much more time-consuming than the top-down structure used in

American culture (Agekyan & Shaposhnikov, 2019). In addition to planning for extra time when

negotiating, interacting with staff-level workers rather than only executives is also important

through the decision-making process ("Japan," 2024).

Contracts in Japan tend to be simple and brief as they are seen as a formal final step in a

long process in which they built a high level of trust with their business partner (Agekyan &

Shaposhnikov, 2019). Contracts underscore the significance of the expectation to maintain a

long-term business relationship as opposed to achieving short-term results (Agekyan &

Shaposhnikov, 2019).

Similarly, Japanese culture values brevity and simplicity in their spoken communication,

meaning that only a minimum is said aloud (Agekyan & Shaposhnikov, 2019). Silence is used as

a communication tool in Japanese business practices to allow for releasing tension when

encountering controversy to enable the continuation of a productive negotiation. It can also be

used to underscore unspoken understanding between parties. (Agekyan & Shaposhnikov, 2019).

The emotional self-control mentioned previously in this paper also applies to business practices.

Japanese business culture values the ability to conceal emotional reactions and conduct business

with minimal use of body language, remaining sitting upright in a formal posture (Agekyan &

Shaposhnikov, 2019).

Japanese business culture places a high value on observation and learning (Agekyan &

Shaposhnikov, 2019). Japanese culture values a holistic understanding of the topic at hand,

examining each piece of the big picture and how they interact (Meyer, 2014). This is illustrated

in the Japanese business concept, "kaizen," in which quality control and process improvements

result from continuous evaluation of the process and results (Agekyan & Shaposhnikov, 2019).

Using this model, Japanese companies continually draw upon consumer feedback to improve

their products and services over time (Agekyan & Shaposhnikov, 2019).

Charting Success

When navigating business across cultures, understanding cultural norms and potential

barriers to effective communication is key. This paper illustrated that successful business practice

in Japan begins with trust gained through the building and maintenance of business relationships.

As this foundation is critical in Japanese business culture ahead of engaging in business with a

potential partner, investing time and care in understanding Japanese culture to communicate a

commitment to a long-term business relationship is a catalyst to success in intercultural business

endeavors in Japan. An awareness of Japan's low-context communication style and emphasis on

concealing emotions in business practice enables a business practitioner to avoid

miscommunication by asking appropriate clarifying questions. Following the guidelines outlined in this paper will serve as a foundation for successful business operations with Japanese partners and stakeholders.

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