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Editorial

If you have teams in Japan, or if you regularly travel there, you have surely been confronted with a situation similar to the ones described in Hiroshi's article.

The Japanese language abounds with expressions such as "read the air" (kuki o yomu) or "communicate as if breathing together" (aun no kokyû) which refer to the ability to [feel naturally what's appropriate and communicate perfectly with few or no words](#).

What you might perceive as not being able to say what one means, is often seen from the Japanese perspective as subtlety, respect for others, efficient in the longer run... therefore the utmost of "social/relational intelligence".

Fortunately, at Managing Worldwide we know from experience that it is not too difficult to overcome this deep cultural gap, as long as you are aware of it and are ready to develop the required skills.

Your people need to encourage a "speak your mind" attitude and at the same time show respect for those who can't easily do it. In addition, if you have Japanese colleagues or partners who have already moved in this direction, you should use them fully. They are what we call "cultural bridges". Your challenge is to transform most of your people here in the West into cultural bridges. [That is the kind of "collective intelligence" you need.](#)



Laurent Lepez, Associate Partner



Your clients, your partners, your teams: How to know what's really going on in Japan?

By Hiroshi Kagawa, Senior Consultant based in Tokyo

Let me start with 3 short stories

"When we, an American middle-size corporation, go to Japan and meet our clients there, they usually give us a warm welcome, but fairly often, after we get back home we get a barrage of complaints that were never voiced at the time. Why don't they say these things in front of us?"

"I'm from Italy, and I export clothes to Japan. I'm always told by my partners on the Japanese side that clients in Japan are fussy about the quality of the goods, that they're not fully satisfied with our present quality control, and that in fact they themselves are getting all sorts of complaints from their Japanese customers. When I go there and meet the clients with my partner, I never have this feeling. Where is the truth?"

"During our business trips to Japan, we, a German auto part supplier, make a point of visiting our clients to try to get a grasp of the actual state of affairs. When we meet with our clients, no mention at all is made of any problems. On the contrary, they give the impression of being pleased and grateful for our products and services. We even try to talk about potential subjects of dissatisfaction, but they seem to avoid the subject. The meeting always ends in a very good mood, and afterwards we go out for an enjoyable Japanese dinner and drink sake, which is not easy for us because we are jet-lagged. But after our last two visits, as soon as we got back to Munich, we received a list of complaints or points to improve in the near future. We were baffled and shocked."

Short analysis

In most Western countries, many business people or managers expect meetings to involve discussions of concrete problems and themes which have to be solved during the meetings.

In the 3 examples above, they tend to think, "If there's a problem, why don't the Japanese come out with it in the meeting? This is, after all, why we've taken the trouble to come to Japan."

In Japan, however, voicing a complaint directly in front of the person involved tends to be avoided, and getting a message through to him or her indirectly, through another person, is not considered rude. Rather, it's a way to avoid friction and to solve the problem in a harmonious way. This is a particular Japanese style of communication. In the Italian business person's experience, the Japanese client simply used the Japanese partner to voice their dissatisfaction. These relationships using intermediaries can be bewildering to non-Japanese but they are quite common in Japan.

Your clients, your partners, your teams:

[How to know what's really going on in Japan?](#) (continued)

Understanding a bit deeper

If you have the opportunity to meet directly with a Japanese client, you should first gather as much factual information as possible so that when you meet with him/her, you have a clear picture of what is going/went right and what is going/went wrong. [It may seem a bit strange to you, but you could even apologize](#) about the potential problems you have identified before the trip. At this point, your client will probably brush the apology aside and say, "Oh, don't worry, everything is fine." This is nothing but superficial politeness. It could also be a sign that no proper relationship has yet been built up between you.

If you have a Japanese partner, he/she should formally introduce you to the Japanese clients. You shouldn't expect that a proper relationship will develop within just one or two meetings. Even if there is no immediate problem requiring a solution, you should be prepared to pay a visit to your client's office several times. At a certain point in time, you should invite them out for dinner, so that all of you can spend a relaxing time together. It's through this kind of exchange and [socializing that the other party will gradually feel able to raise problems and issues that have to be dealt with](#). And through the connections that are built up in this way, you will be able to get important messages across to the other party too. Obviously, your [Japanese partner or colleagues are there to help and you should really consider them as a "cultural bridge"](#).

In fact, the Japanese managers who are on the receiving end of the claims by Japanese clients are probably themselves concerned that your company won't be able to deal with the problems effectively. They themselves are not always comfortable informing your team about how the clients truly feel. However, to alleviate the clients' worries, the Japanese partner has no other way than to tell you the bad news too... but more importantly, [there is no other way for you than to encourage them to do so](#). Now, assuming that you do just that, your ability to work on actual solutions will be your next common challenge.

In Japan, you don't build up a relationship without spending time together. Rather, it's only when you have built a good relationship that you can move on to doing

proper business. This is a fundamental difference in how business gets done in Japan versus much of the Western world (Northern Europe, the USA, Australia...) where people get right down to business immediately. So please, do bear this in mind, and with the help of your ["cultural bridge"](#), try to refine your interaction with your clients and teams in Japan.

Relationships that have been built up with a lot of effort are very secure. Once such a foundation has been laid, you will accomplish great things together.

A few pieces of advice to Western companies having a subsidiary or a local partner in Japan

- (1) Be aware that the quickest shortcut to hearing what your clients really think is by building a strong personal relationship with them.
- (2) If you have a Japanese partner, consider him/her/them as a real cultural bridge between your customer and you.
- (3) Get them involved as much as possible in close exchanges with the customer and encourage their giving you sincere feedback.
- (4) Be ready to deal with it openly, as a team. Avoid the "us and them syndrome". Thinking with your Japanese partner about what can be done, worrying together, and responding together to the customer in order to build a stronger relationship, is a strong key to success.

Mini Bio: Hiroshi Kagawa



Hiroshi is an international businessman, having acquired, merged and sold several companies in his career. In the meantime, he has developed his skills in intercultural management and communication. Now, with over 20 years of experience with about a hundred international leading companies and 4000 managers and executives, he is recognized as a top intercultural trainer, coach and consultant. In addition to his home country, Japan, Hiroshi has worked extensively in the US, Europe, the Middle East and across Asia Pacific.