



## The Occidental Tourist

*Learning about another culture isn't just good manners—it's good business. This guide, based on real, long-term experience with multinational companies, shows that cross-cultural training is essential if Americans and Japanese are to work together effectively.*

**T**he typical Westerner who encounters Japan can be called a tourist—but so can the seasoned "Japan Watcher."

After a deep, extensive study of the Japanese language and culture, the most truthful statement I can make is that I am a wonderful tourist: polite, well-intentioned, able to travel and shop independently, but incapable of doing business in the Japanese language or taking part in a professional conversation. I still must struggle regularly to make appropriate responses to situations that occur in my multicultural work life.

A friend who has spent the last six years living and working in Kyoto told me, "I'm finally beginning to feel that

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Sharon Cohen

I understand what's going on here." It's my opinion that companies underestimate (or ignore entirely) the difficulties that Japanese and Americans can encounter when they try to work together.

### Japanese work values

In modern Japan, education has become the way to get ahead in the work world. The advantage of a prestigious diploma from one of Japan's carefully ranked universities leads to both sad and comic situations.

In Tokyo I had lunch with an art dealer and his wife. They were being interviewed the next day for a slot in Keio Kindergarten for their four-year-old. The child was one of 1,500 applicants hoping for one of the school's 40 openings. If he succeeded, he would be ensured an eventual place at Keio University and not have to endure the grim round of tests commonly called "Examination Hell."

### By Linda S. Dillon

Japanese education keeps junior-high and high-school students in a rigorous lock-step, through a tracking system that eventually awards them enrollment in a university. My friend had purchased a new suit and had a haircut for the occasion, which was a critical event in his toddler's life.

"I told the barber," he said, " 'Try to make me look intelligent.' "

At the Tokyo university where I held a visiting-scholar position, I learned that, even after a rigorous secondary-school program, only 15 percent of high-school graduates test well enough to enter a university immediately upon completing high school. In fact, 70 percent of the students who eventually achieve enrollment attend another full year of "cram school" after high school to make high enough scores.

Named *ronin* schools after an ancient, masterless samurai warrior, the "cram" schools have become a multi-million-dollar industry that helps to ease the transition from high school to college. And college ultimately means employment in one of the best firms. Modern industries in Japan develop relationships with universities to gain access to the best and brightest of the graduate crop each April.

The irony of the system is that once college enrollment has been achieved, the coursework is frequently less challenging than in high school. College life is commonly thought of as a last fling before the real work of life begins.

One would think that such a rigorous tracking system would create burnout among young Japanese, encouraging a contempt for learning and a disinterest in academics. In fact, it creates a real advantage for resource-poor Japan. The high level of average achievement means that most people

in the workforce are bright, well-educated, middle-class people who value education. They assume that continued study will lead to enlightenment and personal growth, allowing the individual to better contribute to the group.

The ideal of reaching "expertness" pervades Japanese thinking, whether someone is a full-time homemaker, a bank clerk, or a businessperson. Education is expected to be a lifelong struggle. If it is unpleasant, that should only be expected. The greatest prizes do not come easily.

The story is told of an elderly college professor who took a paper a student had written, rolled it into a club, hit the student over the head with it, and yelled, "It's no good!" When asked why he did that instead of offering the student some direction, the professor replied, "If I told him what to do, that would be too easy and he would forget. If I make him find it himself, he will always remember."

### Training generalists

In a society in which job rotation and slow promotion ensure the development of generalists, career development takes on a different meaning. Most men become "salary men" and most women become "office ladies"; there are few well-developed job descriptions in Japan, as Western human resource specialists would write them. One simply "works for Matsushita" and takes whatever position is assigned.

Japanese employees see their roles as offering their managers and work groups the most extensive, thorough support possible. Job rotation and changing corporate strategies can move individuals from one unrelated field to another in a very short time. The movement creates loyalty to the company, not the job title. That discourages the development of professions, professional organizations, and highly specialized graduate-degree programs.

The Japanese practice of hiring new employees as a group each year precludes the search for outside talent, so training is an important part of maintaining a skilled workforce. Young people will typically be hired by a company as a class—from high

schools for blue-collar workers and from colleges for managerial positions—and move together in lock-step through their first 15 years on the job.

They may live in the company dormitory or at home with their parents, so their work life takes on a social aspect as well. Men are encouraged to marry women who are already working for the company, so "the company" becomes the central focus of their lives.

Companies depend on universities and high schools to provide a certain level of ability. In hiring, companies use written tests and extensive interviews, which focus on selected personality traits over academic performance. Successful candidates exhibit willingness to work hard for the company (*eiyouku*), physical and mental vitality, and willingness to cooperate with others.

Companies do not expect to find significant skills within a particular specialty. Those will be provided (at the largest companies) through extensive, lifelong training programs offered through the corporate offices.

Early training experiences are designed to help the company determine—and encourage—individual strengths. They are used to make "weak" young people tough, to establish team spirit, and to create individual gratitude. They are more like college fraternity hazing than any training experiences in the American workplace.

For example, to engender loyalty to the group, new-employee training may include a forced group hike of 25 miles, with the only rule being that no one can rest until everyone has finished. To create gratitude to the large and significant organization that has allowed the lowly individual to establish a place in its society, the individual is left alone to fend for him- or herself in a strange town with only 100 yen.

Any company that would hire a talented young person away from a competitor would receive a lot of bad publicity. Any employee who would take off for greener pastures had better have a contract in hand before leaving. The typical Japanese personnel manager realizes that anyone who would leave one employer might easily leave another. Contempt for such disloyalty makes any attempt to "job hop" im-

practical and dangerous for the individual.

It is only over the long term that careers begin to develop. Dissatisfaction with the system is beginning to appear, but there is intense pressure for such practices to continue as they have been.

Westerners misunderstand lifetime employment: it is not a contract, but a custom. Japanese people value the knowledge that their place in the group is ensured; they use loyalty to express their gratitude. Those are the work values and experiences that the typical Japanese manager in a multicultural company brings to the American workplace.

Bear in mind that Japan is only the size of California. Though a world power, it is more like a state in the complexities of administering educational programs. The ease of travel offered by the Japanese bullet train means that industries can share the expense of operating one outstanding technical-training facility, such as the Iron and Steel School in Tokyo. Local governments set up short-term programs to provide retraining if significant job displacement occurs in the area.

Many employers set up their own high schools to feed well-trained young people into entry-level positions: Toyota has a technical program for auto workers, and the Nissei Gekijo has a program to train actresses, singers, and dancers for the popular *takarazuka* theater (an all-female review).

Instructors typically come from the ranks of experts in certain content areas; training programs are much like community-college programs in the West. The focus is typically on broad, work-related education rather than job-specific training, which is more likely to occur on the job.

### Is training necessary?

More and more Japanese firms are deciding to set up manufacturing facilities and business offices in the United States. Many Americans will be employed by those companies as managers, supervisors, and blue-collar workers. But those Americans may know little about the values of the companies and the parent culture.

I interviewed 30 people (American and Japanese) who had received train-

ing prior to their cross-cultural work experiences. The Americans were unanimous in the belief that an understanding of the Japanese culture and workplace was important to them as they faced the challenge of new jobs with foreign-based companies.

What was surprising was that the Japanese I spoke with disagreed. They were articulate about their reasons: "We don't expect the American people to know the culture of Japan. We want to make this company an American company. We don't want to make this company a Japanese company." They seemed at times almost embarrassed to call attention to the differences in the two cultures; they denied that the differences could be problematic.

In spite of the regard for education among Japanese people, any U.S. training specialist who approaches them about cross-cultural training is going to have an uphill climb. "We are only interested in providing the same kind of training that you would ordinarily provide to an American work group," one Japanese manager said.

### When East meets West

Even Japanese managers who relocate to the United States may receive little help from their companies. The Japanese have been slow to recognize language ability as a talent, and don't draw on it to the extent one might expect. "Technical competence" and "previous experience with a start-up" are offered as the preferred criteria.

One executive described the process for her firm: "The training is supposed to come during the transition when the old person says to the new person, here are the do's and don'ts. During that overlap period there is usually about one week of coaching, but typically, little formal training is provided to the Japanese manager who is relocating to the West."

Many Japanese firms starting up in the States send their American "new hires" to Japan to be trained by experts on machinery that is up and running. In addition to technical training, it is expected that the experience will give the Americans a pride of membership in their new companies and an understanding of the Japanese culture.

"You've really got to experience it firsthand," said one American worker.

"Even though I had been to Japan before, it affected me to the point that I was more conscientious about my work, about our product, and about who was going to use the product after it was shipped. Of course it's not economically feasible to send everyone, but to change attitudes, send people to Japan."

Many of the firms I studied were in highly technical fields, pioneering state-of-the-art developments. Training was typically a two-year, intensive process. I interviewed American engineers in Japan who described gaining a "new mentality" from the Japanese people:

"You have to realize that they are watching you all the time."

"You have to be a little bit aggressive because they're shy."

"If you're not a little bit assertive you may never get any training; you

only to walk through a Japanese workplace to see that occur. Any irregularity or problem is discussed with at least one other individual before it is acted upon.

But the Americans I interviewed complained, "They will share information with other Japanese before they will share it with an American." It is a simple fact that processing information in a second language is hard work, even for the most capable linguist.

The Japanese complain that Americans refuse to accept a broader vision. "We try to provide cross-training but it fails. Americans only want to learn about what they have responsibility for. If you try to broaden their knowledge, they don't want to learn from someone at the same level."

Many young American trainees become disenchanted and quit, which

## **"If you're not a little bit assertive you may never get any training; you may never get anything done"**

may never get anything done. They won't come to you most of the time."

Japanese training specialists forget that adults in the workplace do a lot of passive learning. In an American company, an employee can overhear a conversation, ask questions, and learn. But if the conversation is in Japanese, the American employee misses out. Trainees can focus on what's in front of them, but they have to ask questions to learn. And even the technical documentation is in Japanese, so American trainees need help to evaluate and understand it.

One trainee described his disappointment in the lack of focus: "The Japanese should be thinking, 'What do we need to get into their heads? What do we need to teach this person?' And they need to plan an approach. . . . Part of the problem is that if we need a manual to help with our training, we have to write it."

Japanese managers will tell you that you don't need documentation in Japan, because everyone shares information with everyone else. You have

just adds fuel to the fire of the "Americans are disloyal" stereotype.

### What's the problem?

How can we characterize the relationship between Japanese and Americans that results from current training efforts? In the seven multicultural firms I studied, problems occurred because of separateness: "It gets to the point where you've got the Japanese group and the American group, and it's very easy to shrug off the responsibility and say, 'Oh, it's theirs.'"

What factors cause problems?

■ **American withdrawal.** Several of the Japanese who were interviewed described a tendency on the part of Americans to give up and not even try to communicate with the Japanese. "People kind of shy away from them," said one person. "It's like they don't even want to talk to the Japanese," said another.

■ **The start-up effect.** The first group of "new hires" received special attention and tours of Japan. That polarized the American workforce in-

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to the "first class" and the "second class" (those who came later).

One manager described the first class's expectations: "It's almost like they were promised Chairman of the Board... and that's really not what was intended." While some employees were promoted within a year, others became dissatisfied with the pace of advancement and began looking elsewhere.

■ **Length of service.** The Japanese tendency to promote based on seniority further caused a rift between the first and second classes. Employees who were not in the first class said, "What's so special about them? Why are they all at the top?" According to one interviewee, "There's really some bitter feelings about it."

■ **Work load.** Americans often describe the long hours of the workaholic Japanese as sometimes necessary but frequently a matter of choice—a work style that the Japanese enjoy (or feel compelled to enjoy). Some Americans insist that, even if it means being perceived as disloyal, their intention is to leave at a particular time. "I can get my work done," they insist. As a result of that behavior, they will be less likely to become part of the group that makes the decisions.

Japanese managers see hours on the job as an indication of company loyalty. "If anyone is going to be promoted, they look closely at who puts in the time," one American engineer noted.

■ **After-hours decision making.** Companies involved in simple manufacturing processes can begin to "coast" once they are up and running. But many companies need to communicate with the home office in Tokyo or Osaka.

The 10- to 13-hour time difference between the United States and Japan means that an engineer can call or fax in the evening, just in time to reach colleagues who are arriving in the morning. Experimentation can continue throughout the night, with answers arriving in time for the American workforce the next morning. It saves the company the expense of maintaining two research facilities and paying higher salaries to American engineers. And of course, the communication is conducted in Japanese.

That procedure can create a prob-

lem for American managers and engineers: they sometimes feel excluded from the important work that is carried on after five o'clock. Said one observer about an American: "He's in some meeting in the daytime, and he sees the direction everything is going . . . and it's almost there. Then the next day the direction is totally different, and everyone is in agreement that it's this other way!"

Consensual decision-making requires a lot of behind-the-scenes discussion and negotiation, which is frequently carried on after hours. The language barriers that exist between Japanese and English speakers only exacerbate the problem. While the Japanese reject the idea of interpreters, many respondents shared a sense that a bilingual individual should act as a "conductor," or intermediary, for intercultural communication.

### What do Americans need to know?

My interviews provided the opportunity to ask Japanese and American managers what should be included in cross-cultural training programs. Here are some of the ideas they presented:

#### **Americans need a world view and knowledge of the company.**

Japanese companies are export-oriented, so it's important to adopt a world view, which Americans typically neglect. "You need to be more international, not just thinking of Japan, but of all the cultures of the world. One of the biggest changes in my life is that now I worry about the dollar/yen ratio."

Training should always include the company's philosophy, which is the focal point of its decision making. The company's products or services and its history are all important and should also be included.

#### **Japanese managers have different work values and expectations.**

Japanese managers' values, such as the focus on constant improvement, are very different from those in the West.

One individual summarized some Japanese work values: "If you make a mistake, say 'I made a mistake' and try not to make it again. Be positive. Don't just come to work to collect money. Try to contribute and bring out some ideas to improve the process, or give

more suggestions about how to improve the quality of products."

An American technician said, "The Japanese always want to go deeper. If we're controlling a part at the per-million level, they want to control at per billion. A lot of people don't understand that. The Japanese always feel a need to improve."

#### **Japanese companies place high priority on qualities other than technical competence.**

Japanese companies are willing to hire and promote people with no experience in the relevant technical field, as long as the employees are diligent and loyal. The real issue for them is "Will you stay after we teach you what you need to know?"

The president of Sony Corporation has been credited with saying, "The job of management is to get the most out of the guy with 50 percent ability." I heard the same philosophy from a satisfied American employee of a Japanese firm in the States: "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to work with them, but if you show an eagerness or willingness, they will teach you many things."

"Try hard," a Japanese manager confirmed. "I don't ask them to be smart, but I always ask them to try hard."

Diligence and attention to detail are Japanese qualities that mystify many people. One Japanese manager shared his unhappiness with the tendency of the Americans he had worked with to become dissatisfied and want to move along to other positions.

"Americans like a challenge," he said. "So far I have not met an exception. They want to try new things. But they don't understand how deep their current jobs are. They know just shallow areas, but they must go deeper; it's hard to make them understand. Americans all want to accumulate expertise by doing different jobs."

#### **Japanese managers place a high value on initiative.**

Americans may need to adjust their usual work behavior to take into account that attitude.

Judgments of competence in Japanese companies appear to be made on such qualities as age and initiative rather than on technical skill. When I asked one manager, "How do you describe the best American employee?"



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I received the answer, "Self-motivated. We think this company needs improving every day. So part of the driving force of that daily doing, based on our experience, is self-motivation. If people are very well-motivated to improve, then it makes a big difference."

One American manager tried to explain the phenomenon as he observed it: "When asked to do additional tasks, Japanese don't even ask 'Why?' Americans hesitate for many reasons, sometimes because they've been trained in a union shop, possibly because they don't want to be perceived as pushy, bossy, or aggressive. It wouldn't even occur to the Japanese to worry about that. Americans spend too much time focusing on their job titles."

One Japanese manager described that expectation: "In Japan, if I say one thing, my subordinate considers 10 or more. In America I must be more directive. In America the young engineers do not know what I mean."

Another complained, "The Americans I work with seem always to be waiting for instructions. Japanese people wait for instructions when they are children, but when they grow up and

work for a company, they are very creative—they have a big responsibility. Everybody has a big loyalty to the company. People stop and think, 'I have to do something for the company by myself.' They're not just waiting for orders or information."

**Japanese companies focus on greater responsibility and broader job titles.** This tendency offers companies unique advantages when technology is changing rapidly.

One American manager described the prevailing attitude of U.S. firms that perceive such change as an intrusion on the orderly flow of business: "American firms lose a great deal by not giving employees more job responsibility. I told my corporation that I wanted to work in marketing. It was an interest I'd had in college, but they said, 'You? You're an accountant!' Then when you want to be promoted they can always say, 'Well, you haven't had enough experience.'"

Some Americans hesitate to take on additional responsibilities. Long after the fact, one American manager realized the source of his hesitation to

take responsibility:

"I used to work for strong managers and strong bosses who came to me and told me what to do. The first year I got here, I was waiting for my Japanese manager to tell me what to do, and he was waiting for me to take charge. It took us about a year to figure out that we were both waiting. It would have helped me to know about how [the Japanese] function and what their expectations are."

**Japanese managers focus on data and detail.** Attention to detail allows Japanese managers to be in control of what's going on. That's true even of simple matters. "If we can't speak of some data, past record, or previous occurrence, then they will ask for it," said one American. "You can't just speak in generalities and expect to convince them."

A Japanese manager shared that perception: "The real skill of Japanese managers is their ability to work with individuals. They can take a big order and break it down into small instructions, and they can use people or manage themselves and finish the job."



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**The American approach is informal by world standards.**

Americans are known for their casual approach to business relationships and social occasions. Japan is a more formal society, one in which showing respect for position is very important. The supervisor tries to create harmony and a family-like relationship within the company by getting to know each worker and showing each the respect due to a person in that position.

From an American manager, I heard, "I think the Japanese have more respect for their fellow workers, and I don't know how you can instill respect into people. . . respect for their supervisors, respect for their managers. [Americans] think they're doing the Japanese a favor by coming to work here."

Another person discussed her sense of the result of that kind of behavior on the part of American workers: "If you anger [the Japanese] you create a thick barrier that is hard to bridge."

**The Japanese focus on harmony.**

The Japanese focus on harmony places people who know how to

cooperate and get along with others at an advantage in Japanese companies, especially with regard to decision-making.

At meetings, one should never argue with the person who is speaking or with the person who called the meeting. All disagreements should be held in private, never in public.

A technician observed, "Knowing how to humbly make a suggestion is appreciated, instead of coming on strong with an attitude. Speaking to your supervisor first before you spread your ideas is appreciated, as it would be in an American company. [Japanese managers] prefer to talk first with individuals rather than come to a meeting and have a surprise sprung on them."

**Japanese customs and typical polite behavior are different.**

Japanese people follow the rules; they are law-abiding. If the sign says "don't walk," they don't walk. If there is a rule or procedure to govern something, they follow it. Americans are more easygoing.

A U.S. salesman said, "I think it's im-

portant for Americans to learn about the culture and to learn to speak some phrases in Japanese. And learn some business customs. The Japanese all speak English here, and they are very familiar with the American business practices.

"I think that it's important that Americans do the same in reverse, it really impresses the Japanese: carrying business cards, presenting a gift when you make a sales call, learning to return a small bow when it's appropriate. It's polite and the Japanese really appreciate it."

**Planning in Japanese firms is for the long term.**

One American technician pointed out the advantage that slow promotion offers over the long term: "Top managers in Japan know about the shop floor because that's where they came from. Everyone starts at the bottom. One of our vice-presidents here can speak with as much authority about the machinery as some of the operators. It's been 20 years, but he came from production, so he knows what the operators are experiencing. No one is hired from an

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Americans misunderstand lifetime employment. It's a custom, not a contract, and an understandable part of Japan's traditional system of relationships and obligations. But the loyalty has to be mutual. Long-term employment means that promotion and reward may be long-term in coming as well.

"Ten years with a Japanese company is just the beginning. You're really not going to see any noticeable

differences for almost 20 years of service," I was told.

**It will be difficult for American and Japanese colleagues to come to an understanding.** The American businessperson must acknowledge such difficulties and attend to them. Remember that different human beings have different ways of thinking, and that language is a problem.

According to a Japanese manager, "In Japan there are two different kinds of understanding: *kyo*, philosophical

understanding (from the heart), which is followed by action; and theoretical understanding, or *ri*, which may or may not be followed by action. Even if [your subordinates] say they understand you, you have to ask yourself, 'What level of understanding do they have?'"

Knowing what "yes" and "no" mean are a big part of intercultural communication. A Japanese manager may say "no" because he or she doesn't understand, or because he or she wants you to think some more. "If we get a 'no' we make a small change and we submit it again. If someone asks why, we say 'because he said no.' If you get 'no,' don't give up, try again."

One American said, " 'Yes'? It means that I agree, but I don't agree. We would send a letter for [the Japanese manager's] approval and he would sign it, and we'd think that he had approved it, but later it would come to me that he had signed it to signify that he had read it. It took us a couple of years to figure out that this is the way it is done."

Typical behavior sometimes has to change to promote understanding. One American observed, "You find yourself changing the way you talk. You don't use as many contractions, and you speak a little slower. You try to articulate your words better. You simplify your speech to the point that you start to sound a little silly."

A technical specialist recommended, "Learn the *katakana*. This is the syllabary that is used almost like italics for the printing of foreign words. Since technical terms are frequently English words, you can get a lot of information in that way."

### Turning tourists into natives

Tourists feel and act quite differently than do native sons and daughters. Tourists, just passing through, are less likely to take responsibility. They have more difficulties in dealing with the novelty of what they see.

Human resources training programs need to help employees of multicultural firms be less like tourists and more like natives. Training can help address misunderstandings between the two cultures early on. Americans and Japanese can begin to understand one another and be truly successful in working together. ■

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