

Client Relations in Japan

Today, a few Japanese phrases and a deep bow don't cut the sushi.

Few cultures seem more foreign, more exotic, or more different from ours than Japan's, despite the country's high degree of industrialized development and modernization. Yet, American businesses are designing sales strategies for the Japanese market, trying to compete more effectively with the Japanese, and cooperating with the Japanese on joint ventures. Americans need to understand Japan better.

The information American businesses need today about Japan is more complex than what was needed a decade ago. Contacts with the Japanese are no longer limited to large multinational corporations. Professionals in more and more medium-size and small companies are doing business with the Japanese, and their companies are calling for intercultural training.

Cultural stereotypes derived from the "inscrutable Oriental" were never representative, and now they are proving to be business liabilities. Simple lists of cultural do's and don't's are hopelessly inadequate, too. Instead, sophisticated training programs must provide accurate and relevant information that is drawn from cultural anthropology, speech communication,

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sociolinguistics, and comparative organizational development.

Effective cross-cultural training requires the specialized skills of the training designer and instructional technologist. The tasks include selecting subject matter; constructing the training paradigm; selecting the appropriate training methods; and designing the training according to principles that maximize the assimilation, retention, and use of learned information and skills.

An in-house training program

Client Relations in Japan is a two-day, in-house training program at Underwriters Inc. It is designed for professional members of our staff who travel to Japan to work with clients on projects and for staff members who deal extensively with Japanese clients at our offices in the United States.

The program is designed around a series of mini-lectures that cover 50 topics, ranging from a historical perspective to the exchange of gifts. It is conducted by training department staff members and a guest speaker. The program includes a lecture, case studies, role plays, language practice, and a short test on cultural terminology.

The first third of the program concentrates on Japanese history, social

norms, and contemporary cultural trends. The second third focuses on styles of written, verbal, and nonverbal communication. The final third examines corporate organization, management style, and business etiquette.

Those nominated to the program range from project managers with extensive experience in Japan to those preparing for their first contact with Japanese clients. Most trainees have had at least some contact with Japanese clients. In general terms, the training is intended to clarify differences in cultural norms and thereby increase trainee effectiveness in working with Japanese clients.

Specific learning objectives are established for each segment of the program. Trainees are given goals such as learning five nonverbal indications of unease, listing six ways Japanese indirectly express disagreement, and learning to pronounce accurately the vowels in Japanese names. Trainees must also master guidelines that help prevent cultural gaffes.

A frame of reference

The program provides a frame of reference for interpreting Japanese social and business behavior, and it gives trainees greater confidence to go forth into unfamiliar cultural territory. An understanding of both verbal and nonverbal means of communication is a valuable tool for conflict management, problem solving, and disagreement negotiations. The program also

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attempts to clarify trainees' previous experiences, organize their future perceptions, and facilitate their ongoing learning about Japan.

Topics are introduced by brief lectures and supported by training manual notes. Each page of the instructor-led manual summarizes from 10 to 20 key lecture points, including important general concepts, illustrative examples, cultural terms, Japanese language phrases, and behavioral guidelines. The manual also contains case studies, practice exercises, and assigned background readings.

Five case studies are used in the course. These provide practice in interpreting factors such as after-work communication styles, gender roles in business, and the Japanese reticence to express direct refusals. Analysis of the case studies is done in groups of three or four trainees.

One practice exercise—based on the work of John Condon, a writer on Japanese business and culture—presents 10 typical misunderstandings and complaints about Japanese behavior. Participants must provide ra-

tionales for the misunderstandings that are based on differences between American and Japanese cultural norms. A companion exercise asks the reverse, to look at American business norms from a Japanese point of view.

A film and the following discussion are important parts of the course. The film *Kacho*, available through the Japanese External Trade Organization, depicts a day in the life of a Japanese section head. It shows the *kacho* interacting with staff members, other section heads, the department manager, and suppliers. Japanese interpersonal communication, conflict management, decision making, leadership style, and after-work socializing are depicted.

Throughout the training program the trainer refers to scenes from the film, because they serve as real-life examples of topics that are discussed during training.

Another key element of the program is the guest speaker, a native-born Japanese with an awareness of business concerns and an ability to discuss intercultural issues in both

abstract and concrete terms.

Having a Japanese speaker address the group not only adds depth and variety to the program, but also helps validate the other segments. The guest speaker may be a government official, university professor, journalist, or business professional from a major corporation. The guest speaker gives a brief presentation on a subject he or she chooses and then devotes most of the time to answering questions from trainees.

An overview of cultural norms

Part 1 of the program, which takes up most of the first day, is intended to present a broad overview of the cultural norms that strongly influence Japanese social and business behavior.

Class begins with a series of disclaimers. The training is founded on a comparison of cultural norms, but cultural norms are generalities. Individual Japanese will behave uniquely. Each will have been influenced to different degrees by the values, traditions, and cultural pressures of Japanese society. Factors such as age, upbringing, education, corporate style, experiences outside of Japan, and personal temperament also affect individual behavior. And as Japan evolves along with its changing role in the world, there will be more differences among its people.

After a brief historical overview, trainers present and define three key cultural foundations: the island, the agriculture, and the *bushido samurai*. In a break-down group exercise, trainees are asked to predict behavioral tendencies resulting from the influences of these three cultural traditions.

The course facilitator leads a discussion of anthropologist Edward Hall's view of Japan as a "high-context" culture, one in which society is highly homogeneous and where communication tends to rely more on indirectness and nonverbal clues. From there, discussion moves to the concept of group orientation, the desire for harmony, attitudes toward outsiders, the importance of outward form, the role of ritual, and the Japanese philosophy of *makoto*, earnest dedication.

There is usually a lot of discussion about the role of women in Japan. Trainees are particularly interested in

Five Strategic Steps for the "Client Relations in Japan" Program

1. The program first asks trainees to expect a wide range of possible Japanese business behaviors; it discourages them from thinking in terms of stereotypes. Instead, they are asked to adjust their behavior according to whether their Japanese client or colleague is traditional or westernized.

2. Effective intercultural training programs stress the analytical aspects of intercultural relations. American business professionals must avoid reacting from preset rules. Interpersonal relations in foreign settings require attention, sensitivity, and ongoing problem solving skills.

3. To create a source for problem solving analysis, intercultural training must provide information that takes into account the variety, depth, and multidimen-

sional nature of cultural influences. Trainers must be aware of the past culture, contemporary social trends, and a variety of topics and influences.

4. Whether they are working with subject matter experts or developing their own course content, trainers must reject any input, approaches, and techniques that may regress to the stereotypical models of the past.

5. Communication is the single most important focus of the training. The emphasis on communication need not limit the breadth of the training or the number of topics covered. It is up to the training designer to clarify the interconnections between the different aspects of culture while facilitating the communication process.

how American women should behave to counteract possible sexist attitudes in Japan regarding the role of women in business.

The film *Kacho* is then shown and discussed. The session leader is prepared to respond to the questions, concerns, and interests of the participants. Discussion includes far-ranging departures from the specifics of the film.

The first day also includes key points about Japanese honorifics and their proper use. Typical greetings and other useful phrases are presented and practiced. Participants are instructed in protocol for business introductions, which includes presenting, handling, and reading Japanese business cards; using proper words of introduction; and knowing the etiquette of the traditional Japanese bow.

Trainees engage in role play, practicing the appropriate greetings, bowing and shaking hands, exchanging cards, and engaging in the kinds of small talk courtesy demands in business and social circumstances.

The interrelationship between culture and communication is pointed out at every step in the discussion and on every page of the manual. The point is repeatedly emphasized: Environment and history determine social organization, which in turn establishes group norms that influence individual communication styles, which must be carefully observed, analyzed, and adapted to minimize message distortion and misunderstanding.

At the end of the first day of training, trainees are ready to analyze Japanese communication styles in greater detail.

Communication styles

The second part of the program examines specific Japanese communication styles—written, verbal, and nonverbal—and explores their effects on interpersonal relations and interactions.

General differences in communication styles between western and Asian countries are outlined and discussed.

The discussion focuses on the Japanese written language, which is composed of four different scripts—Chinese, two distinct Japanese phonetic systems, and the English or Roman alphabet. Trainees receive copies of the Japanese *katakana*

alphabet and the English language equivalents and must translate several words and phrases. As a result, they begin to see Japanese script as having a recognizable form, rather than being mere scrawlings.

In Japanese, verbs occur at the ends of sentences. The Japanese hesitate before responding to questions. Such nuances are discussed, as well as the basic structure of the spoken language. Trainees discuss how to plan sentences, how to be courteous and patient, and how to refrain from interrupting. Japanese pronunciation is also reviewed, so that trainees can correctly pronounce Japanese names.

The Asian penchant for indirectness requires that westerners study Japanese nonverbal styles in some detail. This part of the course covers facial expressions, body language, gestures, nonverbal responses to compliments and criticism, and how the Japanese indicate “yes,” “no,” and “unease” in nonverbal ways.

Trainees also learn guidelines for communicating with Japanese who speak some English. In general, trainees are advised to slow down their speaking rate, to pause, and to be patient in waiting for responses to statements and questions.

Bringing it into the business setting

The final part of the program applies Japanese cultural norms and communication styles to crucial business settings. It explores the cultural context of how the Japanese business establishment affects corporate culture and how this in turn affects the Japanese businessperson's interpersonal communication style.

This part of the course explains Japanese decision making, meeting structure and etiquette, the role of leadership in Japanese corporations, the business reasons behind after-

hours dining and drinking, and the function and etiquette of gift giving.

Participants are asked to apply their learning through a variety of training instruments. It is here that the five case studies are used. Trainees take a short test to reinforce the retention of key terms, facts, names, and concepts. Finally, trainees are asked to respond to stereotypical criticisms of Japanese people by providing answers in terms of cultural norms and Japanese communication styles. This challenges trainees to pull together many of the terms, concepts, and guidelines discussed during training.

The training program concludes with the guest speaker's question-and-answer segment, usually 90 minutes. Having completed most of the program and assimilated a broad range of ideas, trainees are in a good position to ask for additional information on the concepts and guidelines covered in the program.

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HRD's intercultural challenge

Developing good communication skills is a complex task. It is hard enough trying to understand and interact with people in the same culture. It is even more difficult to avoid misunderstanding people whose culture and ways of communicating are very different. The more intricate the problem, the finer the tools and skills needed to solve it.

Training programs today demand increasingly sophisticated research, design, and instrumentation methods. Intercultural training programs require designers and leaders whose credentials go beyond having “lived there a couple of years.” Clearly, the best response to the intercultural challenge is training that unites intercultural scholarship and experience with the skills of the professional training designer. ■