

Intercultural Communication Competence in Business: Communication between Japanese and Americans

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the results of interviews and questionnaires of 20 American business people who have experience in doing business with Japanese people and discusses how Americans with a high degree of intercultural awareness made compromises or could make compromises in order to conduct business negotiations more efficiently. While acknowledging that one's intercultural communication competence is context-dependent and there is no panacea for resolving cultural differences, the constructive responses given by the American business people will certainly help deepen Japanese and American mutual understanding. This paper examines intercultural awareness and accommodation from a broader perspective, going beyond the previous fixed unilateral accommodation by Japanese business people. The results of these surveys offer many insights for business people who wish to do business internationally.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence, intercultural awareness, intercultural accommodation, Japanese and American business, making compromises

Introduction

It is frequently pointed out that one's intercultural communication competence is context-dependent. A big difference in how communication is carried out in business contexts as opposed to other contexts is that "business people need practical immediately applicable business tools that will help them solve business communication problems" (Tomalin 2009:115). In other words, no matter how much knowledge of intercultural communication you have, the knowledge will not be meaningful unless you can utilize it in actual interactions. Also, even if you can analyze problems, you have no chance of succeeding in the business world unless you can find solutions to problems. Therefore, the focus of intercultural communication in business should be on helping people find solutions; that is, utilizing a "process of co-constructing 'better' (rather than right, wrong, good, bad)" (Jackson & Mckergow 2002:179).

The second difference is that business people usually try to keep their company's interests rather than their personal interests in mind. In the business world negotiations are frequently conducted, however, the goal of the negotiations is not to win an argument but to achieve the company's goals or interests (Nakashima 2000).

Intercultural communication should be "a two-way street, with both sides sharing the burden and responsibility of cultural awareness" (Ferraro1994:132). However, previous research studies indicated that Japanese business people unilaterally accommodated themselves to American culture. For instance, Gelfand et al. (2001) identified cultural differences on conflict, using the compromise versus win frame, and stated that Japanese participants perceived conflict to be more compromise-focused compared to their U.S. counterparts. Also, Adair, Okumura & Brett (2001) reported that Japanese intercultural negotiators adapted their behavior to U.S. norms and spent great effort on clarifying information.

Then, what can American business people do in order to share the burden and responsibility of cultural awareness? The purpose of this research is to consider the cultural awareness of Americans who have experience in doing business with Japanese people, and discuss how they were able to make compromises depending on the situation in order to conduct business negotiations more efficiently.

Methodology

For the above purpose, surveys of 20 American business people were conducted either through interviews or questionnaires. Respondents had a choice of answering questions either verbally or in writing depending on the amount of time they had available. In the case of the interviews, respondents had a limited amount of time to think about the questions, however, the researchers were able to ask for more detailed explanations when necessary. As for the questionnaires, although the researchers could not ask further questions, the respondents had enough time to examine the questions carefully and offer their comments.

The respondents were Americans working at a Japanese company either in Japan or in the United States, or Americans with experience in doing business with Japanese people. In age they ranged from their mid-thirties to their fifties. 15 of the respondents were male and 5 were female. The number of years they had in working for a Japanese company/companies or doing business with Japanese people varied from 2 to 30 years.

They were asked to respond to 4 open-ended questions, and also encouraged to give any other comments freely (See Appendix). The first question was designed to find out the most difficult aspects of conducting business negotiations with Japanese. The second and third questions dealt with more specific questions such as managing conflicts and expressing disagreement. The fourth question concerned communication styles on a more personal level. In the interviews, the order of the questions was flexible, allowing for a natural flow of conversation.

Survey Results

Learning by doing is a term frequently employed in the business world. Then, what cultural differences did the above American business people become aware of or learn through their experiences, and how did they cope with these differences?

The Most Difficult Aspects in Business Negotiations with Japanese

(i) *Slowness in Responding and Decision Making*

Regarding the first question about the most difficult aspects of business negotiations with Japanese, the majority of Americans mentioned: "Japanese are slow in giving responses and making decisions." It is no wonder that Americans who generally hold that "faster is better than slower because it symbolizes high productivity" (Lewicki, Saunders & Barry 2006) negatively regard the Japanese way. Their positions were clarified with statements such as: "Decision making is slow, presumably because it takes time to build consensus;" and "Japanese have many meetings before making a decision in order to make sure that no one is surprised."

While the above Americans showed some understanding of the decision-making process in Japan, different people reacted in different ways. Some Americans replied, "I get irritated, but I work for a Japanese company and I have no other choice." On the other hand, others devised ways to elicit responses; for instance, "I got irritated for the first several months. However, I now keep asking questions until I find a suggestion they like;" and "Over time, I learned to put a 'deadline' on decisions, i.e., I would tell them 'I know you need some time to think about this, but if I don't hear from you or if you don't decide by _____, then we will consider that a No.' This sometimes pressured them, but I felt it worked because it gave them a way to say no, which is difficult for them."

(ii) *Taking Risks*

The next aspect of Japanese business culture that many Americans found difficult to accept is that "Japanese people are not willing to take risks." This tendency was pointed out in several examples:

"Americans are willing to take risks on the execution of a program. The Japanese want it to be 99.999% perfect before a release;" and "The Japanese way contrasts sharply with the American way; that is, 'Try it, and fix it later.'" Lewicki, Saunders and Barry (2006:422) mention that cultures vary in the extent to which they are willing to take risks. In this respect, Japanese culture is strikingly different from American culture.

However, some Americans in this study understood that the Japanese attitude toward problems involving risks is just different from theirs and did not necessarily feel that the American way is better. Their interpretations were: "You need to understand how a Japanese person was born and instilled to do the right thing and to eliminate risks in anything they do;" and "This is a great trait of the Japanese and it shows in the craftsmanship of all things, Toyota, one for example."

(iii) *Expressing Disagreement*

As for ways to disagree with proposals made by Japanese, Americans recognized one important factor necessary for effective communication: consideration for saving Japanese face in public. This resulted from utilizing their knowledge of Japanese culture or learning from their communication failures. It is frequently pointed out that saving face is extremely important for the Japanese (Nishiyama 2000; McDaniel & Quasha 2000), and many of the Americans were aware of this; for example, "Generally I would avoid telling them in open meetings. Instead, I would speak with them alone or in a smaller group;" and "I voice concerns in private where it is easier to discuss openly."

When indicating disagreement privately, some Americans who give priority to logic stated, "If you have DATA to back up your rejection, the specific words you use are: 'I disagree and this is why...' data presentation." On the other hand, a number of Americans changed their communication style because of previous communication failures: "At first, I said, 'I don't think it's good because....' However, it didn't work. Now I give them an alternative without saying, 'I don't think it's good.'"

Moreover, a few Americans responded that they change their communication style depending on whether the interlocutor is Japanese or American. "I usually ask my Japanese colleagues, 'Will you describe your plan?' When I become aware of some problems, I say, for example, 'I think it will work in an ordinary environment. However, how will it be in a cold environment? Do you have some data in a cold environment?' I give them an opportunity to reconsider it. If the colleague were American, I would say, 'It's a damn idea. It won't work.' However, I know it is not appropriate to Japanese;" and "When voicing concerns, I often use relatively soft words by American standards. Examples are: 'In my opinion....' and 'I agree in general, but am worried about this one aspect....'"

(iv) *Conflict with Japanese business people*

As for conflict with Japanese business people, a lot of the Americans replied, "No real conflicts in business situations because Japanese don't like confrontations." Some of the Americans had minor disagreements with their Japanese boss: "By indicating the potential loss, I express my opinions. However, I usually say, 'I'll go by what you say.' I accept the final word from my boss;" and "When I have conflict with my Japanese boss, I state my opinions. However, whether we work at a Japanese company or an American company, we have to make compromises with our boss." It is often pointed out that in the United States, verbal interaction between superiors and subordinates is an expected norm, and constructive criticism of proposals is actively sought (McDaniel & Quasha 2000). However, the final decision seems to be with the boss in the United States and to an even greater extent in Japan.

Change in American Business People's Perspectives

With more understanding of Japanese culture, the Americans began to recognize that the same characteristics can be both merits and demerits. This position was described with statements such as: "Japanese people are methodical. They prepare carefully. We have an expression, 'Japanese people prepare, aim and shoot.' This contrasts sharply with the American way, 'prepare and shoot.' On the other hand, we have to wait long until we get a response from Japanese. Americans respond quickly, though."

As for silence and indirect expressions, some of the Americans stated, "Japanese people are polite, but they are sometimes overly polite. When they don't agree with me, they say nothing." Some of the other

Americans mentioned, "I appreciated the indirect style of the Japanese. As someone who doesn't particularly like direct conflict, I could appreciate the lack of direct confrontation. But that indirect style can also be difficult to deal with when you need a direct answer or a true expression of someone's feelings on a particular issue."

As people who have a high-level understanding of Japanese culture, several of the respondents expressed views that differed greatly from those of most Americans. This is probably because "if we can view cultures as integrated systems, we can begin to see how particular culture traits fit into the integrated whole" (Ferraro 1994:34). For instance, one American referred to an advantage of Japanese slow decision making; that is, "Although it requires much time, it won't disregard the minority opinions, and few people concerned will be discontented with the decision." This contrasts significantly with how Americans generally seem to pay attention only to speed in decision making, encouraging others to get to the point and emphasizing that time is money.

Also, while many Americans prefer to reach decisions as quickly as possible, one American pointed out some risks in drawing firm conclusions immediately. He mentioned, "A lot of Americans believe their own opinions to be absolutely right, but I believe a grey line. When I examine various possibilities, I can't draw conclusions easily."

Moreover, another American made a great change in his attitude about winning by stating, "There are many battles and a war. If a battle is not important, I don't have to win. If I let the other person win, and an important battle comes, I will give evidence and insist on my opinion." This attitude contrasts sharply with how much value Americans normally place on winning, and how competition is viewed as an essential component of the socialization process (Ferraro 1994; Fisher 1994).

Furthermore, another American altered his viewpoint after examining others' behavior. He responded, "I don't think which communication style is better. We should accept the way as it is. Some Americans want to make Japan the U.S. They're always complaining. I want to say to them, 'If you don't like it, go back to America.' It's like some Mexicans want to make the U.S. Mexico. It's wrong."

Conclusion

This paper discusses how Americans with a high degree of intercultural awareness made compromises, or could make compromises with Japanese people in order to conduct business negotiations more efficiently. If an American businessperson was planning to stay in a Japanese company for only a short period of time, the above high-level understanding and high-quality skills might not necessarily be required. Likewise, if a Japanese interlocutor has had a great deal of experience or contact with American culture and as a result has an in-depth understanding of American business practices, it may be unnecessary for an American business person to accommodate himself/herself to Japanese cultural practices. After all, one's intercultural communication competence is context-dependent and there is no panacea for resolving cultural differences. Nevertheless, the constructive responses offered by the American business people in this study will certainly help deepen Japanese and American mutual understanding.

Also, although this paper focuses on cultural differences, some occupations require the same attitudes, regardless of culture. Take the hospitality industry, for instance. "In the hospitality industry, it's better to use a softer tone anyway. When expressing disagreement, I use a softer tone, 'I think it might be better to do that in a different way';" and "Whether the person is Japanese or American, I give compliments first, and point out that something is wrong so that we can let others keep pride they normally have."

Regarding gender, no marked differences were identified. This may arise from the fact that gender differences are not as conspicuous as cultural differences or that the sample consisted of only 5 female respondents. Further research will be necessary for this factor.

This paper examines intercultural awareness and accommodation from a broader perspective, going beyond the previous fixed unilateral accommodation by Japanese business people. Intercultural education in the future should be practically designed, keeping prospective business people in mind, and the results of these surveys offer many insights for business people who wish to do business internationally.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

We are conducting a survey on the communication styles of American and Japanese business people. Your answers will be treated confidentially, so we would appreciate your answering each question frankly. Thank you very much for your participation in this survey.

Gender: M F Age: 20's 30's 40's 50's 60's (choose one)

Length of time working with Japanese business people: _____

1. What have you found to be most difficult when conducting business negotiations with Japanese business people? How have you handled these difficulties?
2. How have you managed in situations where you had conflicts with Japanese business people? Please give specific examples.
3. When disagreeing with proposals/suggestions made by your Japanese business colleagues, how have you communicated your objections? Please describe specific words you used that proved to be effective, and describe what you think you should have said if your communication was unsuccessful.

4. What elements of the Japanese communication style have you found to be agreeable and disagreeable when communicating personally with Japanese business people? How did you deal with aspects of the Japanese communication style that you found to be disagreeable?

5. Please add any other comments you'd like to make on communication with Japanese business people.

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