

## Partnership and the Japanese Intercultural Experience

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### 要約:

異文化コミュニケーションという分野の議論をよく耳にするようになったが、長年言われ続けているコミュニケーション上の障壁が依然として存続している。たとえば、1980年以降、日米間で交渉された45の貿易協定のうち成功をおさめているのは、わずか13に過ぎない。この失敗の理由の一つは、基本的に西洋的な、異文化交流に対する唯一のアプローチに固執しているからである。

複数の文化を受け入れられない日本の大きな障害は、「私のグループ」「私のビジネス慣行」「私の文化」という解釈で言われるウチ／ソト意識にある。我々が非生産的な見解やコミュニケーションの習慣を継続しようとする原因はこの解釈にある。したがって、日本における異文化コミュニケーション訓練の目標は、グループ内での活動から複数の文化を含むパートナーシップへと拡大しなければならない。パートナーシップは、改良された共同作業以上のものである。日本人は本能的にグループ内の環境に適応しようとするが、パートナーシップは、その本能的なニーズに直接作用し、一致点を作って全ての当事者の強みを引き出し活用しようとする。パートナーシップは、異なるグループを動機づけ、相手について学ぶ段階から、相手から学ぶ段階、そして相手と共に学ぶ段階へと発展させる。

### Introduction

Of the 45 trade agreements negotiated between Japan and the United States since 1980, only 13 have been successfully carried out. While most private business negotiations probably have better records than this, they continue to be bogged down by even the most long-standing, widely-known intercultural communication barriers. Increasingly, these barriers are rooted less in ignorance of foreign business practices, and more in the rigidity of each party's internal reality.

"Reality is not simply knowing who we think we are, but also what others think of us" asserts multiculturalist David Mura (1988, 152). Knowing who we think we are is alleged to be the Westerner's speciality. Since Descartes, Western philosophical and psychological traditions have found their calling in unveiling for people who and what they are and how they think. And, since multiculturalism has become a pressing global issue, stacks and stacks of books have been written with the objective of unveiling for people what others think. One would suppose that once these two forces are united and aligned within some form of comprehensive intercultural training program, Mura's challenge would be all but answered.

This is the supposition born in the West and embraced by the field of intercultural

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communication as it trains the world's populations in intercultural competency.

Yet it is evident to all who have lived abroad or tried to communicate with someone from a foreign culture that the intercultural experience is far more involved than this. For some reason, "a greater exchange of people between nations ... carries with it no guarantee of increased cultural empathy; experience in other lands often does little but aggravate existing prejudices. Studying guidebooks or memorizing polite phrases similarly fails to explain differences in cultural perspectives. Programs of cultural enrichment ... do not cultivate the skills to function effectively in the cultures studied" (Barnlund, 1994, 27). That is, in spite of extensive education, habitual patterns of attention and understanding are maintained, perpetuated, and continue to be major stumbling blocks for crosscultural exchange.

## Patterns of Attention

Stereotypes are defined by Bennett and Bennett (1995) as "applications of a generalization to every person in a cultural group; or, generalizing from only a few people in a group." More fundamentally, they stem from culturally determined habits of attention which influence the way we listen to, look at, think about and understand our world. Unfortunately, as culture is ethnocentric, leading people to believe that "our way is the right way," stereotypes are invariably negative reflections on other cultures and often elicit feelings of superiority (Porter & Samovar, 1994, 13). Values or styles of behavior which are not like "ours" are unenlightened, less developed, less spiritual, uncivil, unharmonious, uneducated, and ill-mannered. To this extent, stereotypes have a dualizing and isolating effect, creating artificial boundaries around cultural groups and magnifying real and imagined differences. There are two reasons why this type of bounding mechanism is necessary. First, it gives structure to an otherwise ambiguous distinction between "us" and "them," providing a better means to understand the two. Essentially, stereotypes are invaluable for making sense out of an otherwise chaotic world. Or, as Taylor (p.9) adds, they "are like a double-edged sword whereby they give meaning (validation) to our experiences, but at the same time skew our perception of reality." Second, bounding protects what is dear and safe from what is threatening, and legitimizes the impulse to identify and interpret from a detached vantage point what is not understood. In this sense, it is serving the same distancing function of *uchi* and *soto*, or in-group and out-group, in Japanese patterns of interaction.

Learned stereotypes are used to make sense of intercultural interactions and shape our perceptions and evaluations of things foreign. "The Japanese Version," a promotional film put out by The Japan Foundation and the Matsushita Group about how American forms of culture are absorbed, mutated and preserved in Japan, is a shocking list of cases showing Japanese interpreting pieces of Americana to suit personal habits of attention. The cowpokes in one Tokyo cowboy bar say they identify with the heroes of "Rawhide" and other Old West shows because, like themselves, these cowboys take pride in what they do and value teamwork. Of course, an American would snicker that they have it all wrong. Later, David Specter, one of the most long-standing and notorious *gaijin tarento* on

Japanese television, admits to playing up the Japanese view of the blond, boisterous foreigner and being a “panda” for popular amusement. Apparently, there is a greater market for this than for more genuine forms of exchange.

These examples show patterns of attention being embraced and knowingly perpetuated by both Westerners and Japanese. As the known quantity is safe, simple and easy to understand, there exists a natural, instinctive need and readiness to do this. We like to reaffirm that we are right. If culture shock tears down our preconceptions, new ones are immediately constructed, and when the experience is over, our conditioned stereotypes have invariably been reaffirmed, are stronger and more easily sustained.

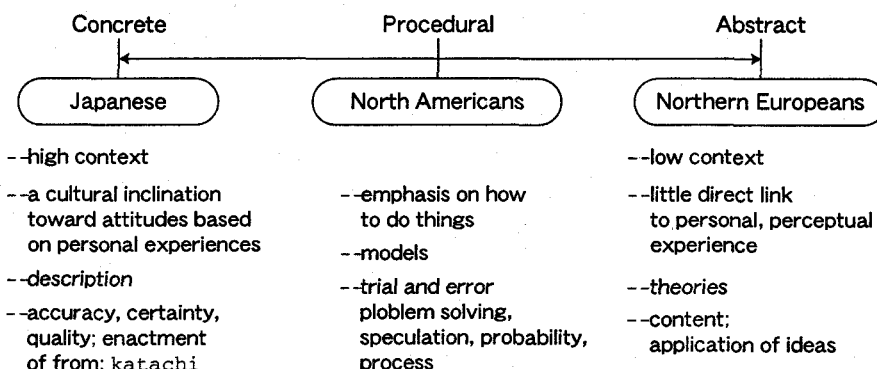
## Intercultural communication and the case of Japan

Shouldering the burden of breaking this vicious cycle, the field of intercultural communication is the alleged answer to the barriers erected by rigid patterns of understanding. Dr. Sheila Ramsey (1995) identifies the field's common approach as composing six stages: to create awareness of difference, to give analytic concepts or theories, to make comparisons, to explore dangers about perceptions and truths, to show that reality is constructed in different ways, and to teach interaction skills and competency. Drs. Janet and Milton Bennett's (1995) list of topics for intercultural communication competency shows a similar progression and goal: an understanding of culture, cultural stereotypes, perception, language use, nonverbal communication, communication styles, value contrasts, problem solving strategies, gender issues, and intercultural adaptation. Barnlund, Porter & Samovar, DeVos, Taylor and other ICC trainers and researchers generally concur that the objective of intercultural competence is cultural self-awareness and empathy, which are only internalized after passing through a progression of stages. Critical self-reflection is “the missing link” to this transformation. “By far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection—reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation of perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting.” (Mezirow cited in Taylor, 16).

However, the impulse to know the self is distinctively Western, and it is questionable whether Japanese would find it a useful or usable means of achieving intercultural competency. Takie Lebra (1992) discusses the highly disparate realms of the Western and Japanese self in a social context. The Western, “Theistic/Cartesian Split Self,” she maintains, is focused inward, engaged in self-examination and understands the world through a logic of categorical opposition. That is, what “I am” is the answer to a riddle arrived at through self-examination, and is largely fixed, irrespective of context. In contrast, the Japanese “Submerged Self,” derived from the Shinto/Buddhist tradition, seeks to understand the self only so far as it is relevant to immediate surroundings. It is directed outward, and understands the world through a logic of interfusion. In Japan, therefore, what “I am” is highly contextual, undergoes frequent changes, and most significantly for Westerners, is not valued as a core of personal strength and stability.

Communication styles, defined by Bennett as how habitual patterns of thought are translated into behavior, naturally reflect these conflicting views of self. Stewart and

Figure 1.  
**Styles of Communication**  
 (Translation of habitual patterns of thought into behavior)



Bennett's (1991) continuum of cultural inclinations for concrete, high context to abstract, low-context styles of communication among Japanese, North Americans and Northern Europeans support Lebra's discussion of self. According to the model (Figure 1), Japanese engage in more concrete, descriptive, highly contexted patterns of communication largely connected to personal experience. This style suggests that the interpretation and evaluation of an event are arrived at more deliberately, perhaps through a process of transaction with the listener(s). If this transaction is good enough, or if it does not occur at all, there may be no verbalization necessary. Indeed, in Japan "the culture is primarily visual, not verbal, in orientation, and social decorum provides that silence, not eloquence, is rewarded" (Cathcart & Cathcart, 1994, 299). And, as Edwin Reischauer explains, non-verbal cues play an important role in communication as well: "the Japanese have a genuine mistrust of verbal skills, thinking that these tend to show superficiality in contrast to inner, less articulate feelings that are communicated by innuendo or by non-verbal means" (cited in Yum, 1994, 83).

At the opposite pole, Northern Europeans employ a more abstract, theoretical style, aiming for the implicit meaning of an event through a more direct, linear approach. This explains why Westerners accustomed to more abstract, content-oriented forms of interaction may be left dissatisfied when asking Japanese how they liked a movie, for instance, as such questions aimed at prompting discussion will often draw only pat, closed responses such as "good," or "interesting."

It follows that strategies for building intercultural competency should reflect people's strongly contrasting conceptions of self and styles of communication. Yet self-awareness and empathy, as goals of intercultural training, clearly assume the Western notion of a fixed sense of self, as well as the Western inclination to make those interpretations and evaluations necessary to conceive of this potentially abstract construction. To this extent, such forms of training can only be of theoretical benefit for Japanese, who, it is well-

documented, are more inclined to perceive social experiences in terms of uchi and soto.

The uchi/soto mindset divides the participants of an intercultural experience into an "us" (Japanese) and "them" (foreigners). Besides creating a strong psychological communication barrier, this has caused a great deal of frustration and anger among Westerners. According to Cathcart and Cathcart (p. 302), "the Japanese we know feel ... strongly that Americans can never really understand 'ware, ware, Nihonjin; or 'we Japanese' as they so often refer to themselves; the 'we' meaning unique or different from anyone else, anywhere." DeVos (1985, 169-170) is even less diplomatic: "Under the conditions of militarism this sense of group uniqueness created extreme difficulties relating to outsiders perceived as inferiors. Today one still sees evidence of these difficulties in the inability to assimilate outsiders into Japan ..." A crucial dynamic in Japanese and Western interaction, therefore, is recognizing and overcoming differences in the concept of self, the corresponding contrast in communication styles and the destructive rift between "us" and "them" which they invariably elicit.

Unfortunately, foreign influences may have exacerbated the uchi/soto construction. Academia's longstanding Eurocentric tendencies have proven destructive to a number of fields. Since the 16th century, for instance, linguists have asserted that the Japanese language, with its honorifics, male/female differentiation, lexicon and verb forms, is somehow deviant and strange, reinforcing this idea among Japanese themselves. In the field of intercultural studies, academia's focus on the uniqueness and homogeneity of cultures has only contributed to separation and alienation between peoples. Scott Ree (1995, 2) wonders, "how are we to empathize and connect to other people if we always point out, reproduce or construct descriptions of their Otherness?" Further, Western studies in intercultural communication have shown Westerners to be more communicatively competent or disposed than those from non-Western cultures. (e.g. Ishii, Cambre, Klopff & Klinger, 1995; Tanaka, 1995). Non-linear forms of communication style and preference, though acknowledged, are not measured as viable for competency.

Eurocentrism in intercultural communication threatens to perpetuate the existing tendency for Japanese to see themselves as different, one which interferes with efforts to communicate. Already it has had effects on Japanese belief systems. Some Japanese are drawn to foreigners who are baffled by Japan or who can not speak the language fluently, as these individuals support what the Japanese suspect deep down — that they and their culture are somehow unfathomable. "News Station" anchorman, Kume Hiroshi's controversial crack on an October, 1996 broadcast — "But, it's better if foreigners speak broken Japanese, isn't it?" (*Shikashi gaijin wa katakoto no ho ga ii yo ne*) — illustrates a common reaction among Japanese to foreigners who do speak the language. Such people, like the fluent Indian restaurateur Kume was referring to, contradict the understood Japanese-foreigner disparity, the uchi and soto paradigm, may consequently be seen as threatening, and cause uneasiness or animosity.

In-group/out-group differentiation has been observed in Japan for millennia, but the concepts of culture and race are comparatively new, only becoming relevant in the Meiji period and not widely applicable until much later. There is little tradition, therefore, of

understanding one's own culture as one of many, or of the existence of — and need for — mediation between coexisting world views. Consequently, one result of internationalization has been for the Japanese to internalize the self and the other at a national level. Most Western countries, by contrast, were founded and built on the strength of a multitude of coexisting (and often conflicting) world views. In these societies culture is perceived at other level(s) (ethnicity, age, religion, region, etc.). In Menand's words, "[culture] comes only through experience; there isn't any other way to acquire it. And in the end everyone's culture is different" (cited in Cathcart & Cathcart, 303).

There are two points, then, which Japanese will need to internalize: that theirs is not the monocultural, homogeneous society that it is so often touted as being, and that a multicultural environment (in-group) is not necessarily more fragmented than a "pure" one. Making sure that Eurocentrism does not contaminate peoples' attitudes about the Self and the Other will be one of intercultural trainers' most immediate challenges. At the same time, trainers will have to contend with Japanese communicator's instinct to protect the in-group from contamination, indeed from any sort of alteration. But the way to overcome the uchi/soto construction is not to destroy it. Not only would trainers find themselves fighting a losing battle, they would be undermining practical and accessible resources for securing a productive partnership.

### Fostering Partnership

If, then, one road to intercultural competency for Japanese communicators is to harness the uchi/soto mindset, its destination is to cultivate a partnership. I do not use this term simply to mean collaboration or association, nor do I wish to limit its usefulness to the business world. The type of relationship I refer to is one which will be constructive for a diversity of purposes, ranging from personal to professional, specifically because it is constructed on the highly intimate precepts of mutual dependence, obligation, and harmony. The type of partnership we are striving for is one which feels and operates like an in-group environment, and is able to achieve a synergy which will allow it to tackle complex issues and utilize each party's distinctive attributes to forge new sources of potential.

Japanese businessmen instinctively attempt to do this by themselves in a number of ways. Entertaining foreign guests after work is a common example. But such practices are generally self-serving, are unlikely to produce the desired results, and may even backfire. Not only is after-hours entertaining likely to exhaust or frustrate foreigners expecting to have some free time, the startling contrast between Japanese in-office and out-of-office behavior may leave them baffled about the sincerity of their counterparts as well as the nature of their professional relationship.

Foreigner groups frustrated by failed bilateral negotiations are also seeing the need for some new form of relationship. The American Chamber of Commerce in Japan conducted a study of the 45 trade agreements between the two countries since 1980, and attempted to deduce definitive reasons why only 13 were successfully implemented. Based on the results, it formulated a series of specific recommendations for future trade negotiators which emphasized the importance of clarity in language and the value of establishing a

closer working relationship. Yet as we have seen, verbal communication as a tool for expression in intercultural interaction carries a number of limitations. It alone does not guarantee mutual understanding. And while such recommendations are undeniably important in aligning the realities of external communication, they ignore the imminent danger of miscommunication due to disparity in parties' internal realities.

Instead of attempting to become friends over a few beers or to establish guidelines for a more hardline position in negotiations, partnership will be more readily generated through a mutually agreed upon and mutually executed program which makes use of cultural traits already in place.

Sociological inquiry has established that dependency, whether it be on parents, school and club friends, or work colleagues, is an important part of Japanese socialization. The principal argument of Doi Takeo's widely acclaimed book, *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1973), is that Japanese children learn dependence through *amae*, and that this plays a prominent role in a number of social relationships throughout life. Needless to say, the *uchi/soto* mindset is a direct result of *amae*. But rather than struggling to dismantle dependency on the in-group, intercultural communicators will find it to be a valuable resource for forming a partnership.

Another recurring motif used to explain Japanese social behavior is that of obligation, or *gimu*. Obligation is a natural extension of dependency and incorporating both into a cross-cultural relationship is extremely important in cementing professionalism and goodwill among potential partners. To do so will instinctively feel dangerous, as there is inherent risk in compromising professional self-determination and independence. Yet, for all parties, this vulnerability is the prerequisite for cooperation and strong commitment to each other.

*Wa* is a third quality acknowledged as fundamental for successful relationships. Though literally meaning harmony, "the word expresses a quality of human relationships, referring to the 'cooperation, trust, sharing, warmth, morale, and hard work of efficient, pleasant, and purposeful fellowship ... [It] is both a major means to social improvement and an end in itself'" (Rohlen cited in Smith, 1983, 50). For our purposes partnership need not be an end in itself. Whiting's often-cited article on Japanese baseball, "You've Gotta Have 'Wa'," discloses *wa*'s influence on the effectiveness of teamwork and shows why reciprocity in business relations, which focuses on avoiding confrontation and maintaining harmony, must be brought to the negotiating table. "If you ask a Japanese manager what he considers the most important ingredient of a winning team, he would most likely answer *wa*. If you ask him how to knock a team's *wa* awry, he'd probably say, 'Hire an American'." (Smith, 50)

It is this very fear, that a close relationship with an outside party will throw the in-group out of balance or disrupt its operation, which may deter Japanese from initiating a partnership. Foreigners likely will not have much interest in *wa* either. American baseball players hired by Japanese teams come to play ball; fostering dependence, obligation and harmony is the last thing on their minds. Of course, hesitation on either side will cause prospective partners to settle for a purely external relationship, fine in some cases, but not when a team-like body would be more fruitful.

Reservations undermining productive intercultural communication may also arise at a personal level. Certainly before they engage in any formal training, Japanese should ask themselves if they even want to become interculturally competent, a state of mind which involves internal transformations potentially threatening to one's sense of Japaneseness. Japanese businessmen transferred abroad are reportedly suspected of losing this quality, and may consequently experience difficulties being reaccepted by their in-group upon their return. Children who have studied in schools overseas endure similar hardships when returning to their Japanese schools. Not only are their particular educational needs unmet by inflexible curricula, they are treated with suspicion by their teachers and fellow students. In such an environment, individuals may have valid reservations about interculturalizing, a sensibility which they should honestly deal with. Kume's reaction to his intercultural experience, wherein he immediately reverts back to an uchi/soto mentality, seemingly to reassert his Japaneseness, is illustrative of how powerful this instinct can be.

As crucial building blocks of the in-group, therefore, mutual dependence, obligation and harmony will be integral elements for a successful internal partnership. Before potential partners set about forming the more practical, working relationships of such an alliance, substantial time must be given to establishing this bond. It is not by accident that this sounds like a deliberate, step-by-step procedure. Intercultural competency happens not just by training (thinking), but by premeditated action and discussion with others (experiencing). To this extent, there must be a process or system in place which is active in nature, which defines the partnership arena, the ground rules, the objectives, and the means to achieve them. Having a common vision is crucial, demanding that this process begin with all parties imagining and discussing in detail the nature of their ideal partnership. After a concrete vision has been established, strategies for achieving it will be easier to formulate and implement.

The booklet "Partnering," issued by the Association of General Contractors of America, attempts to outline this process. Its eight groundrules for a successful partnership:

1. commitment from the top to partnering
2. equity (considering all interests in reaching goals)
3. trust
4. development of mutual goals and objectives
5. implementation through mutual design plan
6. continuous evaluation through mutually designed measures
7. timely communication
8. mutual issue resolution process

emphasize commitment, trust and mutuality, traits which — in a Western sense — approximate *amae*, *gimu* and *wa*. The entire set of eight may not be appropriate for every alliance, but it does include important requirements for any crosscultural relationship. Support from the top, mutual development, implementation and evaluation of measures, and an agreed upon issue resolution process to systematically and fairly address problems as they occur are all vital to the longevity and productivity of any partnership.

Businesspeople will find this model a useful point of departure for customizing their



own partnerships. As a matter of course, these should make optimum use of each group's strengths and potentials. For the Japanese context, group rather than individual intercultural competence might be emphasized, as well as a defined outline of procedures to follow in order to rule out the need for sudden improvisation. The process should also include sessions for scrutinizing personal and group assumptions, opinions, and patterns of thinking about business practices. Learning about each other, with each other, and ensuring continuous communication and interaction will be invaluable for preventing misunderstandings.

Naturally, it is not necessary for Japanese and foreign partners to compromise rudimentary cultural traits, and it would be unrealistic for them to try. Partnerships can and should take advantage of parties' diverse range of strengths to create a richer and more exciting synergistic partnership. As Hampden-Turner (1970) points out, such a union will ideally result in creative potential amounting to more than the sum of its parts.

## Discussion

Intercultural studies take as their goal a vision akin to poet and ecological activist Gary Snyder's (1996) model of Turtle Island: a place or time when people come to understand themselves and others as more than members of nations and ethnic backgrounds. Citizenship on Turtle Island means becoming a "born-again native" of the earth, or for our purposes, recognizing the oneness of all peoples and being able to interact freely with them without the nuisance of cultural barriers. We can easily visualize such a place, this an auspicious indication that it is well within reach. We simply have to create it.

To do so requires that we unlearn patterns of attention and understanding about ourselves and others which create barriers to interaction. For Japanese, this means eradicating the perception of culture as existing on a national level, one which defines people as American, Japanese, etc. The reason for this is that cultural disparities (such as in communication styles) can be overcome with education and good-willed exchange; disparities between rigid notions of "us" and "them" can not. The "my group," "my business practices," "my culture" constructions are directly reinforced by the uchi/soto mindset, constituting the major barrier to multiculturalism in Japan, and it is within these constructions that we find the readiness to perpetuate counterproductive habits of attention. It follows, therefore, that the target of intercultural communication training in Japan must be to expand the nature of the in-group to include multicultural partnerships.

"In partnership," says intercultural trainer Sheila Ramsey (1996), "we have moved from learning about each other, through learning from each other into learning with each other." Amounting to more than improved forms of collaboration, partnership both directly addresses the instinctive Japanese need for an in-group environment, as well as establishes an accord from which to develop and capitalize on the strengths of all parties. It is the Turtle Island for partisan groups consumed by their own agendas and adrift in ethnocentric bureaucracy.

If, then, we accept Mura's view that an intercultural experience only requires that we understand our own and the other's position, we are denying too many of the existing

dynamics their due respect. For Westerners, who may be too self-absorbed or who may rely too much on external forms of communication, empathy and self-and other-awareness are objectives to concentrate on. But for Japanese, who are socialized to value and strongly rely on empathy and sensitivity for interpersonal relations, these are not skills which need to be trained. Rather, Japanese should be encouraged to identify and guard against long-held ethnocentric values floating to the surface of cross-cultural experiences. Clearly, a single, predetermined and universal approach can not expect to do this without going beyond empathy.

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