

## CHAPTER 1

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### Culture Shock: East Meets West

#### CULTURAL DIALOGUE

#### *"THE AMERICAN SALESMAN AND JAPANESE CUSTOMER"*

- MR. VALDEZ: I was very upset by Mr. Nakeshita's behavior!
- MR. ROBERTS: I have always known him to be a gentleman. What went wrong?
- MR. VALDEZ: Well, you know I wanted to sell him our line of golf balls. And he just wanted to make "small talk."
- MR. ROBERTS: At the first meeting?
- MR. VALDEZ: Yes. I started telling him all about the balls, but he only wanted to talk about the weather and Japanese and American holidays. So weird! Rude!
- MR. ROBERTS: No business took place?
- MR. VALDEZ: Yeah, I got "the business." I think he didn't like me. He was so damn evasive. He smiled, made chit-chat, and was never direct. He insulted me!
- MR. ROBERTS: I finally see what you're talking about. Look, Valdez, YOU were the one who insulted HIM!

MR. VALDEZ: Are you crazy?

MR. ROBERTS: No. You must *first* get respect and build a relationship. You hardly ever sell a Japanese anything at a first meeting.

*Analysis:* Valdez will have to think quite carefully about the confrontation he thought he had with Nakeshita. Inasmuch as Valdez is the one who is trying to sell Nakeshita, it seems reasonable that Valdez be briefed on Japanese expectations.

Valdez wanted to get down to business immediately, talk up a sale, and skip over all the small talk. He became extremely impatient with Nakeshita's seemingly evasive, indirect, "beating around the bush" behavior.

As U.S. politicians are slowly learning, you can't just show up in Japan for a single visit and expect to obtain instantaneous Japanese investment. Hundreds of research sources, repatriates and astute international business players constantly tell of the slower paced Japanese approach to doing business. The first few visits with potential Japanese investors or buyers are best spent building up a personalized relationship, with only gradual reference to the business agenda. In essence, Valdez was communicating too rapidly for Nakeshita. He needed to slow down, listen, and recognize that the "small talk" is strategic!

As distances diminish in the information age, unprecedented business, corporate, political, and educational ventures unite the United States and Japan in what former secretary of state James Baker recently termed "the world's most crucial alliance." This meeting of the East and West is extremely volatile, however, as radically different national cultures, histories and lineages easily lead to conflict, ultra-nationalism, ethnocentrism, and other separatist and collision courses. It is within this well publicized climate of escalating joint ventures and rising protectionist sentiments that the U.S. business traveler, public leader and corporate expatriate enters into relations with Japanese.

## **Culture Shock: The Plight of the U.S. Expatriate Stranger within Japanese Business Culture**

Perhaps the single most formidable challenge facing U.S. expatriates in the 1990s is “culture shock.” When dealing with Japanese nationals in U.S. or Japanese based subsidiaries, on sojourns to negotiating tables in Nagoya, or in the early days of a five year assignment in Tokyo, the undermining surprises of operating within a foreign environment cannot be overestimated.

In corporate, military, peace corps, and consulting and training circles, the term *culture shock* emerged as a simple, descriptive sound byte, describing a complex phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The multifaceted challenge of culture shock can be examined from the perspective of the virgin U.S. expatriate in Japan. In the opening minutes of *meishi* (business card exchange), the most sophisticated of Western corporates enter an alien business ritual.<sup>2</sup> As unprepared *gaijin* (foreigners), Americans feel the feelings, think the thoughts, of the “stranger.”<sup>3</sup> During the course of a first business day or week, the overall onslaught of culture shock is made up of numerous tremors. All taken-for-granted Western business and social practices are suddenly under scrutiny. Cultural blunders abound. Introductions are unsure and awkward. The manner in which Japanese utilize the English language and use honorifics, appears evasive and ambiguous. How Japanese conceive of business meetings and negotiations is substantively and procedurally confusing. The eloquence exercised so boldly and successfully in U.S. venues does not get a positive, direct response out of a Japanese audience. And your status in the organization is foggy, as it is difficult to read the motivation, perception, individual or group mind of the Japanese hosts.

Understanding how to conduct a conversation, respond at an interview, speak to superiors and subordinates, take and yield turns at negotiating tables, make small talk, decode Japanese systems of seniority and promotion, or establish trust and empathy—all appear to be “red flag” situations. There are few road maps, cultural compasses, ground rules for how to cross the perplexing, pronounced cultural borders. Despite all the talk about Japanese becoming more Westernized, it initially appears as if Japanese hosts are deeply entwined in many extremely Japanese bound rules and codes of business and social etiquette.

This jungle of cultural norms is foremost on your mind. You wonder why you were not adequately briefed or trained for this demanding transition. Why weren't Japanese experts, cross-cultural

consultants and trainers, repatriates, or competent human resource specialists busy preparing you? Your new expatriate status, or place as a visiting negotiator in Tokyo, seems in serious jeopardy. Somehow the home office probably had little insight into the cultural perils involved in this transnational assignment.

Face-to-face, language problems further plague expatriates. The initial shock of hearing Japanese spoken all around you wears on. The dissonance builds as you are at a loss to determine whether conversations will be held in Japanese or English. Will translators always be available? Will the Japanese hosts supply translators? And even among English speaking Japanese, you discover a peculiar, difficult to decipher version of the English language. After questioning repatriates and Japanese you find out that this is what locals call "Janglish," or a "Japanized" version of English. Searching for definitive answers to questions, your Japanese associates seem so vague and unclear. It is the most tentative version of English you've ever heard. And in the meeting rooms, negotiations appear incredibly inept, ritualistic. You try to speak your mind but this insults the hosts. Perhaps the free exchange of ideas at a public negotiating table is taboo? Yet it is hard to imagine a people who would not debate, argue, confront one another—is this possible? How shocking is this business world where the individual must suppress personal convictions and unequivocally subscribe to *wa* (group harmony). Can you exist in a corporate culture that does not encourage or put the spotlight on a home run hitter? Does everything have to be teamwork and contingent upon allowing everyone to keep face (*kao*)?

The shock of Japanese business culture continues as you are ushered into your "group office space." No individual office is provided. There are no partitions, walls or doors for insuring privacy. Everyone is in view. There are few secrets. Bad days cannot be conducted from behind the thick, secure privacy of U.S. closed corporate doors; on the best and worst of days you are thrown out into the Grand Central Station of desks; endless rows of identical desks. The shock of "lack of privacy" hits home; you already wonder whether you can fulfill this assignment—stay the course in Japan . . . complete the mission. Before you even get a change to experience that "honeymoon" feeling of being in a foreign country, you feel alienated and dream of returning to the land of the Yankees and Dodgers.

Surely someone at the home office realizes how difficult it is to *have* to constantly interact with coworkers, subordinates and superiors. You do not have your own office! How can this be? You have

lost the screening system you took for granted at home. This culture, of the people and by the people, literally means that you *will* function in a collectivist setting.

### **The Other Side of Cultural Shock: Japanese Hosts on American Guests**

After spending millions of dollars annually on conversational English and intercultural communication training, *Japanese are extremely surprised to find out how little Western expatriates know of Japanese business and national culture, corporate and social etiquette.*

At negotiating tables, Japanese marvel at the perceived audacity, outspokenness, short tempers, and impatience of U.S. representatives. They find it incomprehensible that a single American negotiator could conceivably land in Narita Airport and not have some awareness of Japanese *nemawashi* (informal consensus building) or *ringi* (formal decision-making process). To attempt to defy the slow, methodical, largely non-negotiable Japanese approach to decision-making, is the source of culture shock. Japanese are astounded by the farther reaches of American individualism, as expatriate negotiators “demand” that decisions be reached immediately. Japanese feel the force of further tremors when the expatriates fail to recognize the Japanese chain-of-command, leading to statements made out of turn, to the wrong person, and regarding inappropriate items.

*Japanese hosts are shocked by the full brunt of the Western ego, and are ill-equipped to deal with a culture that sanctions rampant careerism, job-hopping and the revolving door of managers in top U.S. corporations.* Japanese complain of the waves of insults that flood their companies when *gaijin* populate their business world. Lower ranking subordinates pressure Japanese superiors to speak, not knowing that status determines who initiates and/or dominates conversations in the workplace. There is the overwhelming burden of the American “talk culture.” Americans are always talk, talk, talking, chattering away in a sea of needless verbiage. Japanese cannot easily digest the American insensitivity to silence. Worst of all, in the midst of so many cultural insults, no apologies come forth. Japanese contend that the barbarian Westerners are frightfully ethnocentric, blind to the intricacies of Japanese culture, and unwilling to learn. Japanese corporates find it easy to substan-

tiate the “Ugly American” image perpetuated by journalists and films, pointing to the latest gaffes by tall, stupid expatriates.

### **Ethnocentrism or Adaptation?**

Implicit in the experience of *culture shock* is the problem of what can or should be done about it. Life in a global village of joint ventures mandates that Americans and Japanese continuously communicate across their national and cultural borders. The channels for international communication are steadily expanding, as U.S. businesses utilize fax, teleconferencing, overnight deliveries, electronic mail, international telephone systems, video telephoning, letter writing, memos, training videos, and various media formats for information exchange. But behind all of the channels of transmission sit individual Americans and Japanese. Whether an expatriate, a business visitor, or engaged in correspondence through a home office, U.S. business players are expected to communicate with Japanese daily.

Close business ties with Japan clearly point toward the urgent necessity of improving intercultural understanding to the ends of facilitating improved communication. The high incidence of cultural and communication conflict must be examined and reduced. American managers need help in learning how to communicate effectively with Japanese associates in the workplace, through fax, telephone, and other media.

The U.S.-Japanese relationship surely calls for adaptation and mutual study of the other's business and national culture. For there is no task, expertise or specialty that can readily escape from the difficulties of crossing cultural borders and anticipating culture shock. Facilitating smoother intercultural communication is a generic, primary challenge—a calling shared throughout the business world. It requires that U.S. corporations and expatriates carefully decode Japanese protocol, studying Japanese business and social expectations. Everyday marketplace communication should not be taken for granted, nor can Americans continue to blindly assume that the Japanese or international world operates on the floorplans of U.S. culture. Japanese business culture is a labyrinth that can be systematically and strategically deciphered. Even in Western based ventures, all facets of Japanese workplace communication require investigation: introductions, business meetings, conversations between coworkers, superiors and subordinates, public speaking and

## MEDIA BRIEFING

*“JAPANESE ADVERTISING AND MARKETING MAKES  
STRATEGIC USE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE”*

... Advertisements are typically full of English words and Japanese expressions which are made up by using English words. Trade names especially carry English or English-sounding names. Sometimes such names are direct imitations of similar-sounding western trade names. . . . For example, a man named Ishibashi, which means “stone bridge” in English, started a tyre (tire) manufacturing company, and used the trade name “Bridgestone” by reversing his name and imitating the American trade name “Firestone.” A trade name may be made by adding an English word to a Japanese word so that the whole trade name sounds like an English word. Sometime ago, there was a Japanese-made car called *Datto*, which roughly translated means “rapidly running rabbit.” Later, when a new model was launched it was named “Datsun.” The word “sun” here was derived from the English word “son,” because the new car belonged to the next generation. Thus, “Datsun” means the “son” of *Datto*.

(from Michio Kitahara, *Children of the Sun: The Japanese and the Outside World*, Sandgate, Folkestone, Kent, England: Paul Norbury Publications, 1989, 121).

oral reports, negotiating, decision-making, interviewing, verbal and nonverbal communication, organizational charts, seniority and promotions, and a plethora of issues falling under the headings of business culture and business communication—Japanese style.

Similarly, U.S. companies and players must prepare for everyday, social communication in Japan. Work does not take place in isolation. Partaking in afterhours socializing, dinners, drinks, parties, holidays, travel, and other situations is an important flip side of the business culture. Once again, the expatriate must be extremely

*"SILENCE vs. TALK IN JAPANESE-U.S. ORGANIZATIONS"*

The notion that the excellent communicator is an eloquent speaker and has the "gift of gab" is a thoroughly Western perspective. This culturally derived view of the "good communicator" should be rethought in the light of the extraordinary Eastern/Japanese reverence for silence and distrust of "talkers."

careful not to assume that Western social etiquette is in effect within Japan. Many culture shocks await the unsuspecting expatriate regarding: tipping, taxis, use of utensils, paying bills, appropriate conversation at restaurant tables, differences between formal and informal communication, Japanese style toilets and bathing, honesty, trust, nudity, entertainment, and so forth.

There are those who disagree with cultural adaptation, however. They are antagonists who do not agree with the maxim, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." Essentially, the strict isolationist, nationalist or ethnocentric may not actually be "culturally blind," but rather *chooses* to turn his/her back on other cultures. They believe, to varying degrees, that Americans should act American and be under no pressure to have to adapt to Japanese or any other national culture. And even among the ranks of U.S. expatriates, you will find those who want to *consciously* continue to act, think and behave like Americans, even when engaged in Japanese companies and social life in Japan. Likewise, there are Japanese ethnocentrics who believe that Japanese culture and ways just cannot be understood by foreigners. This *nihonjinron* posture (Japan can only be understood by Japanese) is still common, and presents a series of roadblocks to the intercultural challenge of adaptation.

From the perspective taken in this book, there is no simple way of dismissing ethnocentrism and its manifestations by merely taking a liberal, integrationist or convergenist stance. It must be understood and appreciated as the "other side" of adaptation. There



are historical, philosophical and political reasons why both Japanese and Americans continue to perpetuate a separatist mentality. Some nationalists are motivated by the desire to preserve the national culture, the history and traditions, the old ways. They do not like the idea of Japanese culture being overrun with Americana. And some Americans deeply believe that American ways should not be tampered with. How we socialize, do business, and enter global markets is the standard of the entire world. Why succumb to alien protocol? to Japanese?

While the ethnocentric and nationalistic sentiments may have their place, U.S. expatriates in Japan are virtually doomed unless they, at least on the surface, learn how to operate in a *bicultural* fashion. If the speaking of Japanese language is not mandatory, the study of Japanese communication style and cultural influences in business and social life are prerequisites for doing business with Japanese. For as much as Japanese have hired me to teach them how to be “actors” in the “theater” of American business and society, so can U.S. expatriates greatly profit from this increased repertoire. It is this belief in the soundness and viability of cultural adaptation, learning the cultural and communicative behaviors and expectations of Japanese, that underlies the mission and scope of this book.

### **Breaking Through Ethnocentrism and Separatism**

A high degree of ethnocentrism or separatism is contrary to the bicultural goals of joint ventures, or multicultural goals of multinational organizations. Yet because ethnocentrism and separatism represent threats to intercultural adaptation, it merits brief analysis.

Within the U.S. there are various segregationist and separatist movements juxtaposed to the integrationist, multiculturalist factions. This is particularly pronounced in the U.S. workforce, as Anglos, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, East Asians, Native Americans, and others are working side-by-side. Some separatists, for example, want rebuilding of the inner city infrastructures, to the end of generating Afro-American businesses. A few go to the extreme of calling outsiders “devils.” But within the large corporations, there is little choice but to adapt to cultural diversity, learn how cultural codes and backgrounds affect workproduct and habits, and strive for a communication able to bridge the differences and build upon similarities.

For Japanese corporations opening up U.S. based branches, diversity represents a serious problem, as they are even less skilled and experienced than Americans in this arena. In an effort to sidestep multicultural, interracial, and interethnic "problems," Japanese have been careful to situate in non-urban, more rural locales, predominantly populated by Anglos (and if possible, away from the influence of the unions).

Although the forces of ethnocentrism and separatism are in part *responses* to the threats of culture shock and "infiltration," their numerous manifestations can be traced in Japanese history. Unlike Americans, Japanese have spent extended periods of time, separated from the outside world. Intent upon keeping "Japan for the Japanese," and expelling all foreign culture and influence, the two hundred year seclusion declared by the Shogunate Order of 1639, kept most *gaijin*, outside. In contrast to the early Japanese "bashing" of Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, Korean, and Chinese, and a movement toward a "purification" of Japanese culture, colonial America was a land of diversity. Both on the frontier, and in the early factories of the late nineteenth century, American business and workers came from all of Europe and around the globe.

After centuries spent idolizing, mimicking, borrowing, adapting language, culture, and socialization processes from the Chinese, Japan repeatedly attempted to offset and reverse the perception of Japan held by China, as the lowliest and most barbaric nation of East Asia. Turning for brief periods to the influences of Portugal, Spain, and Holland, the exposure led to intensified feelings of ethnocentrism, separatism, and nationalism. The order of 1639 was the ultimate act of ethnocentrism—it was a decree to protect Japanese culture from outside influences—both renouncing their lowly status within the East Asian community and declaring their superiority to the barbarians of the West.

The shogunate and emperor, along with unyielding nationalists, were fierce protectionists and isolationists. A succession of cultural shocks had rocked the people of Japan, as the Western traders brought their Anglo faces, strange languages, large bodies, peculiar artifacts, dangerous weapons, advanced maritime vessels, exotic foods, bizarre clothing, and many startling innovations. To be bombarded and blitzkrieged with the messages, talk, ideas, philosophy, and religion(s) of the huge, bearded strangers, was a great source of fear and concern. The final solution offered by the regime was the seclusion.

The *gaijin* had to be expelled, kept at a distance, not allowed to mingle and mix with the pure, aspiring jewel of the Far East. *Gaijin* bashings and *nihonjinron* nationalism were the common topics of the two hundred year seclusion, serving as a prelude to even more troublesome episodes within the twentieth century. The spokespersons for the land of the rising sun spoke a tough, ethnocentric language of distrust to the militarily and technologically superior Westerners. The objective was to preserve the Japanese status quo against the *gaijin* invasion.

Certain reservations and qualifications were articulated during the two hundred year period. Trade and business was substantially reduced with the Dutch and Chinese, the Chinese in Japan were limited to residency in a small territory within Nagasaki, and the Dutch constrained to the island of Deshima, in the Nagasaki harbor. But ironically, the continued practice of learning the Dutch language, considered at the time to be an international vehicle for communication—also illustrated the less than total commitment to the seclusion.

News of the end of China's seclusion via the Opium War, and the emerging world order of the middle nineteenth century, forced Japanese to reconsider their stance of separatism. Finally, the arrival of the celebrated and infamous Commodore Perry supplied the impetus for the opening of the island nation to the world community. With Perry's display of staggering U.S. technology and his ability to address the Emperor and the highest ranking officials of Japan, groundwork was set for the ensuing Emperor Meiji and the Meiji Period (1868–1912).

During the Meiji Period, Japanese reversed the trends of ethnocentrism and isolationism in favor of adaptation, assimilation, and embracements of U.S. and Western culture. Japanese believed that they had met their technological and military superiors, and were more inclined to absorb the lessons of the U.S. and Europe, than to resist.

In the Meiji Period, the great Japanese educational reformer, maverick and rebel, Yukichi Fukuzawa, made frequent trips to the U.S. and Europe, learning Western educational methods. Through the venue of a private school in Japan, Fukuzawa attempted to bring the adversarial and argumentative communication style to Japan. He believed that for Japanese to succeed in the international community they would have to rethink their Buddhist and Confucianist based practices of silence, group harmony, and their distaste for uttering harsh, face-provoking language. Fukuzawa

*“WOMEN AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS”*

Gender is a volatile intercultural issue in international business. Despite obvious Japanese awareness of the Western women's movement (via the media), many of Japan's organizations are headed by traditionalists who remain extremely uncomfortable in dealing with top U.S. female CEOs, leaders and managers. How to negotiate this difficult problem requires careful consideration of not only current exigencies but cultural lineage as well. Some experienced U.S. repatriates and consultants advise that American female managers, doing business with Japanese in Japan, should be initially accompanied by a high ranking male from the U.S. headquarters.

tried largely in vain to get Japanese to learn oratory, debate, and the art of lawyer-like speaking. After all, they had to deal with foreign markets, negotiators, and were considering starting the Japanese equivalent of the British Parliament—now the Japanese Diet. Wouldn't the art of persuasive speaking and argument be a necessary import from the West?

In more recent years, the Japanese trend of reversing the seclusion and absorbing Western culture and ideas has been particularly prevalent in the areas of business and management. World famous Japanese development of total quality management, quality circles and other marketplace breakthroughs have all been reinventions of U.S. management innovations. Borrowing directly from the likes of Armand Feigenbaum (total quality control) and Demming and Juran (quality circles), Japanese regrouped after their devastation during World War II, to rebuild management and manufacturing.

Perhaps the key to Japanese adaptation is the way in which they have placed a personalized, cultural stamp on all absorptions. U.S. management theories were reconstituted with pivotal aspects of Japanese national culture and the practices of everyday life.

And the collectivist group orientation of Japanese culture was enfolded as a crucial ingredient in the uniquely Japanese surge toward quality control, improvement, team building and worker-management solidarity.

## Implications

The diverse issues raised in this chapter can have direct impact upon Americans doing business with Japanese, or preparing for visits and expatriations. It is vital that U.S. business people realize that cultural preparation is central to breaking through a multitude of otherwise unexpected barriers or *culture shocks*. Key areas of concern in expatriations and business sojourns to Japan include:

1. Identification of typical images of culture shocks experienced by the new U.S. expatriate manager in Japan;
2. How inexperienced U.S. expatriates view Japanese managerial, business and organizational communication and cultural practices, and struggle with contrasts to U.S. practices;
3. How Japanese corporate and business hosts view the guest U.S. expatriates; how Japanese see the typical cultural clashes;
4. Recognition of the dialectic and struggle between cultural adaptation and ethnocentrism;
5. Identification of the importance of intercultural adaptation in business relationships with Japanese;
6. Cognizance of sharply contrasting rules and etiquette regarding appropriate communication in the joint venture workplace, and a readiness to investigate Japanese communication practices and expectations in various business venues;
7. Appreciation of the historical roots of the Japanese "nihon-jinron" syndrome, ethnocentrism and separatism, and its impact on current U.S.-Japanese business relations;
8. An ability to *anticipate* culture shocks, infractions, insults and misunderstandings; this represents an alternative to trial and error intercultural diplomacy;

9. Recognition of the need to become increasingly bicultural in the course of expatriations and extended business associations with Japanese companies, markets, customers, and audiences; and
10. A dire need for intercultural communication training in meeting the challenge of operating as a *gaijin* and stranger within Japanese social and corporate culture.