Tanja Fuß

NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE JAPANESE

Overcoming Intercultural Communication Hurdles

AUSSENHANDELSPOLITIK UND -PRAXIS

Herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. Jörn Altmann

ISSN 1614-3582

Tanja Fuß

NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE JAPANESE

Overcoming Intercultural Communication Hurdles

ibidem-Verlag
Stuttgart

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Dieser Titel ist als Printversion im Buchhandel
oder direkt bei ***ibidem*** (www.ibidem-verlag.de) zu beziehen unter der

ISBN 978-3-89821-420-6.

∞

ISSN: 1614-3582

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-5420-3

Outline

1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

Japan is the second largest economic power in the world after the USA.[1] At the same time, it is probably the culture the most foreign to the other large economic powers of the world, which are, with the exception of the Russian Federation, all Western countries.

Japan's economic development, its modernity and degree of industrialization may lead to the assumption that there are no major differences in the Japanese way of thinking, motivations and value system to those of Western cultures. This is a dangerous misconception.

Japan has imported many elements of Western cultures, but these elements are always only isolated segments which never form a system functioning by itself. The Japanese culture can be compared to a language with its own structure and grammar, which has adapted a lot of foreign words that are superficially recognizable to foreigners, but which have hardly touched the basic social grammar.[2] Dressing similarly, buying the same products and using the same fashionable words by no means constitutes a common culture. "These rather superficial manifestations of culture are sometimes mistaken for all there is; the deeper, underlying level of values, which moreover determine the meaning for people of their practices, is overlooked. Studies at the values level continue to show impressive differences among nations…"[3]

Japan has a long history of adopting foreign practices, symbols and views. Change is not considered negative, and seldom meets with strong resistance. However, superficial changes in attitude and behaviour hardly ever influences the invariable basic character of human relationships and group dyna-

---

[1] cf. MPHPT (2003), p. 25

[2] Nakane (1985), p. 200

[3] Hofstede (2003), p. 181

mics.[4] Rather than replacing a tradition, a new concept of acting and thinking is merely added to the existing patterns and exercised in parallel. Many experts consider it unlikely that basic cultural values will change faster than within a century timeframe.[5]

While being considered as highly westernised, Japan and Japanese behaviour is simultaneously often perceived as incomprehensibly exotic, irrational and even absurd.

There seems to be a considerable lack of information to base interpretation of Japanese behaviour on in the West. Both in literature and in the author's experience, there is a lot of potential for intercultural misunderstandings, miscommunications and problems in this lack. This is further enhanced by the Japanese inexperience in intercultural contacts. Though they tend to be more aware of (at least superficial) differences between them and Westerners, they don't seem to have developed an appropriate code of conduct for interacting with strangers, leading to considerable insecurity on their part when confronted with a foreigner.[6] Internationalisation (国際化 *kokusaika*) is an ideal highly valued in Japan, but exercising it in an island country whose recent history contains almost 300 years of total isolation from the rest of the world still happens often more in theory than in practice.

What further aggravates the situation is that it is obviously difficult to acknowledge the fact that cultural differences induce different behaviour than that one considers 'normal' at home.

> "Everybody looks at the world from behind the windows of a cultural home and everybody prefers to act as if people from other countries have something special about them (a national character) but home is normal.

---

[4] Nakane (1985), p. 199

[5] cf. Hofstede (2003), pp. 46-47

[6] Nakane (1985), pp. 176-177

> Unfortunately, there is no normal position in cultural matters. This is an uncomfortable message, as uncomfortable as Galileo Galilei's claim in the seventeenth century that the Earth is not the center of the Universe."[7]

Equally unfortunately, it is obviously just as hard to believe as Galilei's finding has been to his contemporaries. Instead, when encountering unfamiliar behaviour in foreign interaction partners, many people automatically assume a fault in character as the cause, never considering that the other person might act according to a different value system, which is neither inferior nor superior to one's own.

Even for foreigners willing to accept the existence of differing cultural values, when trying to "learn" a new culture, it is not easy to discern and understand the underlying value system. "In a way, the visitor in a foreign culture returns to the mental state of an infant, in which he or she has to learn the simplest things over again. This usually leads to feelings of distress, of helplessness, and of hostility towards the new environment."[8]

It seems intercultural conflicts are inevitable in such circumstances. There are countless examples for problems in interacting with the Japanese (some of which will be included in this book, see chapter 2.2) which have merely arisen for cultural reasons. In fact, problems of intercultural communication and adaptation are the main cause for Western expatriates prematurely leaving Japan.[9] To the author's knowledge, there are no statistics on the relation between failure of international negotiations and intercultural misunderstandings. But in her more than ten years of experience in Japanese-Western

---

[7] Hofstede (2003), p. 235
[8] Hofstede (2003), p. 209
[9] cf. Kühlmann (1995), pp. 2-...?:

business relations, almost every major conflict encountered could be traced down to cultural rather than personal or factual reasons.

This is at once unsettling and encouraging. Unsettling, because there is obviously a lot of completely unnecessary conflict. Encouraging, because it can be avoided by the appropriate preparation of intercultural contacts. And even in case misunderstandings have already occurred, they can frequently be resolved through clarifying communication and adaptation of behaviour.[10]
After all, as opposed to conflicts related to factual differences, culture-based conflicts are neither necessary nor usually wanted by the parties involved, and thus avoiding them is to the benefit of everyone.

1.2 Objectives and approach

This book pursues three major objectives.
First, the characteristics of Japanese culture and their differences from Western cultures shall be described, **identifying potential sources of conflict**. The focus will lie on characteristics relevant for business contacts and negotiations.
These descriptions will be supported by a number of practical examples, all of which have been taken from the author's own experience in dealing with Japanese interaction partners. By supplementing theory with practice, it will become more obvious to the reader how situations that merely seem strange to the average Westerner can be **analysed for underlying cultural values** with the appropriate knowledge.
Finally, the book will present various ways of coping with intercultural complications and **solving conflicts**, as well as avoiding conflicts altogether and making use of possible cross-cultural synergies.

---

[10] cf. Dülfer (1996), p. 387

This book is not intended to be an instruction manual on how to behave in Japan: there will be no information on how to use chopsticks or hand over business cards or on the appropriate angle of bowing when meeting a superior. It is meant to enable the reader to analyse situations, to sensitise him for possible causes of conflict, and to impart enough knowledge about the Japanese culture for him to act and communicate successfully in Japan. However, one has to keep in mind that there are no standard situations: "It has been stated many times that each cross-cultural relationship is not only a complex situation, it is also a unique situation which has to be understood individually in each case."[11] However, for describing a supposedly homogeneous culture and its characteristics, as well as its variances from other supposedly homogeneous cultures, some general assumptions have to be made. Therefore, this book will contain generalizations like 'the Japanese' and 'the Westerners', pretending there is any such thing as a typical member of a culture behaving in a predictably typical way.
Particularly, the reader should keep in mind that some of the assumptions concerning working life and ideals are only true for large Japanese enterprises and their permanent employees. However, these are probably the negotiation partners he is most likely to encounter.

Generally, the point of view the book assumes will be that of a Western member of an organisation or company negotiating with his Japanese counterpart. The Western negotiator is assumed to be in the weaker position (e.g. a vendor trying to convince a customer of his products), so he is forced to comply with the Japanese cultural requirements to some extent.

[11] Gullestrup (2003/2004), p. 15

Negotiation, in this book, is understood in a very wide sense, not restricting the term to formal meetings with an agenda and professional negotiators. Rather, negotiation is considered to happen whenever people communicate in order to achieve a certain result or target.[12] As stated before, the focus of the book lies on business life, so the negotiation targets tend to be business-related. No special attention will be dedicated to political negotiation, although of course many statements are equally applicable to business and political negotiation situations.

What is not part of this book is researching the reasons for cultural differences and characteristics. Occasionally these may be briefly touched upon, but they will not even constitute a side issue, as the topic is much too complex and requires a totally different approach (plus much more space than available here).
Equally, there will be no information regarding sub-cultures or local cultures. For the sake of generalization, one more or less homogeneous Japanese culture is assumed.
Finally, clarification is required on what is actually meant by "Western". The countries that have been by arbitrary definition of the author included in this term are Northern America, Western Europe (excluding Turkey and Eastern Europe), and Australia. Still, there almost certainly will be a bias towards Germany, the USA and the UK, these being the cultures the author has most experience with apart from Japan.

[12] cf. Gaspardo (2000), p. 3

1.3 Framework for intercultural business negotiations

There are various situational contexts in which negotiations between Westerners and Japanese can occur. As stated before, the weaker position will be assumed for the Western negotiator, so situations in which the Japanese would have to adapt to the Westerner's requirements are deliberately left out in the following.

One large group of negotiation situations is communication between people working together for the same company or organisation. This can happen in several variations:

First, one can be assigned to Japan as an employee of a foreign company's subsidiary. Usually, this happens to managers or technical experts. Both will be highly dependent not only on the co-operation of their colleagues for succeeding in their business target, but also on their help for mastering daily life an a country as foreign as Japan. Especially if they do not speak the language, simple tasks like buying a train ticket or ordering food in a restaurant can be hard to accomplish. Moreover, the foreigner is removed from his social environment and may experience a considerable culture shock, which further complicates successful communication with the Japanese especially in the early phases of the assignment.

Usually, there are four phases to acculturation for expatriates in a foreign country: the first is termed euphoria or honeymoon, as in the beginning of the stay, the country and culture is regarded in a similar way as when travelling for tourism: only the positive, exciting and curious aspects are realized. This usually short phase is followed by culture shock, when the visitor realizes that the differences he experienced so far are only the surface of a completely different value system, and that he doesn't have enough information to judge or predict even basic situations. In the third phase, acculturation sets in as the