

Cross-Cultural Business Tips



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Winning on the Cross Cultural Battlefields.

Japan - still not ready for 'kaizen'

The Japanese word kaizen originates from the two signs Kai (change) and Zen (good) and means continual change for the better. When used in business, kaizen refers to all activities which would help improve functions, proceedings and operational standards. Successfully applied during the restoration period after the Second World War, Japan has lost contact with that powerful (and beautiful) word and how it could be used today.

改善

Change is not really on Japan's mind. Any corrections, adjustments, or flexibility towards standards and rules, are unappreciated and thus unfruitful. Kaizen sounds great, but has almost disappeared in today's values and behaviours.

During a recent business trip to Tokyo, I noticed that (cultural) values & behaviours have not changed in practice since my 6-year stay there in the early 80ies. While the metropolis, until the mid-90ies and now for about another decade, has been perfecting its infrastructure and building entire business districts in a most impressive fashion (i.e. Shinbashi), the way people feel, behave and communicate has not changed.

And this is by all means not an exclusive issue with gaijins (foreigners), but equally valid among the Japanese themselves. The lack of communication is evident everywhere and deeply rooted in Confucius' teaching and Japan's highly hierarchical society. Superiors are to be respected, unconditionally, and all structures followed. Breaking-away from the norm (doubting, questioning or even suggesting changes) is not an option.

The fact that, across Japan, English is still not spoken well is actually irrelevant. Because translation services are available (simultaneous translation though often of low quality), but that does not help in day-to-day negotiation or operational proceedings. The difficult thing is to understand the thinking, the meaning, and the objectives behind it. Nonetheless, after being in the global economy game for nearly 40 years and with the ever-strong US-presence in daily life (political

system, news, sports, pop culture), it is hardly comprehensible why Japan does not speak English better. And in fact, not even in the globally-oriented hospitality-industry: GM of deluxe hotels, sales manager of transportation companies, Chef-de-service at fine dining, and check-in staff at airline gates; if at all, they speak English badly, and uncomfortably. Most business people & politicians have the same problem. And no one wants to improve; no kaizen.

Mingle with the world

One way of learning (about the world) and how to exchange competitively would be to mix with foreigners in all aspects of life. But that's what Japanese cannot do. Immigration policies are still very strict, despite the fact that the economy could well use foreign talents and expertise. The Japanese are such a compact ethnic group, representing 98.5% of their total population. Only 1 in 60 is a foreigner; and two-thirds of them are Koreans and Chinese. So, foreign influence, whether through business, entertainment or cross-cultural marriages, is very limited. And therefore not initiating any change in business: Standard procedures dictated by the superior, the sensei, or the coach. Memorised to the last detail, unquestioned about reasons and unchallenged about the outcome. Yet, and this is amazing, incredibly committed (to clients or employers) in a way in which Europeans would never engage. But their almost blind way of working with guidelines and templates, and memorising each task, produces an almost complete lack of flexibility.

Next step 2020

A next major opportunity to welcome the world to Japan will be in 2020. The IOC awarded the Olympic Games to Tokyo and the country expects a similar

boost, both economical and social, as from the 1964 Games. No-one really expected the Japanese to be able to present a great bid, particularly in the wake of the triple-catastrophe of 2011, nor that they would be able to communicate positively and in a future-oriented way. Yet, they did, and they balanced the damaging Fukushima-issue well. Not ignoring it, nor putting it too much on the front-line. Winning issues were security, infrastructure, public transport, and of course friendliness. But, flexibility was not on the agenda, nor the ability to speak English. But both factors might become key, if the Games are to serve as a true door-opener (and PR-campaign) to the world.



Until then, foreign business people must be prepared to invest lots of time, lots of patience, and in lots of translation services.

About the Author



Daniel Tschudy is speaker and business consultant about globalisation, the shift from east to west, international marketing, cross-cultural competence, and the global hospitality industries.

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