

Current Cultural Trend on Japanese Business Communication

Shun-itsu NAKASAKO

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Principle of Universalism versus Particularism
3. Individualism versus Communitarianism
4. Neutral feeling versus Emotion expressive
5. Specific relationship versus Diffuse relationship
6. Achieved status versus Ascribed status
7. Time as sequence versus Time as synchronization
8. Internal control versus External control
9. The Reason why Japanese is not good at Negotiation
10. Tendency of Japanese People
11. Problems of Small and Medium-sized Businesses
12. High Context versus Low Context
13. Collectivism versus Individualism
14. Uncertainty Avoidance

1. Introduction

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner adapt seven cultural dimensions in order to further understand cultural diversity in business.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, understanding culture is important to solve intercultural problems and to eliminate dilemma. This idea is similar to the condition that Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck framed a theory of value orientation. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck pick up five universal is-

sues. However, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner specialize in business-related ones. They clarified seven fundamental dimensions by considering three issues : (1) Problems arising from interpersonal relationship ; (2) Attitude toward time ; and (3) Attitude to the environment.

These dimensions are in pairs, and like Hofstede's dimensions they are considered as continuum dimensions of which trend is stronger. Some dimensions are mutually complementary and are not conflicting with each other. This idea is different from Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The survey method by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner is to (1) present a scenario which involves a dilemma ; (2) present two different solutions which are opposed to each other ; (3) make people from various countries to select one of them ; and (4) analyze their answers by countries.

2. Principle of Universalism versus Particularism

This dimension is on rules and human relations. Universalism is about finding broad and general rules. When no rules fit, it finds the best rule. Universalism does not approve exception. It stands for the idea that problems should be resolved by keeping rules, standards, laws, etc. Particularism is about finding exceptions. When no rules fit, it judges the case on its own merits, rather than trying to force-fit an existing rule. The idea of particularism is to place more importance on situations or relationships rather than to respect impartial application of rules. For example, based on the idea of universalism, when a person, whether he or she is a friend or not, commits a crime, he/she has to be punished. However, based on the idea of particularism, slightly advantageous testimony can be made at the court. From the universalism point of view, particularists will be considered as distorting the rule and ignoring the equality under the law. On the other hand, particularists will regard universalists as being cold and ignores friendship and humanity.

It seems that attitudes toward business contract are affected by this dimension.

3. Individualism versus Communitarianism

This dimension is quite similar to Hofstede's individualism and collectivism.

Individualism is about the rights of the individual. It seeks to let each person grow or fail on their own, and encourage personal freedom and responsibility. Communitarianism is about the rights of the group or society. It seeks to put the family, group, company and country before the individual. It sees individualism as selfish and short-sighted. In business, difference appears on how to take responsibilities and decision-making.

4. Neutral feeling versus Emotion expressive

This dimension is on emotion and human relations. This is also related to emotions and objective logic. Neutral feeling means that people behave neutrally without showing emotions. To control the emotions as much as possible by themselves are expected. In this culture to express emotions and to act logically are considered to be separate matters. In a culture of emotion expressive, it allows to express emotions openly. In this culture to express emotions and to act logically cannot be separated. The degree of expressiveness depends on how human relations are handled.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, Americans tend to express their emotions, but they tend to separate emotions from objective and rational judgment. Italians and some southern Europeans generally express emotions and do not separate emotions from objective and rational judgment. People in Holland and in Sweden tend not to express emotions, and they generally consider that emotions are incompatible with the objectivity and rationality. Collectivism and power distance gives effect to express emotions to Japanese. For example, within a group to express joy is accepted but to express negative feelings is not allowed. When there is an order according to the titles in the company, it is not exceptional that the company high-ups express some negative feelings like anger to subordinates.

In many Japan companies, it is not uncommon that a boss yells at subordinates in front of other colleagues. Showing angry feeling to subordinates at

work is considered appropriate expression. However, negative feedback in the United States generally takes place in private locations like private offices but not in public. Negative feedback in public is interpreted as lacking objectivity. When negative feelings are expressed to a subordinate in public, he/she feels hurt and he/she feels that he/she lost face.

5. Specific relationship versus Diffuse relationship

The question of to what extent human relation is concerned is the main issue in this dimension. In case of specific relationship, involvement is limited. For example, in case of student-teacher relationship, involvement is only at school or at classroom.

In case of diffuse relationship, it will be natural to be involved with each other once acquainted. For example, in case of student-teacher relationship, involvement is not limited at school or at classroom. Even after the student graduate, the former student may ask an advice to the former teacher concerning love, marriage and some other private matters. Since private issues are concerned, it is natural that the relationship will become closer.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, low context culture is specific relationship, and high context culture is diffuse relationship.

6. Achieved status versus Ascribed status

In this dimension, how to gain status or what affects status is the issue. Achieved status is about gaining status through performance. Ascribed status is about gaining status through other means, such as seniority, social class, gender, educational background, etc. It assumes status is acquired by right rather than daily performance. In a culture where achieved status is stronger, achievement is valued to evaluate a person. A leader is selected based on his/her achievement. However, in a culture where ascribed status is stronger, seniority, educational background and other factors are valued. A leader, therefore, is selected by his/her origin, educational background, gender, etc.

7. Time as sequence versus Time as synchronization

This dimension is closely related to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's value orientation in time, and Hall's M-time (monochronic time) and P-time (polychronic time). M-time emphasizes planning and scheduling, and manages things one by one. P-time emphasizes preferences, not plan or schedule, and place importance to manage multiple things simultaneously. Time as sequence sees events as separate items in time, sequence one after another. It finds order in a serried array of actions that happen one after the other. On the other hand, time as synchronization sees events in parallel. It finds order in coordination of multiple efforts.

In business, the question is which has the priority : original schedule or a smooth working relationship with a flexible schedule.

8. Internal control versus External control

This dimension is related to the value orientation of human versus nature proposed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck. In internal control, the idea is that human beings can control environment or should control it. In external control, however, humans are part of nature so humans should keep harmony with it. How much can you control your own destiny is the issue in this dimension. "Success or failure in life is caused by you yourself" is the idea in internal control. On the other hand, "failure and success in life is out of reach of their own destiny" is the idea in external control.

The idea of internal control in business, external factors such as environment, market, customers, etc. can be controlled, and a company is considered to be an extension to reflect the intention of its operators. In the idea of external control, the survival of the company depends on how to adjust it to the external factors.

From the other point of view, internal control is about thinking and personal judgment, 'in our heads'. It assumes that thinking is the most powerful tool and that considered ideas and intuitive approaches are the best way. On the other hand, external control is seeking data in the outer world. It assumes that we live in the 'real world' and that is where we should look for

our information and decisions.

9. The Reason why Japanese is not good at Negotiation

Japanese negotiators tend to use their own styles based on their experience. Negotiation is not regarded as science. Since the other side is also the same human being, he/she will certainly understand me when I talk. It is necessary for most Japanese to consider negotiation as an activity, which should be conducted consciously.

By filling the other side's hope, initiative should be obtained and/or pre-dominance should be recovered. A new proposal deserves change. It is necessary, therefore, to impress that there are merits to the other side by emphasizing why it can fulfill his/her needs. By doing this, relations are further strengthened.

10. Tendency of Japanese People

Flexibility is missing among most Japanese who are negotiating. Japanese is used to firmly keep social rules, law, business custom, etc. Japanese hates to take risks in doing business. Typical negotiation explores ZOPA (Zone of Possible Agreement) by offering extreme positions and compromise is repeated. By repeating compromise mutually, recognition, which the negotiation process was equal, is shared, and negotiation is finally materialized. Japanese people think in many cases that they are already compromising from the beginning. Therefore, Japanese seldom compromise during the negotiating process.

Precedent is important in a Japanese society. Therefore, there is a tendency to repeat the first proposal when it gets close to the end. There is a tendency to repeat using the same logic, which the other side had previously accepted to compromise. Looking from abroad, it seems that only Japanese people are learning unique negotiation style or there is an impression from overseas that negotiation study itself does not exist in Japan. By experiencing the simulation of negotiation at western business schools, students there learn game theory. They understand that effectiveness can be maximized by cooperation of both sides. There are, however, many students who try to

forestall a partner and to achieve the greatest effect.

There is a big difference especially between western culture and Japanese culture, which tries to maintain peace, "WA." A person, who wants to reach an agreement early by compromising to the other side, is not advantageous. In many cases, Japanese who values peace is already at the compromise mode from the beginning. It is effective to mutually agree and to decide at the beginning when to terminate negotiation. Both will be troubled when the deadline comes, so both sides will try hard to reach an agreement, when it is possible. Japanese people are not good at playing zero-sum game because Japanese people tend to place emphasis on on-going, long-term, and cooperative relations.

Japanese people are good at creating a "plus sum" environment. This is to expand the whole pie in cooperation with a partner. To enlarge a mutual profit matches the soul which believes peace, *WA*, as important. Peace or *WA* can be achieved by discussing the priority to fulfill mutual needs. Japanese people place importance on *WA* and tacit comprehension. There is a strong tendency to try to find a common ground and to agree based on concession. Consciously or unconsciously Japanese people tend to seek for win-win negotiation. Japanese people tend to give priority to build or maintain long-term human relations over winning an impending match.

11. Problems of Small and Medium-sized Businesses

Small and Medium-sized companies were mainly contractors and collaborators of major companies. They placed importance on long stable business relations with major companies. They had strong and firm relations with several major companies. Their main business was to take orders from major companies, so they could concentrate on production or craftsmanship. Small and medium-sized businesses totally relied on large trading companies because trading companies had imported goods from overseas on behalf of small and medium-sized businesses. Small and medium-sized businesses did not have to carry out direct trade with foreign companies.

By the acceleration of globalization, however, business connections with previous main customers have been collapsing. Small and medium-sized en-

terprises themselves have to directly establish overseas base and/or directly do business overseas in order to cultivate markets. They were unfamiliar to do business overseas, but because of the rapid change of the business environment throughout the world, they have to be involved in international business themselves.

12. High Context versus Low Context

There is a variety of possible interpretations on “context” depending on backgrounds. When context, situation, background, or perceptual framework is shared, in general, high context will be materialized. High context and low context exist even in the same organization, company, country, or race. Therefore, a statement that Japanese culture is high context and American culture is low context does not apply every time.

Definition of high context environment is as follows : When the degree of shared context is high, the intention of each other can be mutually understood and communication between each other is smooth without any problem. It is not necessary to make a serious effort to tell and/or understand a message at high context environment.

Definition of low context environment goes as follows : When the degree of shared context is low, communication via language become very active. In order to avoid conflict, expressions by language usually become rich and/or long. It is necessary to aggressively perform logical thinking, argument, persuasion, and negotiation in a low context environment by paying more attention on modes of expression, and methods of explanation. A belief, such as “we can understand each other easily because we are Japanese or because we are Asians,” is a superstition.

Japanese language is often said that it is ambiguous. In many cases, however, Japanese language is often used vaguely and many Japanese are so used to its indirect and unclear use in their daily lives. English language, on the other hand, is said to be a straight language. In many cases, however, straight expressions are used.

13. Collectivism versus Individualism

In a Japanese society people place more value on collective profits than individual profits. Profits of group have priority over individual profits. In Japan there is a fear to be separated from a group. Within the group, order of group principle and order to watch each other within a group is formed. Action, which is adapted within a group, should be taken by all the group members. A system to make people cooperate within a group is formed. Peace, *WA*, is respected in cooperation with others. In Japan, culture absorbs or embeds people's individual preferences. Japanese group principle : This is incorporated in the system of Japanese society rather than in the heart of Japanese people.

There is a tendency to avoid unfavorable criticism in Japanese society. People worry the eyes of others, dislike confrontation with others, and cares about others' evaluation. Self-assertion is weak and there is a tendency to avoid taking risks. Action within a system is not consistent with people's preferential individual behavior. This is the cause of the strong avoidance to take risks.

It is necessary to actively introduce a system to contact or to establish exchange programs with educational institutions overseas. Training people to be willing to experience anything and to have full of positive challenging mind is urgent. Opportunities to contact foreigners have to be increased. According to the Interim report of the meeting of global personnel training promotion (June 2012) by Keidanren, outbound is defined as follows : (1) More contact with foreign students studying in Japan ; (2) Promote Japanese to participate in volunteer activities overseas ; and (3) Promote vocational training for Japanese to become globally talented. Inbound is defined as Preferential treatment of the immigration control system to foreigners who have outstanding work experience and track record.

It is necessary to improve the inner intention of Japanese business personnel who are unwilling to work overseas, increase the number of people to study overseas, and improve the proficiency level of English among Japanese.

14. Uncertainty Avoidance

Japanese people, both young and old, tend to dislike taking a risk. When social risk can be avoided, Japanese people take individual preferential action. When social risk is unavoidable, Japanese people place importance on group principle which is incorporated in the Japanese society as a system, and try to avoid uncertainty.

Generally, people trust others more in individualistic culture. However, in culture of collectivism, people trust their group member but do not trust people who are not their group member. This is why Japanese people and organizations generally prefer transaction cost, and try to avoid to take opportunity cost.

The characteristics of transaction cost are as follows : (1) Business is conducted only with specific people who is trustworthy ; (2) Deal only with specific manufacturers ; (3) Deal only with limited people or companies ; and (4) Risk is low, but the opportunity is limited. Opportunity cost can be characterized as follows : (1) Deal with anybody and/or company ; (2) Many and unspecified persons and companies can enter into business ; and (3) Risk is high, but the opportunity is rich.

Because of the influence of globalization, to value opportunity cost has been getting more popular since transaction cost is a lot more expensive than opportunity cost. New characteristics of Japanese people and society should be explored in order to further improve the communication skills of Japanese people at international settings. Without paying attention from a global perspective, Japan cannot survive successfully in a global society. Higher educational institutes should be responsible in training the students to open-up their minds and to give a lot more practical opportunities to have experience overseas, to further understand foreign culture, and to promote Japanese culture to the people in the world.

References

- Kluckhohn, F. R. & Strodtbeck, F. L. (1961). *Variations in Value Orientations*. Evanston, IL : Row, Peterson, 1961.

- Bazerman, M. H. & Neale, M. A. (1992). *Negotiating Rationally*. New York : Free Press.
- Fisher, R., Shapiro, D. & Schneider, A. K. (1996). *Beyond Machiavelli : Tools for Coping with Conflict*. New York : Penguin Books.
- Trompenaars, F. & Hampden-Turner, C. (1997). *Riding the Waves of Culture : Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business* (2nd ed.). London : Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Fisher, R., Walter, T. & Shapiro, D. (2005). *Beyond Reason : Using Emotions as You Negotiate*. New York : Penguin Books.
- Fisher, R. & Ury, W. (2011). *Getting To Yes : Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (3rd ed.). New York : Penguin Books.
- Lewicki, R., Barry, B. & Saunders, D. (2009). *Negotiation : Readings, Exercises, and Cases* (6th ed.). New York : McGraw-Hill.
- Yashiro, K., Machi, E., Koike, H. & Yoshida, T. (2009). *Ibunka Training : Borderless Shakai o Ikiru*. Tokyo : Sanshu Sha.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and Organizations : Software of the Mind* (3rd ed.). New York : McGraw-Hill.
- Lewicki, R., Barry, B. & Saunders, D. (2010). *Essentials of Negotiation* (5th ed.). New York : McGraw-Hill/Irwin.
- Sakuma, K. (2011). *Kosho Ryoku Nyumon*. Tokyo : Nikkei Publishing Inc.
- Keidanren (2011). *Sangyo Kai no Motomeru Jinzaizo to Daigaku Kyoiku he no Kitai ni Kansuru Anketo Kekka*. Tokyo : Keidanren.
- Keidanren (2012). *Interim Report of the Meeting of Global Personnel Training Promotion*. Tokyo : Keidanren.

