
Jason Goes to Japan: Navigating a Cross-Cultural Encounter

A Case Study

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Abstract

Today, the world has become a global village. Almost every organization is doing business with other companies across the world. Workplaces have become culturally very diverse. Employees are working on cross-cultural teams. This diversity leads to the requirement of communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, who differ in their beliefs, values and attitudes. These cross-cultural encounters are fraught with difficulties. In order to succeed, it is imperative for individuals and organizations to be proactive and understand and respect the ways of other cultures. This will help them to adapt to different cultures with ease.

This case presents an encounter between an American salesperson and a Japanese businessperson. It illustrates some of the differences that exist in the two cultures in terms of dress sense, greetings, body language and beliefs. It is aimed at helping the reader to understand the importance of cultural adaptation and the results of ignoring the cultural differences that exist between people from different cultures. It emphasizes that it is wrong to believe that what works here will also work there.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Communication, Managerial Communication, Intercultural Relations

Introduction

Jason Brown, the Sales Manager at TRW Automotive, was very excited. His boss had just told him that he had to travel to Japan to meet three prospective clients. It was the first time that he was going to Japan. He was very happy that he would have a chance to travel and meet people from a different cultural background.

Just this morning, Jason's boss, Mr. Ray Johnson, had briefed him about the need to build a strategic partnership with three of the major Japanese automobile majors that they had identified. His job would be to convince them about the efficacy of TRW's active and passive safety systems. He thought to himself that this should be an easy task given his experience of 5 years. He was positive that he would be able to get them to ink the deal.

Background

TRW Automotive is a developer and producer of active and passive safety systems for automobiles. It is headquartered in Michigan, USA. They serve all major vehicle manufacturers worldwide and have manufacturing facilities in nearly 20 countries. With the importance being accorded to passenger safety, TRW has also entered into driver assist and semi-automated functions today, such as adaptive cruise control, lane keeping assist, blind spot detection, lane change assist, emergency steering assist, and emergency brake assist and collision mitigating mechanisms. They intend to make mobility safe, efficient and sustainable with their prowess over technology.

TRW wishes to enter into the Japanese market which they have not tapped as yet. Japan has a very strong automotive industry. It has been in the top three countries of the world that has manufactured the most cars since the 1960s, surpassing Germany. The country is home to a number of companies that produce cars, construction vehicles, motorcycles, ATVs, and engines. Japanese automotive manufacturers include Toyota, Honda, Daihatsu, Nissan, Suzuki, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Subaru, Isuzu, Kawasaki, Yamaha, and Mitsuoaka.

TRW wants to enter into a partnership with Nissan, Suzuki and Mitsubishi. It is for this reason that Jason has been asked by his boss to go to Japan. He has to demonstrate his company's products to the Japanese companies and convince them to enter into a partnership. Mr. Johnson briefs Jason about the importance of striking a deal with the three companies and asks him to be well prepared for the meeting with his Japanese counterparts.

Preparation

Jason thinks about how he should prepare to meet the officials from the three automotive companies. He finds out about the companies and their market position. He learns about the other players in the automobile safety systems industry and their products. He also learns about international transactions and how they are carried out. He prepares a nice presentation that captures the essence of TRW and its products. With this, he is ready for the trip.

Meeting with the Nissan team

Jason arrives in Tokyo and checks into his hotel. His meeting is on the next day at 10:30 AM with the team from Nissan. He wakes up early and gets ready for the meeting. Since it is very hot, he decides to wear a T-shirt and shorts to the meeting. This is common practice in the US and he does not give it a second thought.

He arrives at the venue early and sits down to check his presentation. The team from Nissan arrives just before 10:30 AM and enters the room. All the members are dressed in black suits. Jason continues to work even after they have entered the room. He greets them cheerfully from across the room. They look at him in a strange manner and exchange glances with each other. The lady in the team looks disgusted.

After the initial greetings, the oldest member of the team, Mr. Kurosawa, presents his card to Jason. Jason accepts it and puts it in his pocket. At that moment, Jason realizes that he has forgotten his card and apologizes for the same. He jokes about the card not being important and laughs. The team from Nissan does not seem to be amused. All the remaining team members present their cards to Jason and introduce themselves.

After the introductions, Jason says "Well, let's get down to business right away." The team seems puzzled. Jason starts his presentation and explains about his company and its products. Mr. Kurosawa interrupts his presentation of 1 hour once or twice. Jason sees the audience exchange glances and say something from time to time but cannot seem to decipher what they are saying. At the end of his presentation there is silence.

Jason does not know what to make of the silence. He breaks the silence by saying "I hope you liked my presentation. I believe that our companies can forge a strategic alliance and we must not waste any more time. Here are the documents. Let's sign them right away. If you need to

negotiate on any of the clauses, we can do so right now.” His words are again met with silence. Jason is perplexed.

After a while, Mr. Kurosawa says “We cannot sign the deal now. We need time.” All the team members rise. Mr. Kurosawa invites Jason to join them for lunch. Jason is uncertain of the outcome of the meeting. He hopes that they can continue the discussion over lunch.

At lunch, Jason finds that no one is speaking. Everyone seems to be enjoying their meal. Jason struggles through the meal and tries to strike a conversation with the person seated closest to him. But, he does not seem to be interested. He talks to him about the upcoming baseball game and his favourite team. His Japanese counterpart does not seem to appreciate his enthusiasm for the game as it is alien to him. He tries to ask him if he liked TRW’s products. The man merely nods his head.

At the end of the meal, Mr. Kurosawa tells Jason that they would communicate with him shortly. Jason does not know what he should be doing. He thanks the team for their hospitality and leaves. He is convinced that he had done a good job. His presentation had been very well prepared and he had spoken well. He expects a positive response from the Nissan team.

Two days later, Jason receives a mail from Nissan regretting their inability to enter into a partnership with TRW. This is a major loss for Jason and TRW. He has failed in his attempt to convince Nissan. Jason cannot seem to understand what went wrong. He doesn’t know what to do now. Should he return home or meet the remaining automobile majors? What should he do differently to win the confidence of the other teams?

Notes:

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede defined 6 cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001). They are:

1. Power Distance

Power Distance is defined as *the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally* (Hofstede, 2001). In certain countries, the power distance is high while in others it is low.

As per research findings, America scores 40 on this dimension, while Japan scores 54. In American society, there is great emphasis on equal rights for all. All superiors are easily accessible. Managers consult employees for their expertise. Communication is generally informal, direct and participative. Decisions are taken very quickly.

Japan is a borderline hierarchical society. Decision making is very slow as all decisions have to be confirmed by higher ups. Directions are given by the boss and followed by the subordinates. (Hofstede, n.d)

2. Individualism

Individualism is *the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members*. In certain societies, the individual is important and such societies are known as individualist societies. Here, the individual’s achievements and success are given great importance. In other societies, the group is given importance and such a society is termed to be collectivist. Here, individuals are expected to act for the greater good of the group and not for themselves (Hofstede, 2001).

On this dimension, America has a high score of 91. This is evidenced in the way the individual is considered as important in society. Employees are expected to be self-reliant and display initiative. Individual achievements and success are given importance.

Japan has a score of 46. The harmony of the group is considered to be more important than expression of individual opinion. The collectivist side indicates that people like to belong to a group. Their family, colleagues, friends etc. influence the actions of individuals. They are very loyal to their companies and in most cases people work for one company till they retire. (Hofstede, n.d)

3. **Masculinity**

Masculinity implies a society that lays great emphasis on achievement, success and competition. A feminine society emphasizes caring for others and having a good quality of life (Hofstede, 2001).

America scores 62 on this dimension while Japan scores a 95. America is considered to be a Masculine society and a visual display of success and power are considered important here. Americans tend to talk freely about their successes and achievements in life.

Japan is one of the most masculine societies in the world. The focus is on success and achievements which are measured in terms of material gains. (Hofstede, n.d)

4. **Uncertainty Avoidance**

The dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance relates to the way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Different cultures deal with this in different ways. Some prefer to take things as they come and believe in destiny while others try to eliminate any uncertainty that exists (Hofstede, 2001).

America has a below average score of 46 on this dimension and Japan has a score of 92. In America, there is an acceptance for new ideas, innovative products and they are always willing to try something new. Americans are more tolerant and respect others ideas.

Japan is one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries on earth. This is owing to the fact that Japan is constantly threatened by natural disasters. A lot of time and effort is put into feasibility studies and risk factors are worked out for each project. Any change is thus very difficult to realize. (Hofstede, n.d)

5. **Long Term Orientation**

This dimension describes how a society maintains its links with the past while preparing for the future. Some societies who have a low long term orientation score prefer to maintain their traditions and do not welcome change. Other societies who have a high score are more accepting of changes and give a lot of importance to education and consider it as a way to prepare for the future (Hofstede, 2001).

On this dimension, America scores a 26 and Japan scores an 88. American businesses measure their performance on a short-term basis. They also strive for quick results. Japan is considered as one of the most long term oriented societies. They believe that you have only one life and you need to do your best. They also believe that companies are not here to make money but to serve stakeholders and society for many generations to come. (Hofstede, n.d)



6. Indulgence

This dimension is defined as *the extent to which people indulge their desires. If they give in to their desires with ease, it is called indulgence. If they control their desires, it is called restraint.* "Restraint". Cultures can, therefore, be described as Indulgent or Restrained (Hofstede, 2001).

America receives a score of 68 on this dimension and Japan's score is 42. In America, the popular adage "Work hard, play hard.", tells us about the indulgent nature of its people. Japanese culture is one of restraint. In this culture, there is not much emphasis on leisure. They feel that indulgence is wrong and control their desires. Such societies have people who are highly pessimistic and cynical.

References

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