Opposite Sides of a Shared Desk: *Inside the Japanese-American Bicultural Workplace*

By Jennifer Jakubowski

Societal expectations, cultural norms, communication patterns, work philosophies, and numerous other inherent behaviors shadow individuals through their childhoods, educations, and ultimately into their workplaces.

By a multitude of measures, Japan and the United States are among the most polar-opposite cultures on the planet. Japanese society dates back millennia; the United States, by comparison, is but a teenager. Japan embodies one of the most homogeneous populations in the world; the United States is the quintessential melting pot. The axis on which Japanese society rotates is one of group-based mentality and behavior; the United States foremost fosters and rewards individualism. Hierarchy has a long and prominent role in Japan; competition and meritocracy have largely driven the American narrative. Such contrasts represent a mere glimpse of the fuller picture.

Not surprisingly, such wide-ranging and profound cultural differences manifest themselves in work settings. Societal expectations, cultural norms, communication patterns, work philosophies, and numerous other inherent behaviors shadow individuals through their childhoods, educations, and ultimately into their workplaces. We are all, as they say, a product of our past. As such, Americans and Japanese arrive in bicultural workplaces, in the proverbial sense, on opposite sides of a shared desk.

For twenty-five years, I have worked with Japanese companies conducting business in the United States, predominantly with Japanese leadership at the helm of a ship powered largely by an American workforce. Hands down, the most compelling aspect of this work has been witnessing, time and again, how the deep-seated cultural differences color professional landscapes, impacting everything from career paths and priorities to legal risk management to everyday decision-making and beyond. Interestingly, these trends span across industries to a remarkable degree. Whether it is a tea company in New York City, a California-based airline, or an automobile factory in Michigan, I have been struck by the consistency of patterns stemming from cultural differences that permeate almost every organization I have encountered. Five aspects of workplace culture illustrate this point.

Career Paths

One of the most striking differences between Japanese and American workforces lies in their general approach to career paths. Simply put, the typical Japanese worker is destined to become an expert in their company, while the American worker is focused on becoming an expert in a particular skill base. This difference manifests itself in two main ways in the workplace, both of which have a significant impact on business operations. First, Americans will not hesitate to transition to another company for a better opportunity to advance their skillset (or their pocketbook) and, as they see it, to enhance their careers. The Japanese, on the other hand, change jobs far less frequently, as they are building currency within their company in exchange for job stability; there is an implicit acceptance of the terms of employment and not a lot of push back or jumping ship. As such, it can appear to the Japanese that their American colleagues are looking out for themselves at the expense of loyalty to the company. More job hopping among the American workforce and greater expectations of the company amount to a less stable and higher maintenance workforce than Japanese are accustomed to. For Japanese management, who typically assume that their workers will stay the course and accept what the company asks of them, it is a considerable adjustment while in the United States to realize they must engage in a courtship of sorts to keep American talent on board and satisfied with their employment terms.

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Secondly, given the Japanese propensity towards a generalist and collaborative approach to business, the idea of precisely defined job descriptions is not as much of a priority in Japanese organizations as it is in the American workplace. Even when job descriptions are well defined, holding a particular role is typically transient and part of the overall company training path. For the average American employee, however, being clear about specific roles and responsibilities, along with having measurables by which individual performance is evaluated, is expected. After all, this is how one builds a particular area of expertise and recognition of individual achievements. These divergent approaches tell the tale of two very different cultures and yield tendencies that can easily lead to role confusion and tensions.

Communication Styles: High Context versus Low Context

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall is credited with introducing the concept of high and low context cultures in the 1970s as a framework for understanding different communication styles across cultures based on respective social norms and cultural values.[1] Here again, the United States and Japan find themselves on opposite ends of the spectrum.

Japan represents a classic case of a high context culture, typical characteristics of which include homogeneity, widely shared customs and beliefs, and collectivism, or placing a higher value on the good of the group than on the individual. In terms of impact on communication, high context cultures share information more implicitly, with a heavy reliance on mutual understanding, body language, nonword utterances, overall context, and tone of voice. Participants in conversations are expected to pick up on the speaker's cues and actively interpret what is being communicated. The phrase "*ichi ieba, ju wakaru*" ("say one, understand ten") encapsulates the Japanese communication style: When the speaker speaks 10 percent, the listener is expected to understand the rest based on their shared cultural understanding of one another.

Low context cultures, on the other hand, communicate more explicitly in a straightforward and direct manner. With a highly heterogeneous population and stronger emphasis on individual expression and achievements than collectivism, the United States exemplifies a low context culture perhaps more than most countries in the world. The vast demographic diversity results in fewer shared cultural norms and traditions, giving rise to the need for more direct and straightforward language.

So, when we put Americans and Japanese together in the workplace, one of the lowest context cultures in the world is communicating and conducting business with one of the highest context cultures in the world. Until and unless these culturally based communication differences are understood and bridged, Americans can be left feeling their Japanese colleagues are being overly vague or secretive, when really the Americans lack the broader cultural context to read the room and grasp the unspoken message. The Japanese, on the other hand, are often overwhelmed by the directness and volume of words coming from the American side, without conscious awareness of how few shared assumptions exist as a baseline for communication. And none of these contextual issues even consider the actual language barrier itself.

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Decision-Making

Just as communication styles derive from cultural norms and values, with Japan leaning towards collectivism and the United States favoring individualism, so too does decision-making within an organization. The *ringi* system, a highly collaborative method of reaching a consensus, is the hallmark of the Japanese approach to decision-making.[2] Simply put, it involves a lengthy process of circulating proposals among departments and individuals within the company to solicit feedback and, theoretically speaking at least, to get buy-in from the various parties that will be impacted by the proposal. This process serves a multitude of purposes, including fostering a collective sense of ownership, mitigating risk, helping avoid confrontation, and ensuring smooth implementation due to carefully considering many details beforehand. The Japanese approach is, by its very nature, slow and group-based with no one individual or department owning the initiative.

The American approach, not surprisingly, puts a lot more stock in individual players. Naturally, there is some degree of communication and discussion surrounding decision-making in the American model, but an individual manager is typically invested with more authority to make decisions independently, and proposals are launched without the extent of deliberation and details involved in the Japanese model.

The bottom-line impact in the bicultural workplace is the general perception that Japanese feel Americans move too quickly and independently without enough attention to detail and consideration of overall impact on the organization, which feels like a roadmap for unnecessary risk and a potentially messy implementation. Conversely, Americans tend to feel that the Japanese engage in an excessive amount of time and deliberation when making decisions and lament that individual managers are not more empowered to take decisive initiative. Understandably, these contrasting viewpoints can quickly build frustration on either side.

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Legal Risk Management

Year after year when I have asked newly arrived Japanese executives what their greatest concern was in coming to the United States, the predictability in response has stood the test of time: “My English capabilities” is rivaled only by “I am afraid of getting sued.” Given that the United States is among the most litigious countries in the world and Japan among the least,[3] this fear makes sense. It also takes some getting used to, though, as a Japanese newly transplanted to America. Training Japanese leaders on questions not to ask in an interview or educating them on the extent of documentation required to consider parting ways with an employee evokes a reaction of near incredulousness. While Japan does have a robust body of employment laws, the frequency with which Americans will attempt to sue their former employer for a perceived or devised violation of employment law, and the extent to which companies in the United States must proactively preempt such risk, is extreme compared to Japan.

Likewise on the legal front, there is a degree of surprise among Japanese leadership about the extensive role of human resources (HR) departments in America as it pertains to risk mitigation. Indeed, in the United States, it can feel like half of the HR leader’s job description is to navigate employment law. With appropriate training and acclimatization to cultural norms, for most Japanese expatriates, legal risk management can evolve from an initial baseline of downright fear to gradual understanding and acceptance of the extra lengths to which they must go to minimize liability. A key component to getting there is collaboration with and trust in their HR leaders, which is often an unexpected journey for them. Understandably, the road to get there can be bumpy, given how foreign this ever-present threat of litigation is to Japanese leaders.

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Work-Life Balance and Priorities

Historically speaking, Japan has demanded almost complete loyalty from its workers and, in return, provided them with long-term job security. It has been a social contract pretty much made of steel. As such, the typical Japanese workplace culture has, over time, been associated with a “company-first” mentality with copious amounts of overtime and after-hour socializing, mandatory transfers, and very conservative use of paid time off. Work-life balance, for most of the modern era, had been a foreign concept in Japan. With the latest generation, and perhaps with a nod to the pandemic, Japan appears to be turning a corner with regard to increased focus on work-life balance and, indeed, some government policies and workplace practices have reflected that in recent years.[4]

Comparatively speaking, however, work-life balance has been a stronger priority in the United States, with a wide range of laws and corporate

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standards reflecting this, including enhanced family leave laws, work-from-home privileges, onsite day care, and use-it-or-lose-it vacation policies that encourage time off. (Interestingly, compared with the rest of the western world, the United States is far less progressive on this front.) When an American signs up to work with a Japanese company, it is likely that they are forfeiting some of the flexibility and benefits they would have been afforded in an average American organization. Considering the notion of frequent job changes being acceptable in the United States, this gap has posed considerable challenges for Japanese companies wanting to attract and retain American staff. The Japanese companies that have had the most success retaining American talent have been those that have realized the value Americans place on life outside of the company and embraced more flexible workplace policies.

Embracing the Shared Desk

While these workplace differences present unique challenges, they do not have to become major obstacles if all parties are willing to educate themselves on the differences, consider the value in different ways of doing things, and even, in some cases, embrace hybrid models that capitalize on the best of both cultures. To get there, however, takes intent. Bringing members from both sides of the cultural divide together for a cross-cultural training session can give everyone a better understanding of what they are dealing with. And, with understanding usually comes appreciation of and an increased tolerance for differences. Countless times, for example, I have seen frustration with differences in decision-making processes subside significantly after a visual representation of and thoughtful discussion about the pros and cons of each system. Conducting an organization-wide employee opinion survey is also an effective method for addressing cultural elements at play in the workplace and their respective challenges. The simple act of reviewing, sharing, and discussing survey results as a team can go a long way towards collaboration and enhanced understanding.

These differences can be approached in myriad ways, each impacting the bicultural landscape. One thing for certain is that business outcomes differ vastly depending on whether the two sides end up stubbornly mired in cultural tendencies or realize that it is in their best interests to reach across the desk and collaborate in a way that makes the team greater than the sum of its parts.

About the Author

Jennifer Jakubowski is Managing Director of Bridges to Japan, a consulting group specializing in cross-cultural business solutions for Japanese and Americans working together. Since living in Nagoya at the age of eleven, Japan has been a constant thread in Jennifer's life. She spent her junior year of college at Waseda University while living with a host family, made her way back to serve on the JET Program in Hokkaido (1995-1997), and followed JET with a stint as a cultural liaison and radio broadcaster for the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. She founded Bridges to Japan in 2004 and has since been immersed in the Japanese-American business community. Jennifer has enjoyed supporting the JET alumni community over the years through service on the JETAANY Board, presenting at multiple After JET Conferences, and interviewing JET candidates. Jennifer holds a BA in International Studies from Kenyon College and an MA in International Studies & Diplomacy from University of London's School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS).

Jennifer Jakubowski (Hokkaido, 1995-1997)

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Submissions are encouraged from mid-to-senior level professionals who are established in the current fields OR current/recent graduate degree students in both master's and doctoral programs.

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End Notes

1. "Communicating in High Context vs. Low Context Cultures", UGL's Language Services Blog, United Language Group, accessed November 23, 2024

2. Srilalitha Sagi, "Ringi System – The Decision Making Process in Japanese Management Systems: An Overview," *International Journal of Management and Humanities* 1, no. 7 (April 2015): 10–11

3. J. Mark Ramseyer and Eric B. Rasmusen, *Comparative Litigation Rates* (Harvard Law School John M. Olin Center for Law, Economics, and Business: Discussion Paper No. 681, November 2010)

4. Yukiko Sanjo, Fiona Webster, and Stephanie Rosseau, "Japan Adopts Work-Style Labor Reforms," Mercer Law & Policy, February 8, 2019

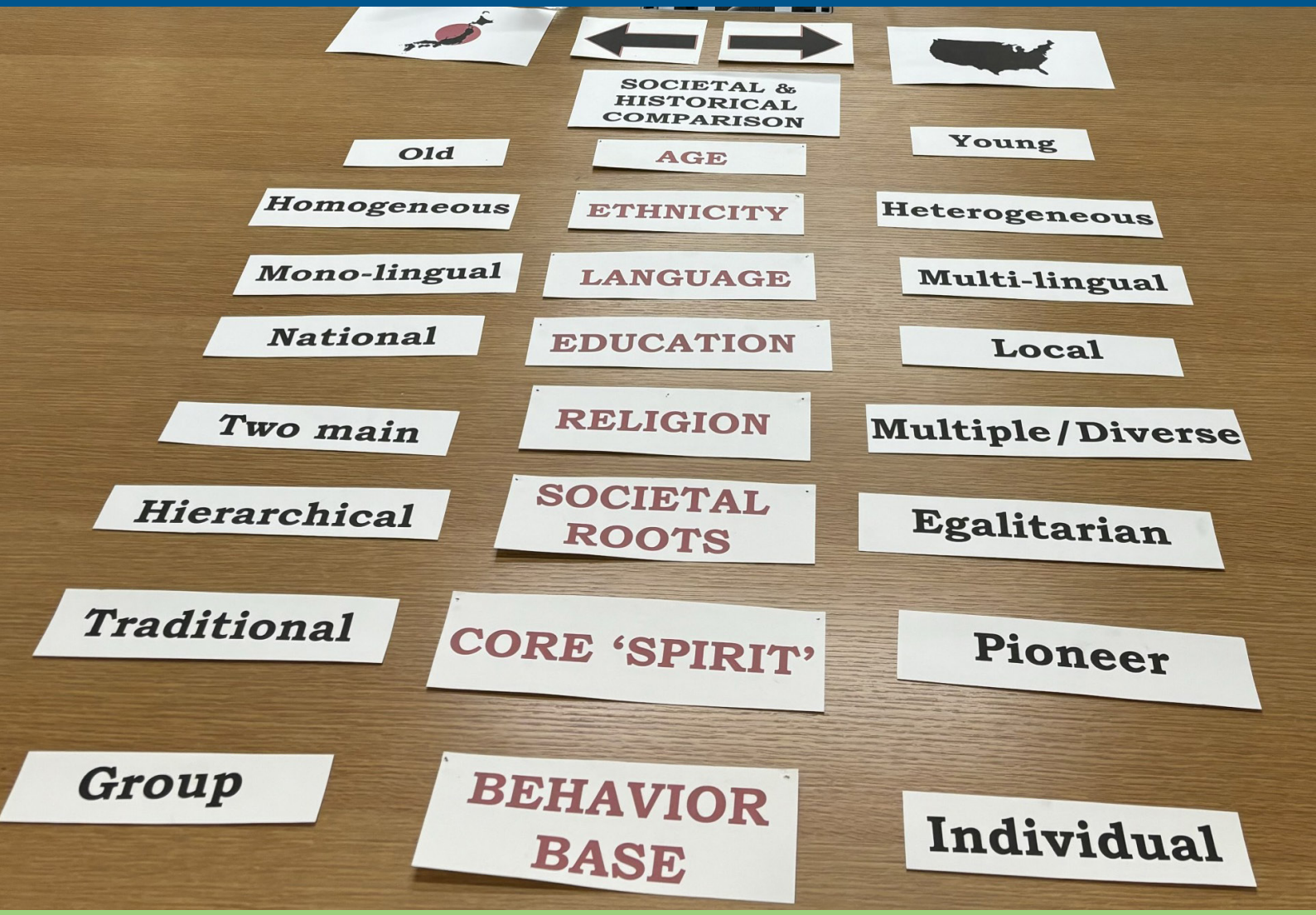

Photo of a Bridges to Japan exercise. Bridges to Japan has provided cross-cultural business solutions to some of the biggest names in business from coast to coast in the US as well as in Japan. (Photo courtesy of author.)