

---

# *Communicating with Japanese in Business*

---



**JETRO**

Copyright © JETRO 1999

All rights reserved. This publication may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, by mimeograph, photocopy, or any other means, nor stored in any information retrieval system, without the express written permission of the publishers.

(For Distribution in the U.S.) This material is distributed by the U.S. office of JETRO (Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco) on behalf of Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), Tokyo, Japan. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

---

---

*Communicating with  
Japanese in Business*

---

---

Misunderstandings caused by different communication styles often lead to lost business opportunities for foreign businesspeople dealing with Japan. This booklet is intended to fill such gaps. We asked Dr. Ernest Gundling, an intercultural specialist, to be the author to leverage on his extensive research and hands-on experience in this field. We sincerely hope that this booklet will help businesspeople from all over the world be successful in doing business with Japan.

International Communication Department  
JETRO

It is a pleasure to be able to offer this introduction to business communication with Japanese. I hope that each reader will find useful tips for his or her work, and quickly build bridges towards strong mutual understanding. The personal and professional rewards of working with Japanese counterparts are well worth the effort.

Dr. Ernest Gundling  
Managing Director  
Meridian Resources Associates

Special thanks to:  
Ruth Sasaki (research and writing)  
David Dickey (research and writing)  
Masaaki Aoki (illustrations)

---

# Communicating with Japanese in Business

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF JAPANESE COMMUNICATION STYLE	5
a. Group Orientation	5
b. Hierarchy	6
c. Form and Formality	7
d. Situational Behavior	8
e. High Context Communication	8
3. COMMUNICATION GAPS CAUSED BY BUSINESS CUSTOMS	10
a. Decision-Making	10
b. Contracts	12
c. Information-Sharing	14
d. Customer Relations	16
e. Meetings	18
f. Feedback and Issue Resolution	20
4. COMMUNICATION GAPS CAUSED BY LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES	22
a. Indirect or Ambiguous Expression	22
b. Unintended Tone	24
c. Japanese English	26
d. Grammar, Word Choice, and Pronunciation	28
e. Nonverbal Communication	30
5. CHANGING JAPAN: INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUSINESS	32
APPENDIX: TYPICAL BUSINESS IDIOMS IN JAPANESE	33

---

# 1. Introduction

---

As companies continue to expand beyond borders to develop global markets and standards, we are living today in a kind of "virtual reality" -- one can see the same products, the same logos, whether one is in London, Bangkok, or Rio de Janeiro. A French businessperson may work with a Japanese to sell products designed in Israel, manufactured in California, and assembled and tested in Malaysia. Add to this communications technologies such as videoconferencing and e-mail, and the world indeed seems to be shrinking.

In this climate of international collaboration, surrounded by the illusion of sameness, we may easily assume that "business is business," and that, when dealing with business associates in the same industry, we "speak the same language" despite cultural differences. This can be a dangerous assumption.

In fact, the more experience a non-Japanese has in doing business with Japanese, the more aware he/she becomes of the difficulty of communication as an obstacle. As Japan has become a key part of the intricate global business environment, the foreign businessperson working in Japan or with Japanese companies outside of Japan may encounter a wide variety of communication gaps arising from differences in cultural values and assumptions, business customs, and language.



This booklet is designed to provide practical insight and strategies for navigating the seemingly opaque waters of business communication in Japan. The next section describes the underlying values and cultural foundations of the Japanese people. Such understanding will help readers to better assess typical communication gaps arising from differences in business practices, which are described in the following section. Each issue is presented with actual case studies that have been collected from the real-life experiences of businesspeople world-wide. The final section then introduces typical language-related gaps that occur when communicating with the Japanese.

The foreign businessperson who understands the cultural background of his or her Japanese customers, suppliers, and business associates will be better prepared to build strong partnerships and take advantage of expanding business opportunities in the global market.

---

## 2. Cultural Foundations of Japanese Communication Style

---

### a. Group Orientation

In Japanese society, the individual has traditionally derived identity from group affiliations including family, school, and company. In Japan, businesspeople will often mention the name of the company they belong to before their own name when meeting someone for the first time.

In a country the size of California, with a population nearly equal to that of Russia, the maintenance of relationships has been critical to survival. Without the "elbow room" of a frontier environment, where one could always move away if relationships soured with neighbors, Japanese have relied on internal restraint in order to maintain harmony and the social order.

Emotions, especially negative ones, are not openly expressed. This is not to say that Japanese stifle individual opinions; but there is an appropriate way to discuss and resolve differences -- an indirect, private way that does not involve public debate, confrontation, or loss of face.

#### Tendency to conform

There are many Japanese sayings that advise people to yield in the face of opposition. *Nagai mono niwa makarero* might be the Japanese equivalent of, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." *Goh ni ireba goh ni shitagae* means something like, "When in Rome, do as the Romans." An individual who disagrees too strongly or insists on maintaining a different opinion disrupts the harmony of group consensus and may be thought to be "immature." On the other hand, someone who considers the good of the group before speaking or acting is considered a person with character and maturity.

Westerners sometimes interpret this tendency to conform as weakness or a lack of imagination -- but in Japan, a person who speaks out regardless of what the rest of the group thinks makes him or herself look ridiculous and loses credibility.



#### *Honne* and *Tatemae* (pronounced "hone-nay" and "tah-tay-mah-eh")

Because of the collective nature of Japanese society and the need to maintain relationships, Japanese often make a distinction between their true feeling or personal opinion (*honne*) and what they know they should say in public because it is the appropriate thing to say in the situation (*tatemae*). All cultures make this distinction in certain situations; however, many foreign businesspeople express frustration at not being able to distinguish which is which when doing business with Japanese. Strategies for distinguishing *honne* and *tatemae* will be discussed in the section on "Meetings."

---

## b. Hierarchy

### The Roots of Hierarchy

In the collective relationship-oriented culture of Japan, respecting and maintaining hierarchical relationships is essential in society and business. The importance of hierarchy in Japanese culture is based in the social ethics of Confucianism, in which people are ordered in vertical, hierarchical relationships, for example, customer (higher) and vendor (lower). A stable society depends on the proper maintenance of these hierarchical relationships.



### Hierarchical Relationships in Business

The relationship between customer and vendor is one of the many hierarchical relationships in Japanese business culture. Others are parent company and subsidiary, head office and branch office, manager and subordinate, senior (a person who joined the company earlier) and junior. In these relationships each person has certain expectations of the other. For example, a manager is supposed to be concerned about subordinates' welfare, even to the extent of helping them in their private life. In turn, a subordinate is expected to trust his or her manager's judgment and not question his or her decisions. One problem in the contemporary Japanese workplace occurs when a manager and subordinate no longer share these same expectations. There is an increasing number of people in the younger generation who value individualism and prefer to keep some distance between their private lives and their work and employers.

### Seniority

An important manifestation of hierarchy in Japanese business is seniority. Seniority has traditionally been an important criterion for promotion (although there is currently a shift away from seniority towards meritocracy). Here is an example: In negotiations between two companies, the Japanese expect each side to send people of the same age and position who literally sit across from each other during the discussions. Such expectations based on hierarchy can make it difficult for Japanese to negotiate as equals, or with someone who is younger or older.



---

## Other Examples of Hierarchy

When Japanese exchange business cards, a formality which takes place when businesspeople first meet, the higher level people exchange cards first. When a card is received, the title on the business card is always checked to establish relative status. Employees of higher rank such as a general manager (*buchoo*) are often addressed by their title ("*Buchoo*") or their name and title ("*Tanaka-buchoo*"). When Japanese bow to each other, the person of lower status bows more deeply.

Seating arrangements are based on hierarchy. In a taxi, the seat behind the driver is for the highest ranking person while the seat next to the driver is for the lowest ranking person. Order of speaking is also hierarchical, in that often the highest ranking person speaks last. Japanese language itself reflects hierarchy. A person of higher status speaks polite or casual speech, whereas the person of lower status uses "super-polite" or "respectful" speech (*keigo*).



### c. Form and Formality

Although many modern Japanese are not particularly conscious of their religious heritage, the Shinto religion is the origin of many rituals that survive today. From Shinto comes the concept of *kata*, or form -- the right way to do something. Those who have studied a martial art such as karate know about the painstaking, repetitive practice of *kata* (basic forms) which must be mastered before one even throws a punch.

In business, the importance of form can be observed in the attention that is given to correct procedure when Japanese exchange business cards. The prescribed way is a way that is the result of long tradition and experience, and therefore something to be mastered. When all members of society understand and conform to the *kata*, ambiguity is removed.

This shared understanding breaks down when Japanese interact across cultures. As an example, many Southeast Asian factory workers have been frustrated when their Japanese supervisors say, "Do it this way," without explaining why that way is best. If questioned, the Japanese may say, "Because I have thirty years of experience and I say you should do it this way."

Foreign businesspeople from results-oriented cultures are often baffled by the Japanese emphasis on form and process. An Indonesian businessperson in the clothing industry gave the example of a product that was returned by a Japanese customer because of one wrinkle. Frustrated by Japanese customers' rejection of semiconductors with cosmetic defects on the package, an American factory manager exclaimed, "If it works, what's the problem?" Cosmetic defects,

---

to the Japanese eye, signal defects in process, which in turn indicate that the overall quality of a product may be low.

The importance of form in business customs can also be seen in the formality of initial meetings in the early stages of a business relationship or negotiation. Sometimes very little of substance is actually discussed in these meetings, but they are critical to getting off to the right start with a Japanese business partner.

#### d. Situational Behavior

In Japanese culture, behavior tends to be situational. Appropriate behavior is tied to many factors, including the place, the rank or relative status of other people who may be present, and one's relationship to those people. Understanding how these factors influence behavior can help the foreign businessperson avoid misunderstandings.

For example, a common complaint from foreigners who do business with Japanese is the difficulty of getting input or opinions. The Western marketing manager of a manufacturer of medical devices visited Japan and complained that the sales manager of a major Japanese account "had no strategy." It was later discovered that this judgment was formed when the Western manager asked the Japanese sales manager, who was driving both of them to the customer's headquarters for a meeting, "So how are things going at Customer X?", and the Japanese manager's only response was, "Things are going very well." The Japanese manager was later astounded to hear that the Western manager had expected a briefing in a car en route to the visit -- he had taken the query as small talk only, and had thus offered only a general response.



The use of *honne* and *tatemae*, discussed in the section on "Collective, Relationship-Oriented Society," is another example of situational behavior in Japanese business. People from cultures with deep roots in Christianity sometimes feel that *tatemae* is a kind of dishonesty, and that Japanese are "two-faced." In Japan, however, *tatemae* is simply a necessary lubricant that enables individuals to maintain harmony with the group.

#### e. High Context Communication

Japan is what cultural anthropologist Edward Hall, in his work *Silent Language*, refers to as a "high context culture." The Japanese people are relatively homogeneous, and share a long history of common values and

---

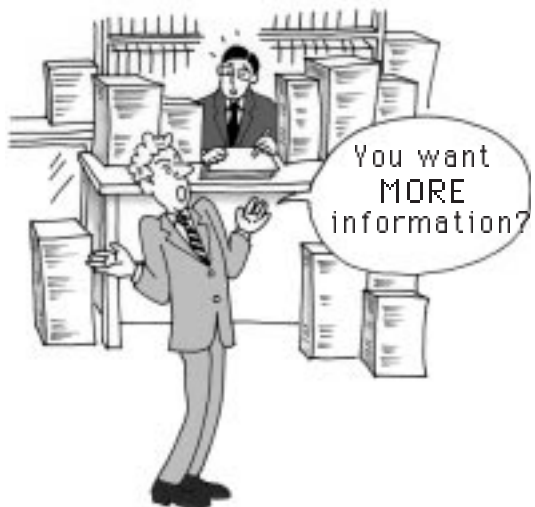
assumptions instilled by strong families and a very standardized educational system. When communicating with each other, it is therefore not necessary to verbalize everything explicitly; since there is a shared background, a kind of shorthand can be used. Feelings can be communicated with few words, or through subtle nonverbal cues. There is a Japanese saying, "Hear one, understand ten." Silence can also have great meaning.

This can lead to problems when communicating with people from countries where elegant public speech is considered to be an art form. The Japanese plant manager of a food manufacturer in France said it this way:

When the French want to say 100 things, they will verbalize 150 things.

When Japanese say 70 things, they are trying to get the other person to understand 100.

When communicating with people from other cultures, with whom there may be little or no shared background, Japanese tend to either assume a higher level of shared understanding than actually exists, and communicate in a way that seems cryptic or ambiguous to foreigners, or they are acutely aware of the lack of shared understanding, and demonstrate a high need for contextual information in order to build this shared context. This can be exasperating for business counterparts who feel that they have provided enough information already. Rather than focusing only on a potential partner's business proposal or the specific task at hand, a Japanese may take a more holistic approach and want to know about the partner's character and history; they will be reluctant to pursue a joint task until a relationship has been established.



---

## 3. Communication Gaps Caused by Business Customs

---

### a. Decision Making



*"Why does it take so long to get a decision?"*

A Westerner wanted to publish a book about the operations of a large Western company with a joint venture in Japan. He contacted the Western company and got approval in the first month. He immediately sent the book proposal on to a Japanese publisher. There they began to discuss it within their organization, which required extensive lobbying with key individuals at several levels, collection of more background data, obtaining advance commitments for book purchases, and so on. After two years he had become convinced that the publisher would never move forward, and had started thinking about other projects. Suddenly he got a call from the publisher telling him they needed the completed manuscript within a few months, which of course he never had working on in the past two years.

### Group Consensus vs. Individual Authority

Japanese companies make decisions based on the cultural value of group orientation. Decisions tend to be made by group consensus rather than individual authority. In the process of forming a group consensus, all the possible repercussions of a decision are examined and taken into account, a holistic approach which maintains harmony within the organization.

### The *Ringi* System

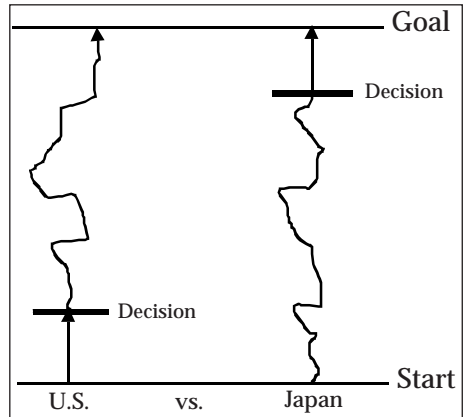
This collective, holistic, harmonious decision-making process has a formal manifestation called the *ringi* system. The *ringi* system consists of a written proposal which is circulated among all the people who will be affected by the decision. It is circulated by a predetermined route based on hierarchy, starting lower in the organization and working its way up. When the *ringi* proposal reaches each person's desk, they read it, sometimes make a few minor adjustments or suggestions, and then put their personal seal on it (in place of a signature in the West). By the time the *ringi* document has "made the rounds" and received everyone's seal, all the people involved in the decision have had a chance to give input and are in agreement on the decision.

The *ringi* system is often used by large, traditional Japanese corporations for big decisions. However, even if the actual *ringi* system is not used, decision making in Japanese organizations will often follow a similar process. The end result is that the responsibility is spread out among many individuals and not left with one or only a few. This has the advantage of more people feeling responsibility and "owning" the decision; the drawback is that sometimes no one really is accountable for the decision or the results.

Japanese people themselves are frustrated by the amount of time required to make decisions, and some steps are being taken within companies to delegate more decision-making authority and make the process more efficient.

### Nemawashi (Root-binding)

Before Japanese company members "sign off" on a proposal, whether as a formal *ringi* document or more informally, consensus building starts with informal, face-to-face discussions. This process of informally making a proposal, getting input, and solidifying support is called *nemawashi*. The word *nemawashi* (root-binding) comes from gardening. It is the process of preparing the roots of a plant or tree for transplanting, protecting the roots from damage. *Nemawashi* in a Japanese organization protects the decision-making process from "damage" such as disagreement or lack of commitment.



### Benefits of the Japanese Decision Making Process

One benefit to a longer, consensus-based decision-making process is smoother implementation. Everyone is aware of the decision, most people agree with it, and more careful planning has taken place. Another benefit is that when different groups or companies are involved, the relatively longer process allows a stronger and more trusting relationship to develop, once again resulting in smoother implementation.

### Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

Expect the process to take longer than it would in your culture, and to involve more meetings and correspondence.

Prepare lots of detailed information to supply upon request.

Demonstrate patience and commitment throughout the process

-- often your commitment to the relationship is the deciding factor.

Check in with your counterparts regularly to show your commitment and to be available to supply answers to questions.

Spend time building relationships widely and look for key people who have the power and experience to make decisions within the Japanese group.

Cultivate informal contacts within the Japanese organization to help you monitor where the Japanese are in the decision-making process.

Avoid making quick decisions or pushing for quick decisions.

Make sure your team is in agreement; avoid showing disagreement amongst yourselves in front of the Japanese.

## b. Contracts



*"Why don't companies stick to the terms of a contract?"*

An American company contracted a Japanese supplier, located outside Tokyo in a somewhat rural area, to build parts for its product. The American company's customers were requesting replacement components for this part, so the American company asked the Japanese company to supply certain replacement components, as had been stipulated in the contract between the two companies. The Japanese company said that, in their agreements with Japanese customers, they usually provided the whole part as a replacement, not just components.

In a face-to-face meeting to resolve this, a representative of the American company brought out the contract and pointed out the clause that stated that the Japanese company would supply replacement components. This was met with silence; then the highest-ranking Japanese present looked at the English contract, leaned back, and said, "Oh -- is that something I signed?" The Japanese in the meeting laughed. The American didn't think it was funny at all, and it took quite a while for him to calm down.

### Japanese Attitude Toward Contracts

Differing attitudes toward contracts lead to difficulties for many foreign businesspeople who do business with Japanese companies. One of the main complaints seems to be that Japanese contracts are "vague," brief documents that don't spell out details sufficiently to avoid disputes at later stages; on the other hand, Japanese often complain about how "detailed" Western contracts are. Another common complaint is that Japanese do not necessarily stick to the terms of a contract.



In a high context, relationship-oriented culture such as Japan, a contract has traditionally been viewed as a piece of paper that summarizes an agreement, and is considered more an expression of willingness to do business rather than a specific set of promises and limitations to be rigidly abided by despite changes in circumstances.

In general, Japan has been a much less litigious society than many Western countries for the following reasons. First is the Japanese desire to maintain harmony and avoid open conflict through the nurturing of strong relationships. Taking a business partner to court would in essence signal the end of a relationship.

Secondly, litigation in Japan is slow and expensive. The number of lawyers is regulated in Japan, and in the entire country, there are only as many

---

lawyers as one can find in one large city in the U.S. In Japan, lawyers, when used, are generally brought in to resolve issues after the fact, unlike in the West, where they are brought in at an early stage to shape agreements for the protection of their clients.

When a contract is drawn up between two Japanese companies, the contract is viewed as a summary of a long negotiation process that has been conducted by the two parties themselves, without legal assistance. To request detailed stipulations in the contract would show a lack of trust, and jeopardize the relationship. Even a standard practice in the West such as requesting that a company sign a confidentiality agreement may sometimes be misinterpreted by Japanese companies, who feel that potential foreign partners do not trust them. Another key difference is that in Japan, even after signing, a contract is considered negotiable. Since outside conditions are subject to change, the contract should be flexible enough to enable the two companies to renegotiate if the need arises.

Large Japanese companies in urban areas have become more accustomed to Western contract practices in recent years. However, smaller companies, especially those outside of major metropolitan areas, may still find Western attitudes toward contracts somewhat foreign.

### Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

This does not mean that foreign businesspeople should abandon contracts in their dealings with Japanese companies. However, the following strategies may be useful:

- Take the time to build a strong relationship; think of the business relationship as a personal contract rather than a legal one.

- If your Japanese business partner seems reluctant to honor the terms of a contract, try to meet in person to find out the reasons and make adjustments as soon as possible.

- Be willing to leave some terms of agreements fluid.

- Make sure all contract terms are translated into Japanese.

- Make the terms of the document succinct and straightforward so that they can be readily understood by non-native speakers of English.

- Be flexible and willing to update the terms of the contract through frequent communication and contact with your business partner.

- Think about the long-term repercussions of a short-term focus on a literal interpretation of contract items.

- Be prepared for different attitudes toward contracts depending on whether business associates are from urban or more rural areas, large or small companies.

---

### c. Information-Sharing



*"Why do the Japanese need such detailed information?"*

A Japanese field applications engineer asked an engineer in the U.S. to test a prototype chip. The engineer in the U.S. verified that the chip worked in their system under the specified conditions, and responded that there was "no problem." The Japanese engineer was surprised that no further explanation was forthcoming. He began sending detailed questions to find out the specific environment in which the chip had been tested, if it had been tested under any other conditions, why it didn't work in certain applications, etc.

The engineer in the U.S. became upset, saying:

If we test under the specified conditions and there's no problem found, that's the end of my responsibility. Pursuing other scenarios is outside of my job.

The Japanese engineer explained his expectation:

When I ask them to do some special thing, they only do that -- they don't do related things. When we receive information from the U.S., it's not enough. We have to ask again and again.

#### "Nice to Know" vs. "Need to Know"

Businesspeople from low context, task-oriented cultures tend to limit their focus to "need to know" information, which means information that *they think* they or another person needs to know to complete the task at hand. They don't want to be inundated with "nice to know" information -- there isn't time to deal with it all.

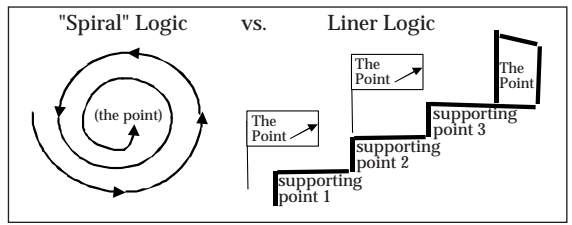
However, in a high-context, holistic culture such as Japan, "nice to know" *is* "need to know." If a Japanese engineer asks x, the expectation is that the other person will also explain y and z, and anything else that might be related or important. As a result, requests are not always specific or explicit, but simply a starting point for getting what is needed. Foreigners sometimes complain that requests from Japanese business associates are unclear. Some of the reasons are 1) no justification -- the foreigner can't understand why information is required; 2) the request, or information, "emerges piecemeal" -- and this may happen because the foreigner is not anticipating all needs and responding fully in the way expected by the Japanese, so the Japanese is forced to follow up again and again in order to get the desired action or information.

#### Getting information: Too much

In the opposite direction, when getting information from Japanese associates, foreigners sometimes feel inundated with background information or details. Foreigners from low context cultures such as Germany or the U.S. often find Japanese explanations or presentations confusing. Rather than



hearing a concise statement of key points supported by facts and examples, they may find themselves lost in a spiral of background information, with no explicitly expressed conclusion. In trying to communicate the whole



context, Japanese often lead up to the point through a gradual accumulation of background details. When enough background has been given, it may even be felt redundant to verbalize the conclusion, as it should be obvious by that time. This can lead foreigners to impatiently plead, "So WHAT is the POINT?"

### Getting Information: Too Little

On the other hand, foreign businesspeople sometimes complain that they cannot get vital information from their Japanese associates. This may happen when the relationship is not good, or when the foreigner is perceived as junior or an outsider. The better the relationship, the freer the flow of information.

### Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

When asked for information by Japanese associates:

- Provide as much information (and context) as possible up front.

- Find out from your associates what kind of information is needed and why it is needed.

- Be willing to share what you may consider "nice to know" information.

When listening to a Japanese presentation that does not seem to get to the point:

- Don't keep interrupting to ask "Why?" "So...?" Interruptions can cause the speaker to launch into even more background information, or repeat what has already been said.

- Listen patiently and encourage the speaker by occasionally nodding and avoiding prolonged or strong eye contact.

- In a one-on-one conversation, draw out the speaker by summarizing, confirming or repeating what he or she has said. You can lead him or her more quickly to the point.

To get more information from Japanese associates:

- Pay careful attention to hierarchy; information may not flow downward from people in higher positions as readily as you might expect.

- Cultivate many informal contacts.

- Build relationships through frequent contact and occasional "after-five" socializing.

- Feel free to tactfully request the same information more than once.

---

## d. Customer Relations



*"Every customer request is 'urgent.' Can't they prioritize?"*

A British marketing manager in the U. K. felt that he was constantly bombarded by urgent requests for support from the account managers of their Japanese subsidiary.

One day, they want some technical specifications as soon as possible, and another day they want a prototype which meets customer specifications in a week. They insist that their requests should be given the highest priority because they are, after all, customer requests. It's like the story of the boy who cried 'Wolf!'. After a while, we just don't pay attention.

One of his counterparts in Japan describes how the reaction of the head office has damaged the morale of the employees in Japan:

Customer responsiveness is a critical component of competitive advantage in Japan. But when our head office does not act on that standard, we can no longer have confidence in selling our products. As a result, some of our competent sales people have left the firm.

### "The Customer is God"

The type of disconnect described above does not stem from the inability of the Japanese to prioritize, but from a fundamental difference in attitudes about customer-vendor relations. In Japan, *okyakusama wa kamisama desu* -- "The customer is god." Western businesspeople talk about customer orientation and even occasionally say, "The customer is king." But egalitarian Western businesspeople often have a hard time accepting a basic fact of life in the hierarchical Japanese business culture: When it comes to customer demands, the unreasonable is reasonable. One Japanese said, "In the U.S. the customer-vendor relationship is a partnership. In Japan, it is an ownership."



It can therefore be difficult for a Japanese sales representative to think in terms of "driving the customer" to align the customer's direction with that of his or her own company. Headquarters marketing outside of Japan may make decisions to support or not support a product modification, for example, based solely on business size. To the Japanese sales side, this is a short-sighted decision which jeopardizes the long-term relationship with a customer.

In addition, other Japanese suppliers are quite willing to jump through hoops to make these modifications or meet certain quality or pricing

---

requirements. So in addition to the desire to serve the customer, there is also the desire to conform to the standard set by other companies in the same industry. An example of this would be lowering prices to compensate for foreign exchange rate changes. Western companies hesitate to offer a price reduction unless there is a guaranteed increase in sales. Another example is meeting rigid quality standards that are far above the acceptable quality level in other countries. Why do it? Because other Japanese suppliers are doing it, and that's what it takes to remain competitive in the Japanese market. In the traditional Japanese business world, the effort shown to meet a customer's current unreasonable demands often pays off in some way in terms of future business size or opportunities.

As business becomes more global, cost effectiveness becomes more important, and Japanese companies form new relationships with foreign companies, the bond of mutual obligation between customer and vendor is weakening. The fast pace of new technology and the changing economy are also necessitating changes in business style. Organizations must respond quickly to changing market conditions. The Japanese themselves are realizing that even a god might respond to a little marketing strategy, and this may be what is behind the recent mushrooming interest in foreign M.B.A. programs.

### **Advice for the Foreign Businessperson**

Even if you cannot meet what appear to be unreasonable demands, it is important for the customer to know that you have made a great effort to do so.

Try to avoid giving immediate negative responses to a customer's request. Frame a negative response in a positive way in order to create an atmosphere that indicates a willingness to continue the relationship.

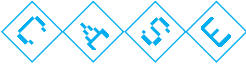
When trying to make the decision to support or not support a customer's requirement, it's important to draw out what is behind the request. There may be a critical reason which no one thought to explain because they assumed it was obvious.

Consider the big picture, not just this particular product or deal. How will this decision affect the next one? Will there be an impact on other business with other divisions? Even if this particular deal may not be large, is there strategic importance to satisfying the customer?

If you decide not to support a request, try not to leave the customer "high and dry." Come up with a compromise. If you are discontinuing a product, establish a support plan by which you can phase the product out gradually, or gradually migrate the customer to a new product. Give sufficient notice, and keep the customer informed with frequent updates.

---

## e. Meetings



### "What was that meeting about?"

There was a group of Singaporeans and Japanese working on a marketing plan in Singapore. The Japanese seemed very enthusiastic about the marketing plan. Two weeks after the meeting the Singaporeans got an e-mail from Japan outlining their marketing plan and it was completely different from the plan they presented to the Japanese at the meeting. "It was as if they hadn't attended the meeting. We call that e-mail 'the bomb e-mail'.", said one of the Singaporeans.

The enthusiasm the Japanese showed at the meeting did not mean agreement. Instead, they were expressing their understanding of what was being said and how impressed they were with the good plan and the presentation. Their objective for attending the meeting was to hear their partner's plan so they could use the information to make their own plan. They returned to Japan, worked on the plan and then notified the Singaporean group.

### Honne/Tatemae

Japanese sometimes seem to say one thing and then do another because they are withholding their personal opinion or true feelings (*honne*) in the public setting of a meeting, voicing only the official line (*tatemae*). To learn a person's *honne*, there has to be a good relationship between the people, and the setting must be appropriate--meetings are often not the place for *honne*.

### "Why don't Japanese speak up in meetings?"

- Lack of confidence in English

There are many reasons why Japanese seem relatively quiet in multicultural meetings. Some of the most basic reasons are language-related. Many Japanese do not have much confidence in their English speaking ability and therefore choose to remain silent. Even Japanese who are fairly good at English do not feel comfortable speaking incorrect English.



- It is impolite to interrupt

Another reason for lack of participation has to do with communication style and the expectations of speakers and listeners. Japanese feel that it is impolite to interrupt -- speakers should leave enough space for people to ask questions and clarify. Most importantly, speakers should pick up on non-verbal signals that the listener does not understand. On top of that, the pace of multicultural meetings is often too fast for Japanese to interrupt comfortably.

- 
- The need to give complete information

Another aspect of Japanese communication style which comes into play is the desire of Japanese to give a "good" answer, or a "complete" response. Japanese feel that it is important to give reliable information to other people and that they are responsible (at least partially) for the results of the information they give to another, so they are careful to give reliable, complete information. Giving such information requires time and thought, but many multicultural meetings move fast and leave little time for contemplation.

### "Why are there so many meetings, and many formal meetings, in Japanese companies?"

First, meetings are a demonstration of "form" in business. Holding regular meetings helps to instill confidence, trust and commitment in the people involved. In a high-context, group-oriented culture, meetings serve to establish a shared context and group cohesiveness. Finally, meetings are often called for the official announcement of decisions which have already been made through consensus building. During the process of *nemawashi*, everyone involved informally discusses a proposal and gives their input, so that by the time the meeting comes, everything is already decided.

### Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

1. In order to allow Japanese to participate comfortably and actively in meetings:

Send an agenda and necessary written materials well in advance.

In meetings, clearly state that the objective of the meeting is to share opinions; check beforehand to ensure that hierarchical relationships will not prevent people from opening up.

When asking questions, do not expect or demand an immediate response--pushing for an answer may only result in a *tatema* answer.

Control native English speakers and call on people individually for their ideas.

Keep a running record of the main points of the meeting in writing on a flip chart; summarize periodically and at the end.

2. In order to align meeting objectives and meeting outcome:

Clarify objectives and expectations before the meeting and again at the beginning of the meeting.

Confirm agreements and next steps at the end of the meeting (in writing on a flip chart, if possible).

Confirm meeting results in writing after the meeting (by e-mail, fax, etc.).

Meet with Japanese one-on-one whenever possible to find out each person's *hon* off the record.

---

## f. Feedback and Issue Resolution



*"I never hear about anything we are doing well!"*

A frustrated foreign businessperson working for a European clothing manufacturer in Japan asked his Japanese colleague why the customer always complained and never thanked them for their good work. His colleague replied simply, "God doesn't have to thank people."

But then why do I never get any praise from my Japanese boss? Are bosses supposed to be gods, too? Or am I just not meeting his expectations? When I ask for feedback, all I get is 'Everything is fine.' And I just get more work!

### Indirect Feedback

As stated in the "Cultural Foundations" section of this brochure, in close-knit Japanese society people rely on internal restraint to maintain harmony and good relations. Japanese people try to avoid conflict and try to resolve differences in an indirect, private way which does not involve confrontation or loss of face. Therefore, when a Japanese person has some negative or constructive feedback to give someone, he/she will often find an indirect, private way to give that feedback, avoiding confrontation or loss of face.

### Use of Intermediaries

Japanese will sometimes use an intermediary, a third person, to give feedback. Foreign businesspeople sometimes complain, "Why didn't he just tell me to my face?" They interpret the indirect approach as sneaky and unprofessional. By being indirect, the Japanese person is trying to maintain harmony within the organization, and this is considered professional behavior.

### Focusing on the Negative

While Japanese will often avoid giving negative or constructive feedback directly to a higher status individual, they will often talk about things that are wrong with the company or directly criticize a subordinate's actions. A Japanese bank employee in Canada commented: Japanese businesspeople feel that the most effective way to improve either themselves or the company is to focus on things that are not going well and try to fix them. In an hierarchical relationship, praise is not as important as pointing out areas for improvement. And although Japanese may not *focus on* strengths or what is going well, they will use strengths and successes to solve problems and resolve issues.

---

## The Issue Resolution Process

Some foreign businesspeople have trouble with the way Japanese solve problems or resolve issues. Like decision making, sometimes it takes a long time. One expatriate manager in Canada describes the Japanese approach and the reaction of local staff:

...if there is some bad situation, we Japanese will identify the problem and investigate the causes. And then we will involve many people connected in order to establish countermeasures, and we are apt to spend a lot of time trying to take care of the problem. In reaction to this, the local staff is hoping for a more pragmatic approach.

## Escalating Issues

Another complaint foreign businesspeople have voiced regarding Japanese issue resolution is the escalation of issues over someone's head to his or her boss. This problem usually happens when Japanese do not get a response as soon as they feel is necessary. Often the Japanese gets a request or a complaint from a customer and is under a lot of pressure to respond quickly. In this case, it is important for the foreign counterpart to at least respond as soon as possible even if steps toward resolution will take more time.



## Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

Expect indirect feedback; demonstrate your openness to feedback by asking for feedback on specific issues regularly.

Pay attention to whom, when and where you ask for feedback: Private, informal situations after working hours with people you have built good relationships are conducive to more direct talk.

Expect constructive feedback to come after general, positive feedback; wait for it.

Do not take the Japanese focus on the negative as a negative attitude or ignoring the positive.

Expect Japanese problem solving and issue resolution to involve more people and take more time.

Respond quickly to Japanese requests for information or help in customer issues situations; at least contact them and say when you can get back to them with a full answer.

Work with Japanese counterparts on how to communicate the relative urgency of issues and details of the situation.

---

## 4. Communication Gaps Caused by Linguistic Differences

---

This section addresses some common sources of confusion or miscommunication which may stem from international businesspeople's unfamiliarity with the indirectness of Japanese communication style, certain peculiarities of the Japanese use of English, or Japanese nonverbal behavior or paralinguistics (sounds made when surprised, thinking, etc.).

The important thing to keep in mind when interacting with Japanese in English is to remember that the Japanese are speaking a foreign language. It is therefore important to exercise patience if a point is unclear, and to try to give the benefit of the doubt when one believes one has been insulted or misled.

### a. Indirect or Ambiguous Expression

An Indian businessman noted the Japanese tendency to use inaction or to give no response to indicate disagreement, and added, "I did not understand that this was a kind of rejection."

The Japanese desire to maintain relationships by avoiding confrontation often leads them to give ambiguous responses which are misinterpreted by foreigners, causing misunderstandings and sometimes bad feelings. In a culture like the U.S., which values directness, it is a virtue to "Say what you mean, and mean what you say." In Japan, doing this often causes undesirable results for oneself and the organization.

The following examples of such indirect communication were gathered from a recent JETRO survey of international businesspeople who do business with Japanese.

#### **The Japanese "Yes..."**

"Yes" in Japan can mean anything from "I'm listening to you," to "I understand what you're saying" to "I understand what you're saying, but don't agree with you." A German businessman, a customer in a negotiation with a Japanese company, told the following story:

The Japanese negotiator said, "Yes," meaning "I understand the point," but I took it to mean "Yes, I agree." So, at the end of the negotiation, when the Japanese then said, "We'll think it over and get back to you," the atmosphere became a little unpleasant.

#### **"I understand."**

When foreigners interpret this response to mean, "I accept" or "I agree," they may be giving it a more positive nuance than the meaning intended by the Japanese speaker. The Japanese speaker may simply mean, "I have listened to what you have to say."



---

### **"We will consider it."**

This type of response is sometimes used as a tactful way of ending a discussion while avoiding a direct negative response. If there is no follow-up action after this discussion, then taken together, the Japanese response may be interpreted to mean "No."

### **"This is urgent"**

Another cause of ambiguity in intercultural communication is the lack of specificity. This can go both ways, as each side interprets a general comment based on its own cultural assumptions. A German businessperson remarked:

You have to specify things numerically when you ask someone to do something. For example, when a Japanese asks someone to do a certain job, assuming based on experience that it should take one hour, sometimes it can take a local person a half day or more, even if the Japanese says, "This is urgent!" In cases like that, it's better to clearly agree up front on how many hours the action should require to be completed.

### **"We will raise your salary after a while."**

A Japanese manager made this statement to an American subordinate. The Japanese interpretation was that the American would get a raise in two or three years. The American understood that he would get a raise in two or three months, and when it did not happen within that timeframe, he felt that the Japanese manager had reneged on a commitment.

### **Advice for Foreign Businesspeople**

A Japanese "no" will seldom be expressed directly, in so many words. Pay attention to subtle nonverbal or paralinguistic cues, for example, a long pause before a vague response such as, "Ah, yes ...". Sometimes a negative response will be signaled by a sucking in of breath, with a tilt of the head, or a hesitation noise such as, "Mmmm....".

General responses often signal non-concurrence, while a response that includes a specific next step or mention of time is an indication of a positive response.

Don't hesitate to clarify subjective terms such as "urgent" by asking for a specific deadline. Other examples of subjective terms: "enough," "poor," "soon," "good."

Broaden the focus of your communication radar to include not only what Japanese associates say in a meeting, but also what they don't say, what they do or don't do.

Change the situation if you are not sure whether a response was *honne* or *tatemae*. Try to build and maintain informal communication channels through one-on-one contact, after hours socializing, etc.

---

## b. Unintended Tone

International businesspeople communicating with Japanese in English may at times misinterpret the tone of a Japanese associate's message. Japanese with limited English skills have sometimes not mastered nuance, and may be unaware of the impact that their word choice or intonation can have on an English-speaking listener. Oftentimes Japanese are misusing expressions that they have been taught are polite, or directly translating a form which conveys politeness in Japanese, but which has quite a different impact in English. The following are examples of typical problem areas.

### "You had better attend the meeting."

Countless Japanese claim to have been taught that "had better" is more polite than "should," and are shocked when told that, in many situations, the use of "had better" sounds like a warning or threat. As a result, the international businessperson may occasionally be startled to hear an ultimatum issued by a normally sweet-tempered Japanese associate.

"Had better" tends to be overused by the Japanese. One foreign businessperson was taken aback to be told in a meeting by his Japanese colleague, "You had better change your way of thinking." What the Japanese colleague meant, it was later determined, was, "I think you are mistaken."



### "Maybe I think so."

When asked about difficulties in communicating with Japanese colleagues in English, one Western marketing manager in the electronics industry said, "I'm confused by phrases such as, 'Maybe I think it is good. What do you think?'"

Japanese have many ways of softening the impact of a question or statement of opinion. In a culture which values collective action, indirectness and careful maintenance of relationships, it is important not to disturb the atmosphere of consensus by expressing oneself too strongly. "Maybe" and "I think so" are two examples of ways that Japanese speakers of English translate these attempts to express themselves in a mature and harmonious way. This does not mean that the Japanese person is weak or indecisive; he or she may in fact feel quite strongly about the opinion so tentatively expressed.

In addition, asking the other person for his or her opinion does not indicate that the questioner lacks confidence in his or her own opinion. It is simply a way of demonstrating humility -- again, not asserting oneself too much in a way that will disrupt harmony.

---

### **"Do you understand?" "Is that clear for you?"**

Japanese are often self-conscious about their English-speaking ability, and worry whether they are making themselves clear to their non-Japanese business partners. However, slight variations in word choice may make their well-intentioned question sound condescending, as though they are asking, "Are you intelligent enough to understand what I'm saying?"

### **"It's difficult for you to understand Japanese culture, but..."**

Again, this type of prefacing comment is generally not intended to insult foreign visitors' or residents' intelligence. It is simply the Japanese way of acknowledging the vast differences that may exist in terms of business practices or assumptions, and may even be interpreted as apologetic.

### **"WHY don't you join us?"**

Slight variations in intonation can completely change the tone of a message. "Why don't you call the disTRIButor?" is a helpful suggestion, whereas, "WHY don't you call the distributor??" sounds more like criticism or frustration. "So what's the obJECTive?" is constructive clarification, while "So WHAT is the objective??" again signals criticism or impatience. Japanese speakers of English may be unaware of the tone they are conveying.

### **Advice for Foreign Businesspeople**

When interacting in English with Japanese, be aware of the problem areas mentioned above, and give the benefit of the doubt when you are the recipient of a perceived insult or rudeness.

Refrain from displaying an immediate negative reaction, and be very careful in interpreting what was said, as, often, the perceived message was entirely unintended.

---

### c. Japanese English

Living languages are in constant evolution, and Japanese English is no exception. The Japanese have made foreign words their own, incorporating "loan words" from other languages such as French or German, giving certain English words unique meanings that are not recognized by people from other English-speaking countries, and creating catchy buzzwords from abbreviations of English terms. In addition, the Japanese language contains many standard expressions which, when translated into English directly, often cause confusion. The following are typical examples of each of these categories:

*(Loan words)*

**"Did you return the an-*ket*?"**

*An-*ket** is borrowed from the French word *enquête*, which means "questionnaire."

**"He took a bite to help with expenses."**

*Bai-to*, short for *a-ru-bai-to*, is borrowed from the German word *arbeit*, meaning "work." In Japanese English, *a-ru-bai-to* has come to mean "part-time job."

**"What is the *tei-ma* of your presentation?"**

*Tei-ma* comes from the German *das thema*, and means "topic."

*(Unique meanings)*

**"She is very smart."**

Rather than meaning intelligent, or fashionable (as in "smartly dressed"), the Japanese often use the word *su-mah-to* to mean "slim" or "thin," referring to a person's physique.

**"This is service."**

*Sah-bi-su* is used to mean "free" or "complimentary." In a restaurant, if the chef or waiter places a dish before a customer and says, "*Sah-bi-su*," it means that the dish is on the house.

**"We must appeal our product's quality."**

Japanese speakers of English sometimes use the word *a-pee-ru* to mean "emphasize" or "promote."

---

(Abbreviations)

**"He is waiting at the hotel front."**

In this case, *fu-ron-to* is short for "front desk." Foreigners sometimes misunderstand the above statement to mean "in front of the hotel," i.e., outside. In hotels in Japan, there are many signs pointing to the "Front."



**"They are concerned about *sekuhara*."**

*Se-ku-ha-ra* is an example of a catchy buzzword that has been created by abbreviating a longer English phrase, "sexual harrassment."

**"How about your new *pasokon*?"**

*Pa-so-kon* is a commonly used abbreviation for *pah-so-na-ru kon-pyuu-tah-* (personal computer). The Japanese often ask, "How about X?" to mean "How do you like X?" Translation: "How do you like your new P.C.?"

(Direct translation)

**"You must work harder."**

An Australian line manager who had been putting in a great deal of overtime trying to resolve some equipment failures was enraged when his Japanese supervisor approached him and said, "You must work harder." The Japanese was mistranslating the expression, "*Ganbatte kudasai*," which is an empathetic phrase meant to encourage another person, and means something like, "Hang in there!"

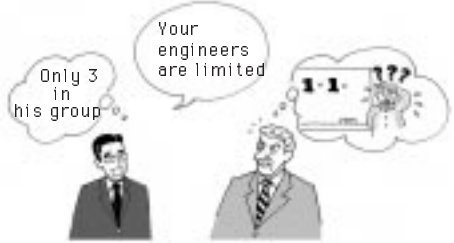
**"Please take care of me."**

A British manager received a very negative first impression of a Japanese subordinate when they were first introduced and the Japanese said, "Please take care of me." What the subordinate intended to say was "*Yoroshiku onegai shimasu*," which is a common phrase used in Japan when meeting someone for the first time. *Yoroshiku onegai shimasu* expresses the wish for a good future relationship. In the West, an equivalent expression would be, "Nice to meet you" or "Looking forward to working with you."

---

## d. Grammar, Word Choice, and Pronunciation

An American technical marketing engineer was trying to resolve a problem with a Japanese sales manager, and was highly insulted when the Japanese manager said, "I think your engineers are limited." What the sales manager meant to say was, "You don't have many engineers in your group," and it was intended to show sympathy with the fact that the American manager was short-handed.



This type of mistake in grammar or word choice often causes misunderstandings or confusion. Here are some other examples of typical problem areas for Japanese speakers of English:

### "I will be in Kuala Lumpur by July 15th."

Japanese often confuse *by* and *until*. If the speaker meant to say, "I will be in Kuala Lumpur until July 15th," then a serious miscommunication about dates will occur. Prepositions in general are difficult to master, so when in doubt, clarify!

### "I am confusing."

The -ed and -ing forms of adjectives are often used incorrectly.

### "They stopped to talk."

Gerunds (*talking*) and infinitives (*to talk*) are often misused, and can cause misunderstandings if the speaker intended to say, "They stopped talking."

### "I am difficult to understand."

The subject of a sentence is sometimes incorrect, or missing altogether. In this case, what the speaker intended to say was, "It is difficult for me to understand." In Japanese, the subject of a sentence is often omitted, as the speaker expects the listener to infer the subject from the context.

### Stress

Japanese syllables are pronounced with fairly equal stress, whereas English words are pronounced with stressed and unstressed syllables. When the Olympics were held in Nagano in 1998, the world learned that Nagano is not pronounced *na-GA-no*. When Japanese speak English, they sometimes place the stress on the wrong syllable. This can be confusing, especially when combined with other vowel and consonant differences. For example, "agree"

---

sometimes sounds like "ugly" when stress is misplaced on the first syllable (*A-gu-ree*). Foreigners may feel that Japanese are carrying self-effacement too far when they think the Japanese is saying, "I ugly."

### Spoken vs. written language

Traditional English language education in Japan has focused on the ability to read, write, and understand the rules of grammar. Therefore, Japanese sometimes learn to pronounce English words based on their spelling. For example, "vitamin" may be pronounced *bee-ta-meen*.

### "Katakana Eigo"

The Japanese language has five vowel sounds, as compared with as many as fifteen in English. In addition, certain consonants, such as "v," do not exist, and consonants are almost always attached to vowels -- they never stand alone. As a result, when native Japanese speakers pronounce English words, the result is sometimes what is referred to as *katakana eigo*, or English pronounced by stringing together the building blocks of the Japanese alphabet. Several different English words may therefore come out sounding almost the same, with possibly slight distinctions in vowel length. For example:

- "first" and "fast" may both sound like *fa-su-to*
- "bus" and "bath" may both sound like *ba-su*

### Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

Learn from experience and familiarize yourself with the typical errors that Japanese speakers of English tend to make. If your colleague says, "I will be in Penang by July 15th," clarify by paraphrasing or asking follow-up questions such as: "So you will arrive on July 15th?" "What day will you return to Japan?"

A familiarity with the Japanese phonetic system will help the foreign businessperson interpret *katakana eigo*.

Rather than focusing on an unfamiliar word which may have been mispronounced, consider the wider context in which the word or sentence is uttered in order to accurately interpret what was said.

---

## e. Nonverbal Communication

### Choosing Nonverbal Communication over Verbal Communication

People from high context cultures such as Japan will sometimes choose implicit, nonverbal communication over explicit, verbal communication. They may feel that verbal communication is too blunt or unnecessarily obvious, whereas expressing yourself nonverbally is more subtle and considerate.

Japanese sometimes avoid expressing negative messages, responses or reactions verbally. Particular nonverbal behaviors to watch for which may indicate a negative reaction to your words or behavior are silence and averting the eyes.

### Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

A common non-Japanese reaction to silence or a break in eye contact is to try to explain more about one's own opinion or situation. Additional words can, however, actually make the situation more uncomfortable for the Japanese. Therefore, a good strategy when you observe silence or averted eyes is to mirror that behavior and wait for the Japanese person to form a response.

### Confusing Nonverbals

#### Laughter

An American computer engineer said, "...Japanese...often laugh when confronted unexpectedly by a different view or understanding of (a) situation. This laughter may well express surprise but seems at first impression directed at the speaker or his opinion."

The Japanese have an expression for one type of laughter, "*Aisoo-warai*," which can be translated as "polite laughter," "diplomatic laughter" or even "fake laughter."

One meaning of the polite laugh is that the person does not understand the English being spoken. Therefore the laugh may indicate confusion or embarrassment, and even a hope that the speaker will clarify. Another meaning of the "polite laugh" is the reluctance of the Japanese to give a direct negative response to what the speaker said. In other words, instead of saying a direct "No" or "I disagree," the Japanese gives a polite laugh to send that message to the speaker.

### Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

Wait, and let the other person give more information.

Paraphrase your words in a simpler, clearer way to help the other person understand without bringing attention to his or her inability to understand the first time. Sometimes it is best to simply repeat the same thing slowly and clearly rather than paraphrasing and adding to the confusion.



---

## Drawing in air through the teeth

Many people believe that when a Japanese businessperson draws in air through his or her teeth it indicates complete disagreement or an immovable "No." It can be better interpreted as partial disagreement or an "I can't say yes." In other words, there is something that the Japanese doesn't agree with, or there is some reason he or she cannot say yes.

## Silence

Japanese silence is often interpreted negatively. For example, it could be thought to indicate lack of interest, inattention, day dreaming, confusion, lack of confidence or lack of intelligence. But silence may be a more neutral or positive message:

- I'm translating or processing the English which I've heard. (Please wait.)
- I'm thinking about how to respond to what you said. (Please wait.)
- I really don't know. (Please suggest a course of action and save my face.)
- I'm confused by your words or logic. (Please paraphrase or elaborate.)
- I trust you, and we don't need to say anything else right now. (Please remain silent.)
- I partially disagree with you but want to avoid direct confrontation. (Please consider my position and reconsider your position.)



## Advice for Foreign Businesspeople

When you receive a "drawing in air through the teeth" response, it is a good idea to wait, or to probe for the aspects of the situation that the Japanese feels uncomfortable with.

Avoid the negative interpretations of silence learned in your own cultural context and try to figure out what the other person is feeling or trying to communicate to you. Clarify if necessary. Remember, Japanese value silence; they also have the saying "Silence is golden."

---

## 5. Changing Japan: Increased Opportunities for Business

---

Japan is changing. These changes are taking place every day: deregulation, the spread of information technology, the shift from seniority-based pay to ability-based pay, the increase of out-sourcing, the streamlining of corporations, and a more global mindset among Japanese businesspeople, to name a few.

What these changes mean to the non-Japanese businessperson looking to take advantage of the Japanese market, technology, and expertise is an increase in opportunities for business. With increased global competition and the greater need to cooperate across borders, Japanese companies are gradually becoming more open to business relationships with foreign companies. It is becoming easier to find markets, identify strategic alliances and form relationships with Japanese counterparts.

Japanese businesspeople and organizations are relying more and more on goods, services and expertise of people and organizations outside of Japan. Their willingness and desire to work as global partners, spurred on by global competition, is steadily increasing.

As Japanese become more open, efforts by others to make positive contacts with them will help to build lines of communication. We hope this publication will allow you to "speak the same language," despite cultural differences, so that you can work together to pursue your business objectives and take advantage of the increased opportunities in a changing Japan.

---

# APPENDIX: Typical Business Idioms in Japanese

---

## 1. Expressions regarding organizational and personal relationships

立場を考える (*tachiba o kangaeru*) :

to base one's behavior on one's corporate position or power relationship

立場がある (*tachiba ga aru*) :

a situation in which one cannot disregard one's corporate position or power relationship

顔を立てる (*kao o tateru*) : to see to it that the person saves face

顔をつぶす (*kao o tsubusu*) : to make someone lose face

足並みがそろろう (*ashinami ga sorou*) :

a situation in which people on the same team or project work on an assignment with similar frames of perspectives and approaches

腹を割って話す (*hara o watte hanasu*) :

(literally meaning to speak with open stomach) to speak honestly

同期 (*dooki*) : colleagues that joined the company in the same year

先輩 (*senpai*) : colleagues that joined the company before one joined the company

後輩 (*koohai*) : colleagues that joined the company after one joined the company

以心伝心 (*ishin denshin*) :

when what one has in mind is conveyed to others without verbally expressing it.

面子 (*mentsu*) : one's honor or reputation

## 2. Expressions regarding clients/customers and business partners

お客様 (*otokui sama*) : very important client/customer

お世話になっている (*osewani natteiru*) :

to express gratitude and appreciation to one's customer or business partner

カバン持ち (*kaban mochi*) :

an assistant who accompanies the boss wherever he/she goes but does nothing more than carry the boss' briefcase; the expression is used when a person is describing his/her role

## 3. Expressions regarding ambiguity

善処する (*zensho suru*) :

to handle matters in an appropriate manner; the expression is used even when there no solution for the issue

---

物は言いよう (*mono wa iiyoo*) :

something can be expressed in different ways and whether to make it sound either black or white all depends on how you put it

前向き (*maemuki*) :

(literally meaning forward-looking) positive frame of mind and attitude

不文律 (*fubunritsu*) : rules that are tacitly agreed upon

暗黙の了解 (*anmoku no ryokai*) :

a situation in which both parties need not go over matters item by item due to long-standing relationship or some kind of underlying reason

( ということで ) あとはよろしく ( おねがいます ) [(*to iukotode*) *ato wa yoroshiku* (*onegaishimasu*)]:

an expression to request execution and implementation of an assignment, although it is sometimes unclear exactly what needs to be done

遺憾である (*ikande aru*) :

a public word of apology expressed by the person in charge in when a problem surfaces

玉虫色 (*tamamushi iro*) :

when a situation can be interpreted differently depending on how one looks at it

#### 4. Expressions to postpone conclusions

様子を見る (*yoosu o miru*) : to wait and see how things develop

検討する (*kentoo suru*) :

to deliberate on a certain issue; the expression is used when one intends to postpone a conclusion

考えておく (*kangaete oku*) :

literally means to deliberate on a matter for a while, yet it often implies one's intentions to postpone working on the issue

上の者と相談する (*ue no mono to soodan suru*) :

means the contact person will return to his/her office and consult with his/her boss when the person does not have the discretion over the judgment

#### 5. Expressions to conclude negotiations

すり合わせる (*suriawaseru*) : to look for a point of compromise when opinions differ

メドが立つ (*medo ga tatsu*) : when future goals and plans are roughly laid out

無理を言う (*muri o iu*) :

to force someone to work on something that is difficult to implement

---

言った言わないの世界 ( *itta iwanai no sekai* ) :

to be caught up in a fruitless discussion such as "You said such and such at that time," with comments in return such as, "No, I never said that."

手を打つ ( *te o utsu* ) : to accept conditions after a long process of negotiations

ダメ押しする ( *dame oshi suru* ) :

to confirm or verify just in case; to work on something little by little while watching carefully how things develop

~ ように努める / 努力する ( *-yooni tsutomeru/doryoku suru* ) :

to exert efforts so that the partner's wishes can be fulfilled

## 6. Expressions to say "No" in an indirect manner

厳しい ( *kibishii* ) :

implies that it is difficult to comply with a difficult demand

~ 訳には行かない ( *-wakeni wa ikanai* ) :

literally means "one is not capable of doing something" yet it often includes the speaker's personal judgment of his/her own capacities

今回はちょっと ( *konkai wa chotto* ) :

an expression to imply flat refusal (although there does not exist a simple word of refusal in one phrase)

~ しかねる ( *-shikaneru* ) :

literally means "not possible;" however, it carries connotations of attributing the situation to external factors such as circumstantial difficulties

難色を示す ( *nanshoku o shimesu* ) :

when one shows reluctance in approving the issue

前例がない ( *zenrei ga nai* ) :

there has not been any precedent, (therefore we cannot do it)

## 7. Expressions to make it unclear who is responsible

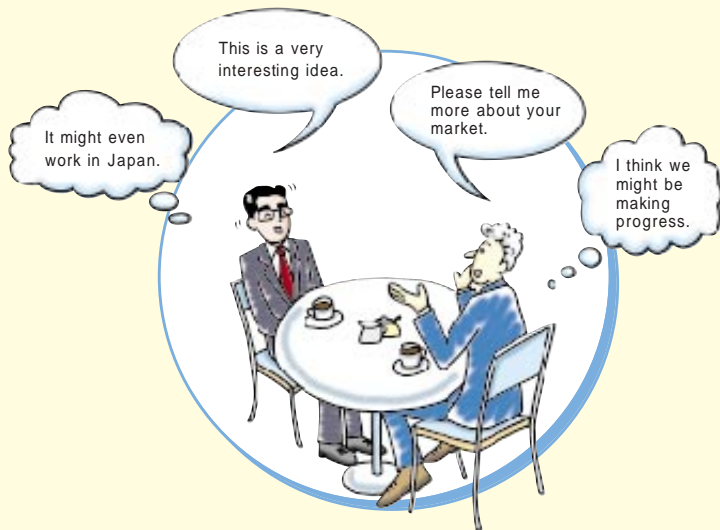
余儀なくされる ( *yoginaku sareru* ) :

an expression used when the results are against one's will due to external factors

仕方がない / 致し方ない / 止むを得ない ( *shikataganai / itashikatanai / yamuoenai* ) :

there may be no other option than to give up

~ ことになる ( *-koto ni naru* ) : implies where the discussion will lead to



*Having understood the different communication styles,  
the two businessmen are on the way to making a successful deal.*



**JAPAN EXTERNAL TRADE ORGANIZATION**

2-5, Toranomom 2-chome, Minato-ku, Tokyo 105-8466, Japan

Home page : <http://www.jetro.go.jp>

Printed in Japan

1999 . 2000