

Americans are more open and talk freely about almost anything, whereas Japanese will disclose little about their inner thoughts or private issues. Americans are willing to have a wide “public self,” disclosing their inner reactions verbally and physically. In contrast, the Japanese prefer to keep their responses largely to their “private self.” The Japanese expose only a small portion of their thoughts; they reduce, according to Barnlund, “the unpredictability and emotional intensity of personal encounters.”⁵⁴ Cultural clashes between the public and private selves in intercultural communication between Americans and Japanese result when each party forces its cultural norms of communication on the other. In the American style, the American’s cultural norms of explicit communication impose on the Japanese by invading the person’s private self. The Japanese style of implicit communication causes a negative reaction from the American because of what is perceived as too much formality and ambiguity, which wastes time.⁵⁵

Cultural variables in information systems and context underlie the many differences in communication style between Japanese and Americans. Exhibit 4-6 shows some specific differences. The Japanese *ningensei* (“human beingness”) style of communication refers to the preference for humanity, reciprocity, a receiver orientation, and an underlying distrust of words and analytic logic.⁵⁶ The Japanese believe that true intentions are not readily revealed in words or contracts but are, in fact, masked by them. In contrast to the typical American’s verbal agility and explicitness, Japanese behaviors and communications are directed to defend and give face for everyone concerned; to do so, they avoid public disagreements at all costs. In cross-cultural negotiations, this last point is essential.

EXHIBIT 4-6 (Continued)

| Japanese Ningensei Style of Communication | U.S. Adversarial Style of Communication |
|--|---|
| 1. Indirect verbal and nonverbal communication | 1. More direct verbal and nonverbal communication |
| 2. Relationship communication | 2. More task communication |
| 3. Discourages confrontational strategies | 3. Confrontational strategies more acceptable |
| 4. Strategically ambiguous communication | 4. Prefers more to-the-point communication |
| 5. Delayed feedback | 5. More immediate feedback |
| 6. Patient, longer-term negotiators | 6. Shorter-term negotiators |
| 7. Uses fewer words | 7. Favors verbosity |
| 8. Distrustful of skillful verbal communicators | 8. Exalts verbal eloquence |
| 9. Group orientation | 9. More individualistic orientation |
| 10. Cautious, tentative | 10. More assertive, self-assured |
| 11. Complementary communicators | 11. More publicly critical communication |
| 12. Softer, heart like logic | 12. Harder, analytic logic preferred |
| 13. Sympathetic, empathetic, complex use of pathos | 13. Favors logos, reason |
| 14. Expresses and decodes complex relational strategies and nuances | 14. Expresses and decodes complex logos, cognitive nuances |
| 15. Avoids decision making in public | 15. Frequent decision making in public |
| 16. Makes decisions in private venues, away from public eye | 16. Frequent decision in public at negotiating tables |
| 17. Decisions via <i>ringi</i> and <i>nemawashi</i> (complete consensus process) | 17. Decisions by majority rule and public compromise is more commonplace |
| 18. Uses go-betweens for decision making | 18. More extensive use of direct person-to-person, player-to-player interaction for decisions |
| 19. Understatement and hesitation in verbal and nonverbal communication | 19. May publicly speak in superlatives, exaggerations, nonverbal projection |

EXHIBIT 4-6 Difference Between Japanese and American Communication Styles

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|---|---|
| 20. Uses qualifiers, tentativeness, humility as communicator | 20. Favors fewer qualifiers, more ego-centered |
| 21. Receiver/listening-centered | 21. More speaker- and message-centered |
| 22. Inferred meanings, looks beyond words to nuances, nonverbal communication | 22. More face-value meaning, more denotative |
| 23. Shy, reserved communicators | 23. More publicly self-assertive |
| 24. Distaste for purely business transactions | 24. Prefers to “get down to business” or “nitty gritty” |
| 25. Mixes business and social communication | 25. Tends to keep business negotiating more separated from social communication |
| 26. Utilizes <i>matomari</i> or “hints” for achieving group adjustment and saving face in negotiating | 26. More directly verbalizes management’s preference at negotiating tables |
| 27. Practices <i>haragei</i> or “belly logic” and communication | 27. Practices more linear, discursive, analytical logic; greater reverence for cognitive than for affective |

Source: Reprinted from A. Goldman, “The Centrality of ‘Ningensei’ to Japanese Negotiating and Interpersonal Relationships: Implications for U.S. Japanese Communication,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18, no. 1 (1994), with permission from Elsevier.

The speed with which we try to use information systems is another key variable that needs attention to avoid misinterpretation and conflict. Americans expect to give and receive information very quickly and clearly, moving through details and stages in a linear fashion to the conclusion. They usually use various media for fast messages—letters or emails giving all the facts and plans up front, faxes, and familiar relationships. In contrast, the French use the slower message channels of deep relationships, culture, and sometimes mediators to exchange information. A French written communication will be tentative, with subsequent letters slowly building up to a new proposal. The French preference for written communication, even for informal interactions, echoes the formality of their relationships—and results in a slowing down of message transmission that often seems unnecessary to Americans. Jean-Louis Reynal, a plant manager at Citröen, explains that “it wouldn’t be too much of an exaggeration to say that, until they are written, until they are entrusted to the blackboard, the notepad, or the flip chart, ideas have no reality for the French manager. You could even say that writing is an indispensable aid to ‘being’ for us.”⁵⁷

In short, it behooves Americans to realize that, because most of the world exchanges information through slower message media, it is wise to schedule more time for transactions, develop patience, and learn to get at needed information in more subtle ways—after building rapport and taking time to observe the local system for exchanging information.

We have seen that cross-cultural misinterpretation can result from noise in the actual transmission of the message—the choice or speed of media. Interpreting the meaning of a message can thus be as much a function of the transmission channel (or medium) as it is of examining the message itself.

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