



WA AND TRUST: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS IN JAPAN

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The significant cultural, relational and business practice distinctions of the U.S. and Japan are well noted within academic research (Fatehi, 2008; Griffith, Myers, & Harvey, 2006). In addition, business managers typically utilize a “self-referencing criterion” (Ball, McCullough, Geringer, & McNett, 2008, p. 25) in their business dealings with foreign businesses and in conjunction with the hindering issues associated with the “liability of foreignness” (Shenkar & Luo, 2008, p. 61) often evident in cross-cultural communication; it becomes of paramount importance for leaders to obtain accurate and practical knowledge of cross-cultural preferences and customs in business. This article describes some of the primary cultural, relational and business dimensions that differentiate U.S. and Japanese preferences in business. Special emphasis is placed on the relational and harmonious Shinto principle of Wa because of the prominence that this religious concept holds in Japanese culture, society and business. Building on the distinctives of Wa, the concepts of trust and commitment are explored from both a Japanese Shinto and Christian perspectives in an effort to construct a bridge that can foster mutually beneficial cultural, social and business relationships. It is becoming increasingly clear that business leaders with global competencies

will have the advantage in growing economically challenged times.

The large cultural differences between U.S. and Japanese organizations can easily deter occidental business leaders from pursuing long-lasting relationships. Fatehi (2008) categorizes Japan as a high-context and the U.S. as a low-context culture. Societies that require additional contextual information in order for outsiders to accurately interpret the social environment are classified as complex cultures. The majority of the communication and meaning in high-context cultures (i.e. Japan) flows through physical and/or behavioral displays and thus low-context cultures (i.e. U.S.) requires internal or specific cultural knowledge to accurately decode the meaning and intent of most of the communication in these high-context cultures. In contrast high-context (i.e. Japan) cultures dealing with low-context cultures (i.e. U.S.) require minimal culture specific or internalized knowledge to understand due to the direct and explicit verbal expression of communication often found in low-context cultures. Foreigners in low-context cultures primarily only need to know and understand the language of the culture to accurately assess and interpret the meaning and intent of communication.

But it is important to note. That the culture and potential for misunderstandings in the low-context countries still remains due to the prominence of non-verbal communication but outsiders are not at such a significant disadvantage as foreigners in a high-context culture.

Cultural Differences between the U.S. and Japan

Preferences in Communication

Table one, displays the significant contrast of the primary characteristics of information and communications exchanges of high and low-context cultures. The characteristics listed in table one do not comprehensively describe all of the communications attributes but provides an accurate depiction of the difficulties that commonly arise in social and business interactions (Fatehi, 2008). These characteristics provide a base for building effective cross-cultural communication for both U.S. and Japanese organizations.

Preferences in Relationships

Similarly, table two describes the contrast of the low and high-context cultures in terms of preferences in interpersonal and relational interactions. The stark contrast highlights the myriad of issues that often arise and compli-

Table 1: Information Attributes of High-and-Low Cultures (Fatehi, 2008, p. 133)

High-Context Cultures	Low-Context Cultures
Through physical context	Through content of message
Internalized by people	Not eternalized by people
Hidden under the surface	Explicit in the message itself
Difficult to interpret by outsiders	Easy to interpret by outsiders
Indirect expression of motives/emotions	Direct expression of motives/emotions
Implicit rules	Explicit rules
Adherences to rules is enforced	Adherences to rules not enforced
Warm-up period needed for exchanges	Information exchange is immediate

cate or deter the establishment of trust and commitment in organizational interaction, and thus negatively impacting the potential for prosperous and long-term social and business relationships. A lack of cultural competence and cross-cultural understanding in business leaders often leads to failed or frustrating interactions (Fatehi, 2008). Kumar (1999) postulates that in these strained business interactions “goal conflict creates negative emotions...” which in turn produce “behavioral incompatibility and/or constricting information processing...” and finally results in the relationship being adversely and negatively influenced (p. 68). In addition, Goodman (2000) confirms that emotional bonds serve an important function in Japanese culture due primarily to their long-term orientation and focus on personal relationships and the process of *nemawashi*, or “getting to know” someone (p. 7). Thus Japanese place business contracts and deals a distant second to personal friendship and relationship. The U.S based business professional must invest the time and energy to honestly and authentically build a relationship with their Japanese counterparts if they desire any level of sustainable effectiveness. The process of *nemawashi* in Japanese business relationships establishes rapport leading to trust and commitment for both parties (Hawrysh & Zaichkowsky, 1990).

Table 3: Priority of Cultural Values (Luthans & Doh, 2009, p.97)

United States of America	Japan
Freedom Independence Self-reliance Equality Individualism Competition Efficiency Time Directness Openness	Belonging Group Harmony Collectiveness Age/Seniority Group consensus Cooperation Quality Patience Indirectness Hospitality

Preferences in Cultural Values

The final point of distinction relates to the broad cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede (2001). Griffith, Myers, & Harvey (2006) utilize five cultural dimensions distilled by Hofstede to illustrate the vast differences between the U.S. and Japan by stating that Japan represents a “collectivist, large-power-distance, strong-uncertainty-avoidance, masculine, and long-term-oriented culture, and the United States is representative of an individualistic, small-power-distance, weak-uncertainty-avoidant, feminine, and short-term-oriented culture” (p. 6). The U.S. and Japan differ to varying degrees on all five of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. In addition, table 3 aids in clarifying these substantial cultural variances. The dissimilarities remain and present noteworthy obstacles that can be diminished significantly when business leaders are willing to learn, understand and use culturally competent communications and business practices (Luthans & Doh, 2009).

Homogeneity Preferences in Japan

Prior to delving into the concept and principles associated with *Wa* a definition of cultures or in this case national culture seems appropriate. An exact, all encompassing and sanctioned definition of culture remains illusive but the following definition might provide a foundation for further exploration. National culture encompasses a “homogeneity of characteristics that separates one human group from another; provides a society’s characteristic profile with respect to norms, values and institutions; and affords an understanding of how societies manage exchanges (Griffith, Myers, & Harvey, 2006, p. 5). The tendency to over-generalize a culture constitutes an area of concern for all cultures, but it does seem that Japanese culture possesses a unique and national feature; homogeneity. Japan’s centuries old traditions, isolationist stance up until the 1860, and limited living space has created a culture with a homogeneity rate of 99.4% (Kameda, 2001). The level of homogeneity, connectedness and togetherness clearly distinguishes Japan from many other cultures, particularly the United States. This level of homogeneity has facilitated the dissemination of cultural values, norms, concept and principles in Japan. The *Shinto* concept of *Wa* stands as one of the primary cultural distinctions of Japanese culture. The religious traditions and impact of Confucianism and Buddhism in Japanese culture are relatively well known but most occidental visitors do not always realize that the native religion of Shintoism is considered the

Table 2: Relational Characteristics of High-and-Low Context Cultures (Fatehi, 2008, p. 133)

High-Context Cultures	Low-Context Cultures
Difficult to form friendships Long-lasting/permanent High obligation High duration Trust must be earned Long-lasting cultural norms Involved in others lives Appear to be very polite High cultural protocol Adherences to cultural protocol	Easy to form friendships Temporary, transient, and casual Low obligation Low duration People are trusted until proven wrong Cultural norms change over time Privacy is valued Politeness is not apparent Low cultural protocol Tolerate deviations from cultural norms

major religious influence in Japan. Maher & Wong (1994) state that Shintoism “is omnipresent in contemporary society...” and the “essentials of Shinto have been secularized and have become an integral part of the Japanese character...” (p. 42). Maher & Wong continue and state that in Japan “there is a fusion of the individual, the family, the nation, and business, the private world and the business world are made of the same stuff” (p. 42).

Building Sustainable Business Relationships

The Shinto Concept of Wa

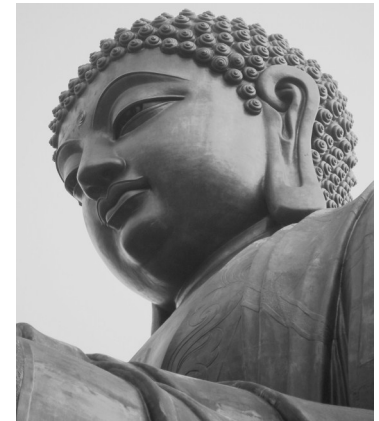
The Shinto concept of Wa means harmony, peace, unity and reconciliation (Maher & Wong, 1994; Parry, 2006; Liu, 2008). Maher & Wong (1994) connect the concept of Wa to the Shinto religion and proposes that this religious concept “dominates” in a “secularized” manner and acts as a “way of life that permeates the Japanese societal structure at all levels....and is omnipresent in contemporary society” (p. 41). Parry (2006) continues the emphasis by stating that “in Japan, harmony, or wa is an end itself...” and that “harmony is the highest goal of human...” and “business behavior” (p. 107). This is in contrast with the common U.S. business goal of maintaining or seeking harmony only as a means to an end, a lucrative business contract. The Japanese vehemently avoid any disruption of Wa, and view others actions that fail to maintain Wa as offensive, severely limiting the establishment of trust and commitment in these possible relationships (Isomae, 2005).

The Japanese maintain Wa through all social interactions, the concepts and interactions associated with the cultural attitudes and norms of joge, on, haji, tatemae, and honne form the bases of Japanese culture, society and of ningen kankei, or relationships (Cooney, 1989). Joge refers to the highly subordinate role of the inferior to the superior. The Japanese “do not regard themselves as a society of

equal...each person has a unique place within a hierarchical system (Maher & Wong, 1994, p. 44). For instance, the practice of meishi, or the exchange of business cards serves as a way to establish rank or hierarchy and the resulting proper social interactions. The most senior Japanese person sits in the middle of the table facing the door. The Japanese strictly follow the cultural traditions and practices in order to maintain social structure and harmony but the collectivist nature endures. Often outsiders are unable to identify a senior executive in a room due to the Japanese principles of omoiyari, “care of membership” and gamen, “self-restraint, humility and modesty (Li & Putterill, 2007, p. 152). The Japanese highly prefer a sense of belonging, safety and stability these attributes are instilled in the Japanese from childhood and carry through into every aspect of life (Giacomino, Akers, & Fujita, 2001).

On refers to the overwhelming sense of obligation from receiving a benefit, gift or advantage of any kind or degree. Benefits derive from relationship and thus the Japanese enter into relationships with caution and suspicion with outsiders due to the sense of obligation and requirement to repay the benefit. Relationships, once formed are not easily relinquished in Japanese society. The recipient must repay the debt or reciprocate failure to comply with the cultural imperative brings haji or shame. The sense of obligation in extreme forms leads to suppuku or self-immolation as a means to repay the debt. On and haji relate to the Japanese hesitation to formally commit to lengthy written contracts and rely on legal injunctions. In addition, the Japanese are distrustful and suspicious of codified laws and formal contracts ability to regulate society and relational exchanges which typically only result in or lead to confrontation severely diminishing Wa. The Japanese prefer to place their trust in people and to rely on the heart of the individuals to guide, and form

the foundation for their relationships and exchanges. The Japanese view formal contract as to rigid and inflexible to account for the multitude of issues that arise in relationships and business transactions (Parry, 2006; Maher & Wong, 1994). In place of



formal contact and laws the Japanese instill mutual trust and commitment as the foundational structure. Interestingly enough, once an outsider gains the trust of their Japanese counterpart they are accepted as an “in-group member and thus expected to abide by the group norms” (Griffith, Myers, & Harvey, 2006, p. 7). Trusting relation-

ships bring intimacy, friendship, long-term commitment and the fulfillment of On (cultural obligation). Where Americans base trust on consistent and congruent prior behaviors that produce predictive future behaviors, the Japanese view the environment as more flexible and with uncertainty, unexpected events may require new actions or at least inconsistent actions with prior behaviors. In essence, the Japanese are able to maintain trustworthiness and commitment to the relationships even in the face of ambivalence, contradiction and seemingly inconsistent behaviors, again as a means of upholding and promoting Wa (Griffith, Myers, & Harvey, 2006). The Shinto concept and principles of *tatemaie*, “truthfulness” or “face saving” acts and *honne* “true mind or motives”

Moku-Toku “The virtue of silence”

are connected in that, the Japanese place the primary emphasis on maintaining harmony and thus limit the verbal expression of clear and direct truthfulness and motives (Hawrysh & Zaichkowsky, 1990; Maher & Wong, 1994). The Japanese, being consistent with the definition of a high-context culture expect tacit understanding. For example, the Japanese expect to obtain *a-un no kokyuu* or mutual understanding simply through the acts of *a-un*, exhalation or inhalation. The Japanese place a very low status on verbal communication and expect *sasshi*, the other person to intuitively know what they are thinking (Goodman, 2000). In fact there are sixteen ways to avoid saying no in Japanese, all with the aim of promoting Wa. The often used Eastern proverb, “keep your mouth closed and your eyes open” depicts for the Japanese the interdependence of both parties in

the relationship (Kameda, 2001, p. 145). The Japanese expect and are comfortable with silence and highly appreciate *moku-toku*, “the virtue of silence” (Li & Putterill, 2007, p. 150). In addition to the emphasis on silence, the expression of emotional and especially strong or aggressive emotions such as anger or frustration are considered “major character flaws” and corresponds with the proverb *tanki wa sonki*, “a short temper means a lost spirit” (Hawrysh & Zaichkowsky, 1990, p. 49). The Japanese decision making process, *ringi* aids in supporting this principle. Decisions are made exclusively through consensus, proposals are passed up and down the hierarchical system, once each member agrees to the proposal it receives a ban or stamp of approval. This process eliminates the necessity of member to directly reject or defend a proposal in public, to do so would destroy the sense of Wa. Business meetings in Japan are not a time to negotiate deals and argue for concessions, for the Japanese meetings are simply a time for the *ka* or work groups to connect and share in the announcement of the consensual decision reached through the *ringi*. Americans experience great difficulty with the Japanese decision making process due to the amount of time it takes but following the ban decision are acted up precisely and swiftly. Americans simply need to understand the cultural practice and respond accordingly to receive the significant benefits of the Japanese decision making process (Cooney, 1989).

Christian Perspectives on Trust

Religious as well as cultural belief and faith can be associated with the ability to trust (Neyrinck & Hustebaut, 2004). Trust, as the primal ground of all religious belief (Rümke, 1949), guides the social and cultural development of individuals (Erikson, 1965) that facilitates the ability to work and live in cooperation and harmony with others (Erikson, 1968). Trust as the central activating power of belief creates not only the possibility for receptivity to the

Sacred (God, the Divine, etc.) but also a determined openness to others (Ganzevoort, 2004). Even though the doctrinal beliefs and practices of Shintoism and Christianity (as one of the major philosophical and religious influences of the U.S.) are radically different, they both share a value preference for trust (Isomae, 2005). Trust is central to Christianity, theology and has been described as the “social logic of the Gospel” (Robra, 2004, p. 11) and as a predictor of effective organizations (Lee, 2004.).

Von Sinner (2005) in developing a Christian hermeneutic of trust proposes five distinct descriptions of relational trust distilled from an exegetical reading of the four canonical Gospels in the Christian New Testament and embodied in the sacrificial life and death of Jesus of Nazareth: (a) trust always implies a risk, (b) trust is a prior investment made unilaterally without certainty about the reaction or result, (c) trust is the categorical imperative in an ethical approach to life, (d) trust is a gift and freely given, and finally (e) trust must be developed in conjunction with a continued willingness to learn from others. Von Sinner's five-fold description of trust can be used as a philosophical foundation for business leaders informed by a Christian worldview and philosophy in the quest to build effective organizational relationships with their Japanese counterparts.

Wa and Trust: Building Bridges of Mutual Effectiveness

U.S. business leaders informed by the Japanese cultural and religious preference of Wa can utilize the Christian philosophical ideal of radical trust to forge a relational stance of mutuality and cooperation in their dealings with Japanese organizations:

1. U.S. business leaders should take the risk of trusting their Japanese counterpart's preferences for harmony, peace and unity. These leaders invest trust, when honoring their for-

eign partners by conforming to cultural norms different to their own, and can expect with a certain amount of probability that their efforts will not only be appreciated but also reciprocated.

2. U.S. business leaders should make the prior investment of advancing trust in their dealings with Japanese leaders, which in turn will impose a moral obligation on the counterparts to honor it.

3. U.S. business leaders can employ the widely known and accepted principle of the “golden rule”, distilled from the Biblical imperative, “...do to others what you would have them do to you...” (Matthew 7:12, NIV), in building strong relationships with Japanese leaders who in turn will repay the kindness in an effort to maintain harmony and balanced reciprocity (the Shinto concept of On).

4. U.S. business leaders can freely adopt the Japanese cultural value of trusting others until proven wrong knowing that this value, although recently neglected in the West, is central to their theological and philosophical heritage.

5. U.S. business leaders can promote the establishment and maintenance of Wa in their dealings with Japanese organizations by cultivating an organizational culture of ongoing cultural education and sensitivity.

Business is increasingly done within in a global context. American business leaders can use the principles of Wa and the ethical ideals of Christian theological reflections of trust to build strong, enduring and transformative relationships that contribute to the ongoing mutual quest for peace and prosperity.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

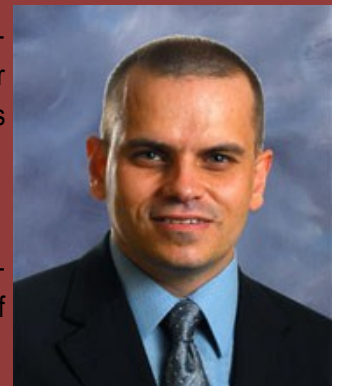


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Mr. Slattery came to Regent University due to the University's mission, vision and purpose statements and how the administration, faculty, staff and students live out the values and purpose of the University on a daily basis. I particularly support and enjoy the integration of Biblical theology and principles through the course material and interactions. Being a part of training the next generation of business leaders provides inspiration and hope.

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Dr. Bekker is an ordained minister and has traveled to Africa, Europe, the East and North America to present at churches, ministries, seminars and academic conferences on the subject of Christian spirituality and leadership formation.



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