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Applied Intercultural Communication Readings

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Applied Intercultural Communication

List of Readings

- 1 Meyer, Erin (2016): *Culture Map*. New York: Public Affairs. Introduction
- 2 Erin Meyer_ Selection of online articles: <https://erinmeyer.com>
- 3 Eric Barton: How to fire somebody in China: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/>
- 4 Why so many of the world's oldest companies are in Japan: [Why so many of the world's oldest companies are in Japan - BBC Worklife](#)
- 5 Dorie Clark and Andy Molinsky: Self-Promotion for Professionals from Countries Where Bragging Is Bad: <https://hbr.org/2014/03/>
- 6 Virginie Mangin: Chinese status symbol: <https://www.dawn.com>
- 7 Trompenaars, Alfons; Hampden-Turner, Charles (2012): *Riding the Waves of Culture*.
3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp.113-117
- 8 Richard Lewis: Contractual Obligations & Attitudes to Truth: <https://www.crossculture.com/contractual-obligations-attitudes-to-truth/>
- 9 Erin Meyer: WHEN TO SPEAK UP. WHEN TO SHUT UP. <https://erinmeyer.com/when-to-speak-up-when-to-shut-up/>
- 10 Communication Styles: Direct vs Indirect, High- Low Context
- 11 How 'reading the air' keeps Japan running, BBC Worklife: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200129>
- 12 Hygge: A heart-warming lesson from Denmark, BBC News Magazine: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34345791>
- 13 Japan's formula for life satisfaction, BBC Travel: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200510>
- 14 Nomunication: <https://www.nomunication.jp>
- 15 Jantelagen: Why Swedes won't talk about wealth, BBC Worklife: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20191008>
- 16 The Greek word that can't be translated, BBC Travel: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20170605>
- 17 Japan's usual way to view the world, BBC Travel: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20181021>

Erin Meyer_Online Articles: <https://erinmeyer.com>

1. Managing Confrontation in Multi-cultural Teams
<https://erinmeyer.com/managing-confrontation-in-multi-cultural-teams/>
2. Cultural Coaching: Knowing When to Shut-Up
<https://erinmeyer.com/cultural-coaching-knowing-when-to-shut-up/>
3. The Cultural Perils of Clockwatching
<https://erinmeyer.com/the-cultural-perils-of-clockwatching/>
4. How To Say “This is Crap” in Different Cultures
<https://erinmeyer.com/how-to-say-this-is-crap-in-different-cultures/>
5. When to Speak Up. When to Shut Up.
<https://erinmeyer.com/when-to-speak-up-when-to-shut-up/>
6. Are you a Holistic or Specific Thinker? It may Depend on Where you Come From.
<https://erinmeyer.com/are-you-a-holistic-or-specific-thinker-it-may-depend-on-where-you-come-from/>
7. Leading Across Cultures: Learn to Adapt Your Style
<https://erinmeyer.com/leading-across-cultures-learn-to-adapt-your-style/>
8. One Reason Cross-Cultural Small Talk Is So Tricky
<https://erinmeyer.com/one-reason-cross-cultural-small-talk-is-so-tricky/>
9. Leading Across Borders Takes More than A Multi-cultural Background
<https://erinmeyer.com/leading-across-borders-takes-more-than-a-multi-cultural-background/>
10. The Art of Persuasion in a Multi-cultural World
<https://erinmeyer.com/the-art-of-persuasion-in-a-multi-cultural-world/>
11. Map out Cultural Conflicts on Your Team
<https://erinmeyer.com/map-out-cultural-conflicts-on-your-team/>
12. Tailor Your Presentation to Fit the Culture
<https://erinmeyer.com/tailor-your-presentation-to-fit-the-culture/>
13. Avoiding Culture Clashes When Making Decisions
<https://erinmeyer.com/avoiding-culture-clashes-when-making-decisions/>
14. What Makes a Boss too Formal?
<https://erinmeyer.com/what-makes-a-boss-too-formal/>
15. Building Trust Across Cultures
<https://erinmeyer.com/building-trust-across-cultures/>
16. The Most Productive Ways to Disagree Across Cultures
<https://erinmeyer.com/the-most-productive-ways-to-disagree-across-cultures/>
17. Giving Negative Feedback Across Cultures
<https://erinmeyer.com/giving-negative-feedback-across-cultures/>
18. Mapping out Cultural Differences on Teams
<https://erinmeyer.com/mapping-out-cultural-differences-on-teams/>

INTRODUCTION

Navigating Cultural Differences and the Wisdom of Mrs. Chen

When dawn broke that chilly November morning in Paris, I was driving to my office for a meeting with an important new client. I hadn't slept well, but that was nothing unusual, since before an important training session I often have a restless night. But what made this night different were the dreams that disturbed my sleep.

I found myself shopping for groceries in a big American-style supermarket. As I worked my way through my list—fruit, Kleenex, more fruit, a loaf of bread, a container of milk, still more fruit—I was startled to discover that the items were somehow disappearing from my cart more quickly than I could find them and stack them in the basket. I raced down the aisle of the store, grabbing goods and tossing them into my cart, only to see them vanish without a trace. Horrified and frustrated, I realized that my shopping would never be complete.

After having this dream repeatedly throughout the night, I gave up trying to sleep. I got up, gulped a cup of coffee and got dressed in the predawn dark, and wound my way through the empty Paris streets to my office near the Champs Elysées to prepare for that day's program. Reflecting that my nightmare of ineffectual shopping might reflect my anxiety about being completely ready for my clients, I poured my energy into arranging the

conference room and reviewing my notes for the day ahead. I would be spending the day with one of the top executives at Peugeot Citroën, preparing him and his wife for the cultural adjustments they'd need to make in their upcoming move to Wuhan, China. If the program was successful, my firm would be hired to provide the same service for another fifty couples later in the year, so there was a lot at stake.

Bo Chen, the Chinese country expert who would be assisting with the training session, also arrived early. Chen, a thirty-six-year-old Paris-based journalist from Wuhan, worked for a Chinese newspaper. He had volunteered to act as a Chinese culture expert for the training, and his input would be one of the most critical elements in making the day a success. If he was as good as I hoped, the program would be a hit and we would get to conduct the fifty follow-up sessions. My confidence in Chen had been bolstered by our preparatory meetings. Articulate, extroverted, and very knowledgeable, Chen seemed perfect for the job. I had asked him to prepare two to three concrete business examples to illustrate each cultural dimension I would be covering during the program, and he had enthusiastically confirmed he would be ready.

Monsieur and Madame Bernard arrived, and I installed them on one side of the big glass rectangular table with Chen on the other side. Taking a deep, hopeful breath, I began the session, outlining on a flip chart the cultural issues that the Bernards needed to grasp so their time in China would be a success. As the morning wore on, I explained each dimension of the key issues, answered the Bernards' questions, and carefully kept an eye on Chen so I could help facilitate his input.

But Chen didn't seem to have any input. After finishing the first dimension, I paused briefly and looked to him for his input, but he didn't speak up. He didn't open his mouth, move his body forward, or raise his hand. Apparently he had no example to provide. Not wanting to embarrass Chen or to create an awkward situation by calling on him when he was not ready, I simply continued with my next point.

To my growing dismay, Chen remained silent and nearly motionless as I went through the rest of my presentation. He nodded politely while I was speaking, but that was all; he used no other body language to indicate any reactions, positive or negative. I gave every example I could think of and engaged in dialogue with the client as best I could. Dimension after

dimension, I spoke, shared, and consulted with the Bernards—and dimension after dimension, there was no input from Chen.

I continued for three full hours. My initial disappointment with Chen was spilling over into full-fledged panic. I needed his input for the program to succeed. Finally, although I didn't want to create an awkward moment in front of the client, I decided to take a chance. "Bo," I asked, "did you have any examples you would like to share?"

Chen sat up straight in his chair, smiled confidently at the clients, and opened up his notebook, which was filled with pages and pages of typed notes. "Thank you, Erin," he replied. "I do." And then, to my utter relief, Chen began to explain one clear, pertinent, fascinating example after another.

In reflecting on the story of my awkward engagement with "Silent Bo," it's natural to assume that something about Chen's personality, my personality, or the interaction between us might have led to the strained situation. Perhaps Chen was mute because he is not a very good communicator, or because he is shy or introverted and doesn't feel comfortable expressing himself until pushed. Or perhaps I am an incompetent facilitator, telling Chen to prepare for the meeting and then failing to call on him until the session was almost over. Or maybe, more charitably, I was just so tired from dreaming about lost fruit all night long that I missed the visual cues Chen was sending to indicate that he had something to say.

In fact, my previous meetings with Chen had made it clear to me that he was neither inarticulate nor shy; he was actually a gifted communicator and also bursting with extroversion and self-confidence. What's more, I'd been conducting client meetings for years and had never before experienced a disconnect quite like this one, which suggested that my skills as a facilitator were not the source of the problem.

The truth is that the story of Silent Bo is a story of culture, not personality. But the cultural explanation is not as simple as you might think. Chen's behavior in our meeting lines up with a familiar cultural stereotype. Westerners often assume that Asians, in general, are quiet, reserved, or shy. If you manage a global team that includes both Asians and Westerners, it is very likely that you will have heard the common Western complaint that the Asian participants don't speak very much and are less forthright about

offering their individual opinions in team meetings. Yet the cultural stereotype does not reflect the actual reason behind Chen's behavior.

Since the Bernards, Chen, and I were participating in a cross-cultural training program (which I was supposed to be leading—though I now found myself, uncomfortably, in the role of a student), I decided to simply ask Chen for an explanation of his actions. “Bo,” I exclaimed, “you had all of these great examples! Why didn't you jump in and share them with us earlier?”

“Were you expecting me to jump in?” he asked, a look of genuine surprise on his face. He went on to describe the situation as he saw it. “In this room,” he said, turning to M. and Mme. Bernard, “Erin is the chairman of the meeting.” He continued:

As she is the senior person in the room, I wait for her to call on me. And, while I am waiting, I should show I am a good listener by keeping both my voice and my body quiet. In China, we often feel Westerners speak up so much in meetings that they do this to show off, or they are poor listeners. Also, I have noticed that Chinese people leave a few more seconds of silence before jumping in than in the West. You Westerners practically speak on top of each other in a meeting. I kept waiting for Erin to be quiet long enough for me to jump in, but my turn never came. We Chinese often feel Americans are not good listeners because they are always jumping in on top of one another to make their points. I would have liked to make one of my points if an appropriate length of pause had arisen. But Erin was always talking, so I just kept waiting patiently. My mother left it deeply engrained in me: You have two eyes, two ears, but only one mouth. You should use them accordingly.

As Chen spoke, the cultural underpinnings of our misunderstanding became vividly clear to the Bernards—and to me. It was obvious that they go far beyond any facile stereotypes about “the shy Chinese.” And this new understanding led to the most important question of all: Once I am aware of the cultural context that shapes a situation, what steps can I take to be more effective in dealing with it?

In the Silent Bo scenario, my deeper awareness of the meaning of Bo's behavior leads to some easy, yet powerful, solutions. In the future, I can be

more prepared to recognize and flexibly address the differing cultural expectations around status and communication. The next time I lead a training program with a Chinese cultural specialist, I must make sure to invite him to speak. And if he doesn't respond immediately, I need to allow a few more seconds of silence before speaking myself. Chen, too, can adapt some simple strategies to improve his effectiveness. He might simply choose to override his natural tendency to wait for an invitation to speak by forcing himself to jump in whenever he has an idea to contribute. If this feels too aggressive, he might raise his hand to request the floor when he can't find the space he needs to talk.

In this book, I provide a systematic, step-by-step approach to understanding the most common business communication challenges that arise from cultural differences, and offer steps for dealing with them more effectively. The process begins with recognizing the cultural factors that shape human behavior and methodically analyzing the reasons for that behavior. This, in turn, will allow you to apply clear strategies to improve your effectiveness at solving the most thorny problems caused by cross-cultural misunderstandings—or to avoid them altogether.

* * *

When I walked into Sabine Dulac's second-floor office at La Defense, the business district just outside of Paris, she was pacing excitedly in front of her window, which overlooked a small footbridge and a concrete sculpture depicting a giant human thumb. A highly energetic finance director for a leading global energy company, Dulac had been offered a two-year assignment in Chicago, after years of petitioning her superiors for such an opportunity. Now she'd spent the previous evening poring over a sheaf of articles I'd sent her describing the differences between French and American business cultures.

"I think this move to Chicago is going to be perfect for me," Dulac declared. "I love working with Americans. *Ils sont tellement pratiques et efficaces!* I love that focus on practicality and efficiency. *Et transparent!* Americans are so much more explicit and transparent than we are in France!"

I spent several hours with Dulac helping her prepare for the move, including exploring how she might best adapt her leadership style to be effective in the context of American culture. This would be her first

experience living outside France, and she would be the only non-American on her team, twin circumstances that only increased her enthusiasm for the move. Thrilled with this new opportunity, Dulac departed for the Windy City. The two of us didn't speak for four months. Then I called both her new American boss and later Dulac herself for our prescheduled follow-up conversations.

Jake Webber responded with a heavy sigh when I asked how Dulac was performing. "She is doing—sort of medium. Her team really likes her, and she's incredibly energetic. I have to admit that her energy has ignited her department. That's been positive. She has definitely integrated much more quickly than I expected. Really, that has been excellent."

I could sense that Webber's evaluation was about to take a turn for the worse. "However, there are several critical things that I need Sabine to change about the way she is working," Webber continued, "and I just don't see her making an effort to do so. Her spreadsheets are sloppy, she makes calculation errors, and she comes to meetings unprepared. I have spoken to her a handful of times about these things, but she is not getting the message. She just continues with her same work patterns. I spoke to her last Thursday about this again, but there's still no visible effort on her part."

"We had her performance review this morning," Webber said with another sigh, "and I detailed these issues again. We'll wait and see. But if she doesn't get in gear with these things, I don't think this job is going to work out."

Feeling concerned, I called Dulac.

"Things are going great!" Dulac proclaimed. "My team is terrific. I've really been able to connect with them. And I have a great relationship with my boss. *Je m'épanouis!*" she added, a French phrase that translates loosely as "I'm blossoming" or "I'm thriving." She went on, "For the first time in my career I've found a job that is just perfect for me. That takes advantage of all of my talents and skills. Oh, and I have to tell you—I had my first performance review this morning. I'm just delighted! It was the best performance review I have had since starting with this company. I often think I will try to extend my stay beyond these two years, things are going so well."

As we did with the story of Silent Bo, let's consider for a moment whether the miscommunication between Webber and Dulac is more likely a result of personality misfit or cultural differences. In this case, national

stereotypes may be more confusing than helpful. After all, the common assumption about the French is that they are masters of implicit and indirect communication, speaking and listening with subtlety and sensitivity, while Americans are thought of as prone to explicit and direct communication—the blunter the better. Yet in the story of “Deaf Dulac,” an American supervisor complains that his French subordinate lacks the sophistication to grasp his meaning, while the French manager seems happily oblivious to the message her boss is trying to convey. Faced with this seemingly counterintuitive situation, you might assume that Webber and Dulac simply have incompatible personalities, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

So you might assume. But suppose you happened to be speaking with twenty or thirty French managers living in the United States, and you heard similar stories from a dozen of them. As they explained, one by one, how their American bosses gave them negative feedback in a way they found confusing, ambiguous, or downright misleading, you might come to the correct conclusion that there is *something* cultural driving this pattern of misunderstanding. And in fact, such a pattern does exist—which strongly suggests that the case of Deaf Dulac is much more than a matter of personality conflict.

This pattern is puzzling because Americans often *do* tend to be more explicit and direct than the French (or, more precisely, more “low-context,” a term we’ll explore further in a later chapter). The one big exception arises when managers are providing feedback to their subordinates. In a French setting, positive feedback is often given implicitly, while negative feedback is given more directly. In the United States, it’s just the opposite. American managers usually give positive feedback directly while trying to couch negative messages in positive, encouraging language. Thus, when Webber reviewed Dulac’s work using the popular American method of three positives for every negative, Dulac left the meeting with his praise ringing delightfully in her ears, while the negative feedback sounded very minor indeed.

If Dulac had been aware of this cultural tendency when discussing her job performance with her new American boss, she might have weighed the negative part of the review more heavily than she would if receiving it from a French boss, thereby reading the feedback more accurately and potentially saving her job.

Armed with the same understanding, Webber could have reframed his communication for Dulac. He might have said, “When I give a performance review, I always start by going through three or four things I feel the person is doing well. Then I move on to the really important part of the meeting, which is, of course, what you can do to improve. I hate to jump into the important part of the meeting without starting with the positives. Is that method okay for you?”

Simply explaining what you are doing can often help a lot, both by defusing an immediate misunderstanding and by laying the foundation for better teamwork in the future—a principle we also saw at work when Bo Chen described his reasons for remaining silent during most of our meeting. This is one of the dozens of concrete, practical strategies we’ll provide for handling cross-cultural missteps and improving your effectiveness in working with global teams.

INVISIBLE BOUNDARIES THAT DIVIDE OUR WORLD

Situations like the two we’ve just considered are far more common than you might suspect. The sad truth is that the vast majority of managers who conduct business internationally have little understanding about how culture is impacting their work. This is especially true as more and more of us communicate daily with people in other countries over virtual media like e-mail or telephone. When you live, work, or travel extensively in a foreign country, you pick up a lot of contextual cues that help you understand the culture of the people living there, and that helps you to better decode communication and adapt accordingly. By contrast, when you exchange e-mails with an international counterpart in a country you haven’t spent time in, it is much easier to miss the cultural subtleties impacting the communication.

A simple example is a characteristic behavior unique to India—a half-shake, half-nod of the head. Travel to India on business and you’ll soon learn that the half-shake, half-nod is not a sign of disagreement, uncertainty, or lack of support as it would be in most other cultures. Instead it suggests interest, enthusiasm, or sometimes respectful listening. After a day or two, you notice that everyone is doing it, you make a mental note of its apparent meaning, and you are able henceforth to accurately read the gesture when negotiating a deal with your Indian outsourcing team.

But over e-mail or telephone, you may interact daily with your Indian counterparts from your office in Hellerup, Denmark, or Bogota, Colombia, without ever seeing the environment they live and work in. So when you are on videoconference with one of your top Indian managers, you may interpret his half-shake, half-nod as meaning that he is not in full agreement with your idea. You redouble your efforts to convince him, but the more you talk the more he (seemingly) indicates with his head that he is not on board. You get off the call puzzled, frustrated, and perhaps angry. Culture has impacted your communication, yet in the absence of the visual and contextual cues that physical presence provides, you didn't even recognize that something cultural was going on.

So whether we are aware of it or not, subtle differences in communication patterns and the complex variations in what is considered good business or common sense from one country to another have a tremendous impact on how we understand one another, and ultimately on how we get the job done. Many of these cultural differences—varying attitudes concerning when best to speak or stay quiet, the role of the leader in the room, and what kind of negative feedback is the most constructive—may seem small. But if you are unaware of the differences and unarmed with strategies for managing them effectively, they can derail your team meetings, demotivate your employees, frustrate your foreign suppliers, and in dozens of other ways make it much more difficult to achieve your goals.

Today, whether we work in Düsseldorf or Dubai, Brasília or Beijing, New York or New Delhi, we are all part of a global network (real or virtual, physical or electronic) where success requires navigating through wildly different cultural realities. Unless we know how to decode other cultures and avoid easy-to-fall-into cultural traps, we are easy prey to misunderstanding, needless conflict, and ultimate failure.

BEING OPEN TO INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IS NOT ENOUGH

It is quite possible, even common, to work across cultures for decades and travel frequently for business while remaining unaware and uninformed about how culture impacts you. Millions of people work in global settings while viewing everything from their own cultural perspectives and assuming that all differences, controversy, and misunderstanding are rooted in

personality. This is not due to laziness. Many well-intentioned people don't educate themselves about cultural differences because they believe that if they focus on individual differences, that will be enough.

After I published an online article on the differences among Asian cultures and their impact on cross-Asia teamwork, one reader commented, "Speaking of cultural differences leads us to stereotype and therefore put individuals in boxes with 'general traits.' Instead of talking about culture, it is important to judge people as individuals, not just products of their environment."

At first, this argument sounds valid, even enlightened. Of course individuals, no matter their cultural origins, have varied personality traits. So why not just approach all people with an interest in getting to know them personally, and proceed from there? Unfortunately, this point of view has kept thousands of people from learning what they need to know to meet their objectives. If you go into every interaction assuming that culture doesn't matter, your default mechanism will be to view others through your own cultural lens and to judge or misjudge them accordingly. Ignore culture, and you can't help but conclude, "Chen doesn't speak up—obviously he doesn't have anything to say! His lack of preparation is ruining this training program!" Or perhaps, "Jake told me everything was great in our performance review, when really he was unhappy with my work—he is a sneaky, dishonest, incompetent boss!"

Yes, every individual is different. And yes, when you work with people from other cultures, you shouldn't make assumptions about individual traits based on where a person comes from. But this doesn't mean learning about cultural contexts is unnecessary. If your business success relies on your ability to work successfully with people from around the world, you need to have an appreciation for cultural differences as well as respect for individual differences. Both are essential.

As if this complexity weren't enough, cultural and individual differences are often wrapped up with differences among organizations, industries, professions, and other groups. But even in the most complex situations, understanding how cultural differences affect the mix may help you discover a new approach. Cultural patterns of behavior and belief frequently impact our perceptions (what we see), cognitions (what we think), and actions (what we do). The goal of this book is to help you improve your ability to decode these three facets of culture and to enhance your effectiveness in dealing with them.

MODULE 3: CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

POWER DISTANCE

WHAT MAKES A BOSS TOO FORMAL?

<https://erinmeyer.com/what-makes-a-boss-too-formal/>

Answer the following questions quickly without giving them much thought. Do you expect a boss to wear an Armani suit or khaki trousers with jogging shoes? Should she travel to work on a mountain bike or in a limousine? Do you call him “Mr. Director,” or are you more likely to address him as “Sam”? How you respond to these questions depends on your individual personality. It also may reflect the country you come from.

For Steve Henning, raised in egalitarian Australia, the answer was clear. The best boss is just one of the guys:

At home I was a near-full-time bicycle commuter. I’m a senior vice president and my Australian staff thought it was great that I rode a bike to work like many of them did. So I decided to bring my bicycle with me when I was assigned to a new job in China.

Unfortunately, Henning’s decision backfired:

My team was humiliated that their boss rode a bike to work like a common person. There are plenty of bikes on the road here but they are not carrying vice presidents. The team felt my actions suggested to the company that their boss was unimportant, and that they, by association, were also unimportant.

In today’s global economy you might be an Australian leading a team in China, a Russian courting clients in Brazil, or a German acquiring a company in India. The ideal “power distance” between the boss and his staff is deeply woven into the education system and family structure of each society. If you’re the boss it’s particularly important to understand what to expect from the culture you are working with.

When Joseph Alabi moved from Nigeria to Denmark, he was taken aback by the way his Danish staff spoke to him. Everyone — from the secretary to guys on the shop floor — used his first name and didn’t hesitate to contradict him in meetings. As he pointed out:

In the part of Nigeria I come from, we are taught to show the utmost respect to anyone above us in the hierarchy. When an older brother asks his little brother to fetch him water, the little brother does as told or suffers the wrath of his mother. When a grandparent arrives, he gets down on his knees in order to greet him. At work, you wouldn’t dare call your boss by his first name, let alone challenge him in public or in some other way insult his position in society.

At first he took things personally, but gradually Joseph realized that the Danes simply show their respect very differently from Nigerians:

The Danes have something called “the Law Of Jante”, which is a set of extremely egalitarian principles. Do not think you are better than others. Do not think you are smarter than others. Do not think you are more important than others. These and the other Jante rules are part of the way the Danes live. Hierarchy is almost entirely absent in this society. Children call the teacher by his first name. Young children challenge elders without hesitation. And the boss really is treated like he is just one of the team — a sort of facilitator among equals.

For anyone working globally, the nuances of hierarchy can be complicated. It is no longer enough to know how to lead the Australian, Chinese, Nigerian, or Danish way. You have to know how to manage up and down the cultural spectrum, and be flexible enough to adapt your style to the culture at hand. Here are a few pointers to get you started.

In an egalitarian culture:

- It's okay to disagree with the boss openly, even in front of others.
- People are more likely to move to action without getting the boss's approval.
- In a meeting with a client or supplier, it is not important to match hierarchical levels.
- It's acceptable to e-mail or call people several levels below or above you.
- With clients or partners, expect to be seated and spoken to in no specific order.

In a hierarchical culture:

- People will defer to the boss's opinion, especially in public.
- People are likely to get the boss's approval before acting.
- If your boss plans to attend a meeting, your suppliers or clients will send their boss. If your boss cancels, their boss will likely not come.
- Expect communication to follow the hierarchical chain; people correspond with others on their own level.
- With clients or partners, you are likely to be seated and spoken to in order of position.

After several years in China, Steve Henning reflected on his experience:

I soon got rid of the bike, and stopped asking everyone to call me by my first name (Mr. Steve was our compromise!). I abandoned early strategies to make their culture more like my own, like implementing an open-floor seating plan. My team no more wanted me seated in a cubicle [than] riding a bike.

He came to not only adapt to this new culture, but to also see that it had its advantages: When I was managing in Australia, every idea had to be hashed out at each level. Hours and hours were lost trying to create buy-in. When I first started working in China, I felt frustrated that my staff wouldn't challenge my ideas. But I have developed a very close relationship with them over the past six years — almost a father-son connection. And I have come to love managing in China. There is great beauty in giving a clear instruction and watching your competent and enthusiastic team jump right in and attack the project at hand without pushback.

It's natural for us to experience our own way of doing things as normal. But as we gain cross-cultural experience, we begin to see that every style has its advantages and disadvantages. And over time, a leader can start to smooth over the cultural gaps in team interactions, while capitalizing on the assets each cultural group brings. The more global the team, the greater the potential for misunderstanding... but also the greater the opportunity for the experienced leader to achieve success. This is the true value of leading in the global economy — getting the best of all worlds.

TIME CONCEPT**THE CULTURAL PERILS OF CLOCKWATCHING**

Although I have researched cultural differences for many years, it is only recently that I have come to see how my American obsession with punctuality and clockwatching can sometimes lead me astray. The truth is, time may be of prime importance in some cultures, but in others it is firmly subordinated to the needs of the moment.

Let me share two experiences I had that brought this truth home to me.

I was to give a keynote speech in Denver, Colorado, to a group of approximately 500, mostly American, managers. The afternoon before the event, Danielle, the conference organizer, had

shown me a stack of cards she would be holding in her lap during my 40-minute talk. “I’ll hold up a sign every ten minutes,” she explained, showing me cards that read “30 minutes,” “20 minutes,” and “10 minutes” in bold black characters. The sequence concluded with “5 minutes,” “2 minutes,” and “0 minutes.” It was evident that the big black zero on the final card meant in no uncertain terms that my time was up.

I understood Danielle perfectly. She is a typical member of my (American) tribe, and I was very comfortable with the idea of monitoring each minute. My speech went beautifully and my American audience was suitably appreciative.

A few days later I was dining with Flavio Ranato in a restaurant overlooking Brazil’s fifth-largest city, Belo Horizonte. We were planning the presentation I would give the next day to a large group of South Americans. “This topic is very important to our organization,” he told me. “The participants will love it. Please feel free to take extra time if you like.”

I didn’t quite understand, as I had already tested my presentation with the I.T. support person, and the agenda was already printed. “I have 45 minutes scheduled. Could I possibly take an hour?” I wondered out loud.

Ranato responded with a shrug: “Of course, take the time you need.”

Uncomfortable, I decided that my talk should last 60 minutes, not 45. I went back to my hotel room and adapted my presentation accordingly.

The next day at the conference, I noticed immediately that the agenda on the door still said I had 45 minutes. So I sought out Ranato in the crowd. “I just want to make sure I understood correctly,” I said. “Did you want me to take 45 or 60 minutes?”

Ranato just laughed. “Do not worry, Erin,” he reassured me. “They will love it. Please take whatever time you need.”

“I will take 60 minutes,” I replied.

When my presentation began (after a number of unanticipated delays), the audience was boisterously appreciative. During the Q&A session at the end they waved their arms to ask questions and provide examples. Carefully watching the large clock at the back of the room, I ended after 65 minutes.

Ranato approached me. “It was great, just as I expected. But you ended so early!”

Early? I didn’t get it.

“You should have gone on longer! They were loving it!” he insisted.

Later that evening, Ranato and I had an enlightening discussion about our mutual incomprehension.

“You gave me 60 minutes. To me, it would be disrespectful if I took more time than scheduled without getting explicit permission,” I explained.

“But we are the customers,” Ranato responded. “We are paying you to be here. If you see that we have more questions, isn’t it simply good service to extend the presentation?”

I was confused. “But if you haven’t explicitly told me, how do I know that’s what you want?”

He looked at me curiously, as it started to dawn on him how much of a foreigner I was. “They were so obviously interested. Couldn’t you tell?”

The impact of differing attitudes toward time can be enormous. The assumptions Ranato and I made about scheduling caused us to have completely contrasting definitions of “good customer service.”

No matter what country you come from, you want to keep your customers happy. Understanding how your international clients think about time — and adjusting your expectations accordingly — is critical to doing that successfully. And while people in every culture want you to be both structured AND flexible, in some cultures — such as the German, Dutch, British, Danish, Australian, and my own American cultures — we tend to value structure over flexibility. But in many of the world’s fastest growing countries, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Russia and Nigeria, there is much more emphasis put on being flexible than on being structured. In these cultures strongly emphasizing punctuality signals an inability to adapt and even a lack of priorities.

So from now on when I give a presentation in one of these, I give myself a good talking to before I arrive. “Adaptability over punctuality” I remind myself. I try to ignore the clock and focus on giving whatever the client seems to want at that moment, no matter what we agreed on beforehand.

RELATIONSHIP- DEAL-FOCUSED CULTURES

ONE REASON CROSS-CULTURAL SMALL TALK IS SO TRICKY

<https://erinmeyer.com/one-reason-cross-cultural-small-talk-is-so-tricky/>

It was my first dinner party in France and I was chatting with a Parisian couple. All was well until I asked what I thought was a perfectly innocent question: “How did the two of you meet?” My husband Eric (who is French) shot me a look of horror. When we got home he explained: “We don’t ask that type of question to strangers in France. It’s like asking them the color of their underpants.”

It’s a classic mistake. One of the first things you notice when arriving in a new culture is that the rules about what information is and is not appropriate to ask and share with strangers are different. Understanding those rules, however, is a prerequisite for succeeding in that new culture; simply applying your own rules gets you into hot water pretty quickly.

A good way to prepare is to ask yourself whether the new culture is a “peach” or a “coconut”. This is a distinction drawn by culture experts Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner. In peach cultures like the USA or Brazil people tend to be friendly (“soft”) with new acquaintances. They smile frequently at strangers, move quickly to first-name usage, share information about themselves, and ask personal questions of those they hardly know. But after a little friendly interaction with a peach, you may suddenly get to the hard shell of the pit where the peach protects his real self and the relationship suddenly stops.

In coconut cultures such Russia and Germany, people are initially more closed off from those they don't have friendships with. They rarely smile at strangers, ask casual acquaintances personal questions, or offer personal information to those they don't know intimately. But over time, as coconuts get to know you, they become gradually warmer and friendlier. And while relationships are built up slowly, they also tend to last longer.

Coconuts may react to peaches in a couple of ways. Some interpret the friendliness as an offer of friendship and when people don't follow through on the unintended offer, they conclude that the peaches are disingenuous or hypocritical. Such as the German in Brazil who puzzled: "In Brazil people are so friendly – they are constantly inviting me over for coffee. I happily agree, but time and again they forget to tell me where they live." Igor Agapov, a Russian colleague, was equally surprised to experience the pit of the peach on his first trip to the United States: "I sat next to a stranger on the airplane for a nine-hour flight to New York. This American began asking me very personal questions: was it my first trip to the U.S., what was I leaving behind in Russia, had I been away from my children for this long before? He also shared very personal information about himself. He told me he was a bass player and talked about how difficult his frequent travelling was for his wife, who was with his newborn child right now in Florida."

In response, Agapov started to do something unusual in Russian culture. He shared his personal story thinking they had built an unusually deep friendship in a short period of time. The sequel was quite disappointing: "I thought that after this type of connection, we would be friends for a very long time. When the airplane landed, imagine my surprise when, as I reached for a piece of paper in order to write down my phone number, my new friend stood up and with a wave of his hand said, 'Nice to meet you! Have a great trip!' And that was it. I never saw him again. I felt he had purposely tricked me into opening up when he had no intention of following through on the relationship he had instigated."

Others are immediately suspicious. A French woman who visited with my family in Minnesota was taken aback by the Midwest's peachiness: "The waiters here are constantly smiling and asking me how my day is going! They don't even know me. It makes me feel uncomfortable and suspicious. What do they want from me? I respond by holding tightly onto my purse."

On the other hand, coming from a peach culture as I do, I was equally taken aback when I came to live in Europe 14 years ago. My friendly smiles and personal comments were greeted with cold formality by the Polish, French, German, or Russian colleagues I was getting to know. I took their stony expressions as signs of arrogance, snobbishness, and even hostility.

So what do you do if, like me, you're a peach fallen amongst coconuts? Authenticity matters; if you try to be someone you're not, it never works. So go ahead and smile all you want and share as much information about your family as you like. Just don't ask personal questions of your counterparts until they bring up the subject themselves. And for my coconut readers, if your peach counterpart asks how you are doing, shows you photos of their family or even invites you over for a barbecue, don't take it as an overture to deep friendship or a cloak for some hidden agenda, but as an expression of different cultural norms that you need to adjust to.

BUILDING TRUST ACROSS CULTURES

<https://erinmeyer.com/building-trust-across-cultures/>

Do you trust with your head or with your heart? There is a big difference between cultures when it comes to building trust, and not understanding that can put a business relationship in peril.

Karl Morel, an acquisitions expert from Nestlé, found himself in a challenging situation when he was negotiating a joint venture in China. Morel led a team to Shanghai to explore a venture with a company that made packaged Chinese delicacies. The initial meetings with eight Chinese executives had him baffled. Morel and his team tried to be friendly and transparent, providing all of the details the Chinese wanted. “But they were impenetrable and unwilling to budge on any of their demands,” Morel said.

After a frustrating week, Morel and his colleagues met with a Chinese business consultant to figure out how they should adjust their approach. “The consultant told us that our approach was wrong, that we were going too fast.” Morel reported. He said they weren’t going to get what they wanted from the Chinese executives until they developed *guanxi* with them.

Relationships first

Guanxi is a Chinese term used to describe relationships that may benefit both parties. As the consultant explained, to develop good *guanxi*, one must build trust from the heart. “Forget the deal for a while,” he said. “Open up personally. Make a friend. A real one.”

Morel took the consultant’s advice, inviting his Chinese counterparts out for dinner, and including people from different levels of the company. There was live music and plenty of food from the Tianjin area of China, where the owner of the Chinese company was from. It was an excellent dinner, and there was plenty of socialising. The two groups toasted each other several times in a sign of mutual respect and emphasised their happiness at the prospect of a long-term relationship. After restarting the meetings the following Monday, the Chinese were much more willing to cooperate and the teams made excellent progress during their second week together.

Take a long lunch

I heard of a similar example when I worked recently with a group of executives from Gerda, a Brazilian steelmaker. I learned the interesting backstory of one of the company’s acquisitions from Maria Morez in the Brazilian team and her American counterpart, Jim Powly. The acquisition was successful, but the path was challenging.

When the Brazilian team arrived in Jacksonville, Mississippi, Jim’s group gave them a warm welcome. “We got right down to business that morning,” Morez recounts; for three days the teams engaged in intense, sometimes difficult negotiations, ordering sandwiches for lunch and only taking short pauses throughout the day. At the end of two days, the Americans felt great about what they’d accomplished. They also felt that the short breaks and tight schedules were a sign of respect for the time their guests had taken out of their busy schedule to visit. But the Brazilians were less upbeat. “Despite having spent two days together, we didn’t know whether we could trust them.” explained Morez.

Powly continued the story, explaining that he brought the American team to Brazil to continue the discussions. Although the days were packed with meetings, lunches were long and dinners went well into the evening. This made the Americans uncomfortable. They worried if they’d have enough time to get everything finished and they even wondered if their Brazilian counterparts took the negotiations seriously.

For the Brazilians, the long lunches and dinners also showed respect for the Americans’ time. “This is supposed to send a clear message”, Morez explained: “Dear colleagues, who have come such a long distance to work with us, we would like to show you that we value you, and even if nothing else happens during these two days besides getting to know each other well,

and developing a personal connection, we will have made good use of our time together.” Morez and Powly managed to complete their deal but a sense of discomfort persisted.

The two forms of trust

There are two basic types of trust: cognitive trust and affective trust. Cognitive trust is based on the confidence you feel in another person’s accomplishments, skills and reliability. This is trust from the head. Affective trust on the other hand, arises from feelings of emotional closeness, empathy or friendship. This type of trust comes from the heart. In all cultures, the trust you feel for a parent or spouse is likely to be an affective trust. But when it comes to business, cultural differences are significant.

In cultures that are more “task-based,” such as the U.S., Denmark, Germany, Australia and the U.K., business people are much more likely to develop work bonds based largely on cognitive trust. In China, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, trust is “relationship-based” and is built through developing a personal bond. In the business world of those cultures, cognitive and affective trust aren’t separate but are woven together.

For those from task-based societies who are working with relationship-based counterparts, a few key rules to remember are:

- Put more time and effort into organising meals or social events to be shared. During those engagements, drop talks about work. Laugh together, and make friends. Beyond meals, make all efforts to find time to let your guard down with those you’d like to build trust with, and to build up personal bonds. Those from relationship-based societies who are working with task-based counterparts should keep the following points in mind:
- Don’t throw out socialising altogether. Go ahead and organise a lunch but if it is likely to stretch to ninety minutes or longer, prepare your colleagues in advance. Feel free to set up evening dinner or drinks, but if your counterparts leave early to rest or catch up on work, don’t take offence. Recognise that a personal bond might help, but the business is more likely to come with cognitive proof of a high-quality product.

There is a very clear, practical benefit to investing in affective relationship-building, especially in emerging markets. Very often the relationship is, in itself, the business contract, so it is important to join the crowd and show your true self to feel a personal bond. In these cultures, trust is like an insurance policy: – it’s an investment you need to make up front, before the need arises.

MODULE 5: BUSINESS APPLICATIONS

TAILOR YOUR PRESENTATION TO FIT THE CULTURE

<https://erinmeyer.com/tailor-your-presentation-to-fit-the-culture/>

Fourteen years ago I moved from Chicago to Paris. The first time I ran a training session in France, I prepared thoroughly, considering how to give the most persuasive presentation possible. I practiced my points, and anticipated questions that might arise.

The day of the session, my actions were guided by the lessons I had learned from many successful years of training in the U.S. I started by getting right to the point, introducing strategies, practical examples, and next steps.

But the group did not seem to be responding as usual, and soon the first hand came up. “How did you get to these conclusions?” You are giving us your tools and recommended actions, but I haven’t heard enough about how you got here. How many people did you poll? What questions did you ask?” Then another jumped in: “Please explain what methodology you used for analyzing your data and how that led you to come to these findings”.

The interruptions seemed out of place, even arrogant. Why, I wondered, did they feel the need to challenge my credibility? The material was practical, actionable and interesting. Their questions on the other hand — if I were to spend the necessary time answering them — were so conceptual they were sure to send the group into a deep slumber. So I assured them that the methodology behind the recommendations was sound, and was based on careful research, which I would be happy to discuss with them during a break. I then moved back to my conclusions, tools and practical examples. Let’s just say things got worse from there.

The stonewall I had run into was “principles-first reasoning” (sometimes referred to as deductive reasoning), which derives conclusions or facts from general principles or concepts. People from principles-first cultures, such as France, Spain, Germany, and Russia (to name just a few) most often seek to understand the “why” behind proposals or requests before they move to action.

But as an American, I had been immersed throughout my life in “applications-first reasoning” (sometimes referred to as inductive reasoning), in which general conclusions are reached based on a pattern of factual observations from the real world. Application-first cultures tend to focus less on the “why” and more on the “how.” Later, as I began to understand the differences between one culture and another in how to influence other people, I heard many examples of the way the typical American presentation style is viewed from a European perspective.

Jens Hupert, a German living in the United States for many years, explained his opposite experience during an interview. “In the U.S., when giving a talk to my American colleagues, I would start my presentation by laying the foundation for my conclusions, just like I had learned in Germany; setting the parameters; outlining my data and my methodology; and explaining my argument.” Jens was taken aback when his American boss told him, “In your next presentation, get right to the point. You lost their attention before you got to the important part.” In Hupert’s mind, “You cannot come to a conclusion without first defining the parameters.”

Most people are capable of practicing both principles-first and applications-first reasoning, but your habitual pattern of reasoning is heavily influenced by the kind of thinking emphasized in your culture’s education structure. Different cultures have different systems for learning, in part because of the philosophers who influenced the approach to intellectual life in general. Although Aristotle, a Greek, is credited with articulating the applications-first thinking, it was British thinkers, including Roger Bacon in the 13th century and Francis Bacon in the 16th century, who popularized these methodologies. General conclusions are reached based on a pattern of actual observations in the real world.

For example, if you travel to my hometown in Minnesota in January, and you observe every visit that the temperature is considerably below zero, you will conclude that Minnesota winters are cold. You observe data from the real world, and you draw broader conclusions based on these empirical observations. Francis Bacon was British, but later, Americans with their pioneer mentality came to be even more applications-first than the British. By contrast,

philosophy on the European continent has been largely driven by principles-first approaches. In the 17th century, Frenchman René Descartes spelled out a method of principles-first reasoning in which the scientist first formulates a hypothesis and then seeks evidence to prove or disprove it.

For example, you may start with the general principle like “all men are mortal.” Then move to “Justin Bieber is a man.” And that leads you to conclude that “Justin Bieber will eventually die.” One starts with the general principle, and from that moves to a practical conclusion. In the 19th century, the German Friedrich Hegel introduced the dialectic model of deduction, which reigns supreme in schools in Latin and Germanic countries. The Hegelian dialectic begins with a thesis, or foundational argument; this is opposed by an antithesis, or conflicting argument; and the two are then reconciled in a synthesis.

No matter which type of country you were raised in, and which cultures you are working with, it helps a lot to be able to adapt your style according to your audience. Here are a few tips to guide your preparation when working internationally:

When working with applications-first people:

- Presentations: Make your arguments effectively by getting right to the point. Stick to concrete examples, tools and next steps. Spend relatively little time building up the theory or concept behind your arguments. You’ll need less time for conceptual debate.
- Persuading others: Provide practical examples of how it worked elsewhere.
- Providing Instructions: Focus on the how more than the why.

When working with principles-first people:

- Presentations: Make your argument effectively by explaining and validating the concept underlying your reasoning before coming to conclusions and examples. Leave enough time for challenge and debate of the underlying concepts. Training sessions may take longer.
- Persuading others: Provide background principles and welcome debate.
- Providing Instructions: Explain why, not just how.

These days, I give a lot of presentations to groups across Europe and the Americas. I do my best to adapt to my audience, instead of thinking that the whole world thinks like me. If I’m presenting to a group of New Yorkers, I’ll only spend a moment talking about what research is behind the tool. But if I’m in Moscow, I’ll carefully set the stage, laying out the parameters for my arguments, and engaging in debate before arriving at conclusions. If I fail to do this, they are likely to think “What does this woman think. . . . that we are stupid? That we will just swallow anything?”

When you hope to engage, when you hope to inform and persuade and convince, what you say is important, but how you say it, how you structure your message, can make all the difference — to the Americans, to the French, to everyone.

WORKING IN MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

MANAGING CONFRONTATION IN MULTI-CULTURAL TEAMS

<https://erinmeyer.com/managing-confrontation-in-multi-cultural-teams/>

Everyone knows that a little confrontation from time to time is constructive, right? And the classic business literature confirms it. Patrick Lencioni’s [Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#), for example, discusses at length how to achieve the right amount of confrontation for ultimate team effectiveness — and concludes that fear of conflict is one of the five major barriers to success. It was a bestseller in the U.S.

But what if you come from a culture where confrontation is downright rude? Or what if you just happen to have people from such cultures on your team? The fact is that all-American teams — or mono-cultural teams of any nationality — are becoming a thing of the past (except in the classic business literature). In [one recent survey \(PDF\)](#) a full 63% of randomly selected respondents at multi-national companies indicated that nearly half of their teams were located outside their home country.

Over the past few weeks I've been conducting interviews with executives from various countries about this issue. Here's what an Indonesian interviewee told me:

In the Indonesian cultural context, confrontation is considered rude, aggressive, and disrespectful. Open disagreement, particularly in a group forum, is strongly avoided. Even asking another's point of view can feel confrontational in our culture. We had a meeting with a group of French managers from headquarters, where they went around the table asking each of us: "What do you think about this? What do you think about this? What do you think about this?" At first we were just shocked that we would be put on the spot in a meeting with a lot of people. That is just an insult!

And here's what a French executive said (making the American way described by Lencioni sound really quite moderate):

Confrontation is part of French culture. The French school system teaches us to first build up our thesis (one side of the argument) and then to build up our anti-thesis (the opposite side of the argument) before coming to a synthesis (conclusion). And this is exactly how we intuitively conduct meetings. On French teams conflict and dissonance are seen as revealing hidden contradiction and stimulating new thinking. We make our points passionately. We like to disagree openly. We like to say things that shock. And afterwards we feel that was a great meeting and say, "See you next time!" With confrontation you reach excellence, you have more creativity, and you eliminate risk.

Now imagine that you have to lead a team with both French and Indonesian members. How on earth do you cope? And what happens if there are a whole heap of other nationalities thrown into the mix, all with differing cultural attitudes to confrontation? Well, it is possible to manage a global team and to reap the benefits of disagreement. But you have to tread carefully, using tactics like the following and respecting the various cultures on the team.

1. **Do your preparation.** In many Asian cultures the default purpose of a meeting is to put a formal stamp on a decision that has been made before the meeting in informal pre-meetings. In Japanese this is called *Nemawashi*. The tendency rings true to various degrees in China, Malaysia, Korea, and Thailand. If you lead a team with members from one of these countries, try making one-on-one phone calls before the formal meeting to hear the real deal.
2. **Depersonalize the confrontation.** Instead of asking people to express their opinions and challenge one another's ideas in a meeting, ask team members to send all their ideas to a nominated third party before the meeting and have that person create a list of ideas without stating who had the suggestions. This way, participants can confront each idea during the meeting — without confronting the person associated with it.
3. **Change your language.** You might try following the advice of Sean Gilbride, an American living and managing in Mexico. He says: "I soon learned that if I wanted to encourage team debate it was important to use phrases like 'I do not quite understand

your point’ and ‘please explain more why you think that’, and to refrain from saying ‘I disagree with that’ which would shut down the conversation completely.”

I’d be interested to hear your strategies and opinions — especially from people who disagree with these points. After all, a little confrontation from time to time is constructive, right?

LEADING ACROSS CULTURES: LEARN TO ADAPT YOUR STYLE

<https://erinmeyer.com/leading-across-cultures-learn-to-adapt-your-style/>

Whether you feel the best boss is more of a facilitator among equals or a director who leads from the front, to succeed in international business you need the flexibility to adapt your style to your cultural context.

This lesson was brought home to me when I taught a group of Heineken executives. Heineken, of course, is a Dutch brewing company. When you visit Heineken’s headquarters in Amsterdam, you will find a lot of tall blond Dutch people and also a lot of Mexicans. In 2010, Heineken purchased a big operation in Monterrey, Mexico, and now a large number of head-office employees come from Northern Mexico. Among them is Carlos Gomez, who described to my class his experiences since moving to Amsterdam a year earlier. “It is absolutely incredible to manage Dutch people and nothing like my experience leading Mexican teams,” Gomez said, “because, from my experience, the Dutch do not care at all who is the boss in the room.”

The amount of respect we show to authority is deeply rooted in the culture we are raised in. We begin, as young children, to learn how much deference should be shown to an older sibling, a parent, a teacher – and later, in business, these same ideas impact how we view the ideal relationship with our boss or subordinates.

For someone such as Gomez, who has learned to lead in a culture where deference to authority is relatively high, it is both confusing and challenging to lead a team where the boss is seen as just one of the guys. In this case, the challenge was particularly strong, as the Netherlands is one of the most egalitarian cultures in the world. Gomez explained:

I will schedule a meeting in order to roll out a new process, and during the meeting my team starts challenging the process, taking the meeting in various unexpected directions, ignoring my process altogether, and paying no attention to the fact that they work for me. Sometimes I just watch them astounded. But often I just feel like getting down on my knees and pleading with them, “Dear colleagues, in case you have forgotten I.....am.....the boss.”

Power distances

Geert Hofstede, one of the first researchers to look at the idea of what good leadership looks like in different countries, coined the term “power distance”, which he defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.” As subsequent researchers continue to explore and research this topic we have been looking at questions such as:

- How much respect or deference is shown to an authority figure?
- If you want to communicate a message to someone two levels above or below you, should you go through the hierarchical chain?
- When you are the boss, what gives you your aura of authority?

The answers to these questions vary dramatically depending on what country you come from. One of my INSEAD colleagues, Professor André Laurent polled hundreds of managers, asking: “Is it important for a manager to have at hand answers for most of the questions subordinates may raise about their work?” While 45 percent of the Japanese sample claimed it

was important for the boss to have most of the answers, only 7 percent of Swedes thought the same way.

One Swedish manager commented, “Even if I know the answer, I probably won’t give it to my staff... because I want them to figure it out for themselves!” Conversely, one Japanese executive said, “I would try not to ask my boss a question unless I was pretty sure he knew the answer.”

How they follow the leader

Most East Asian countries are high-power-distance cultures. One of the many reasons for this is the strong impact of Confucianism. Confucius believed that mankind would be in harmony with the universe if everyone understood their role in society and behaved accordingly. He devised a system of interdependent relationships, in which the lower level gives obedience to the higher, while those who are higher protect and mentor the lower.

In order to understand many East Asian hierarchies, it is important to think not just about the lower level person’s responsibility to follow, but also about the responsibility of the higher person – whether father, boss or elder – to protect and care for those lower down – whether sons, staff or youth. Although Confucius has been dead for centuries, anyone leading a team in China can benefit from understanding these principles.

During a research project I conducted with my colleague Elsie Shen, we interviewed Steve Henning, an Australian who had lived in China for many years. “In China, the boss is always right,” Henning reflected, “and even when the boss is very wrong, he is still right.” Gradually he had learned to understand and respect this system of reciprocal obligations. “Your team may follow your instructions to the letter, but in return, you must understand your role to coach and take care of them,” he explained.

In a hierarchical culture, protect your subordinates, mentor them, always look out for their interests, and you may reap many rewards. As Henning put it: “There is great beauty in giving a clear instruction and watching your competent and enthusiastic team willingly attack the project without challenging you every step of the way.”

In today’s global business environment it is not enough to be either a low-power-distance leader or a high-power-distance leader. You may find yourself leading a team with both Dutch and Chinese employees (as well as Italians, Swedes and Mexicans). You need to develop the flexibility to manage up and down the cultural scale. Often this means going back to square one. It means watching what makes local leaders successful. It means explaining your own style frequently. It may even mean learning to laugh at yourself. But ultimately it means learning to lead in different ways in order to motivate and mobilise groups who follow in different ways from the folks back home.

Erin Meyer_Online Articles: <https://erinmeyer.com>

1. Managing Confrontation in Multi-cultural Teams
<https://erinmeyer.com/managing-confrontation-in-multi-cultural-teams/>
2. Cultural Coaching: Knowing When to Shut-Up
<https://erinmeyer.com/cultural-coaching-knowing-when-to-shut-up/>
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16. The Most Productive Ways to Disagree Across Cultures

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17. Giving Negative Feedback Across Cultures

<https://erinmeyer.com/giving-negative-feedback-across-cultures/>

18. Mapping out Cultural Differences on Teams

<https://erinmeyer.com/mapping-out-cultural-differences-on-teams/>

Module 3. Cultural Dimensions

How to fire somebody in China

By Eric Barton, 22 December 2019

Jay Carlson had been working in China for just three months when he encountered his first real management challenge. He needed to fire someone, and quickly found out the process doesn't always happen the same way in China.

Carlson had relocated to **China to set up a new supply chain for a US-based furniture company**. His role was to run the Shanghai office and hire another 70 people. He had assumed he would run his new office much like a **Western** company — **building a collaborative environment of creative thinkers**. But, the local manager, an older man who had worked with the firm for years, had other ideas. He insisted on a traditional **Chinese authoritative system** where the boss is always right, said Carlson. Constant arguments over which method was appropriate meant that Carlson eventually had to fire the local manager. Things went well when he delivered the news, but the following day, the man showed up for work. "I was like, 'Why are you here?'" Carlson recalled. "He said he felt loyal to the company, and even though he had been fired, he was going to serve out the final month of his contract." Carlson explained this really wasn't necessary, that he'd be paid either way, but the man insisted on remaining at work.

Rethinking your style

It was the first of many lessons Carlson learned working in China, a place where foreign managers must often significantly adjust their style and decision-making to the local culture. The good news is that foreign managers who relocate to China can excel, as long as they're willing to acknowledge a few key cultural differences, said Saibal Ray, professor and associate dean at McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management business school in Montreal, Canada.



To lead in China, "you need to deal with all things in harmony." (Credit: Alamy)

Perhaps the most important lesson is that the Chinese often work far longer hours than most Westerners, Ray said. Many assume **they're on call 24-7**, and will arrive early and stay for hours after the boss has left.

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Long hours culture

Many foreign managers new to China's work culture will move to shorten work hours, knowing that numerous studies have shown working longer can actually hurt productivity. But Ray said that may give the wrong impression to more junior employees. Instead, he advised taking a more gradual approach to change.

"You have to give the impression that you, as the manager, work as hard as your employees," Ray said. "Then slowly, you can change to more reasonable hours."

Foreign managers may also find that they've inherited employees who don't speak up, Ray said. Traditional Chinese culture dictates that employees remain task-oriented, without offering new ideas or speaking up when things could be done differently.

"These things are ingrained in the culture, that **if you speak up you will be disciplined,**" Ray said.

That's changing though, in part because of foreign companies operating in China and also thanks to the younger generation, which is more likely to raise their hands with ideas.

Changing a company's culture in China often requires dealing with employees one-on-one, Ray said. In many offices, workers will tend to group together and make decisions as one. Encouraging the culture to change, then, will mean either getting the entire group on board or breaking the herd mentality by dealing with workers individually.

"The good news is that managing in China will make you a better manager," Ray said.

"Once you come back home, you will have dealt with the extremes of changing a workplace culture. Changes elsewhere will seem easy in comparison."

All things in harmony

That's what Micha Benoliel found while hiring Chinese developers to work on the apps FireChat and Open Garden, which allows phone users to chat while off the grid. He travels to China about seven times a year and believes the secret to successful managing there is understanding a fundamental belief most workers share.

Despite stereotypes to the contrary, Chinese workers are just as creative in collaborative environments as their Western counterparts.

"It's a Confucian society, so if you want to lead in China you need to deal with all things in harmony," Benoliel said from his office in San Francisco. "Every decision you make will affect something else, and you need to always be aware of this."

For instance, it would be a mistake for a new foreign manager to come out too strongly against anyone or speak up too loudly in opposition to any idea. This will often be seen as far too confrontational and a sign that the targeted worker's days are numbered.

Approach things with a more reasonable touch, though, and the foreign manager will find Chinese workers among the hardest-working anywhere, Benoliel said. And despite stereotypes to the contrary, Chinese workers are just as creative in collaborative environments as their Western counterparts.

“China will become a leader in innovation soon enough,” Benoliel said. “People work twice as much as in Europe or the US. The pace is twice as fast.”

After spending five years living in China, Carlson is now president of Nicelink Home Furnishings, a \$110m-a-year furniture company. He lives in Orlando, Florida, but travels to China every few months.

“It’s business, and it’s about profits obviously. But it’s also about respecting the local culture.”

Carlson’s time in China taught him that foreign managers can succeed there, as long as they’re willing to respect and understand the local ways. He learned that lesson in his first few months. And the manager who lost his job? Carlson **decided to let him finish his contract**, even though he had been fired.

Handling the situation according to Western management styles and **forcing the man to leave** would have sent the wrong message to the rest of the staff, that **loyalty is not rewarded**. The decision worked: not only did the team take it in their stride, but Carlson and the man he fired have been friends ever since.

“It’s business, and it’s about profits obviously. But it’s also about respecting the local culture,” Carlson said. “Managing in China, you will have challenges, and it’s about finding ways to overcome those challenges that fit into the way things are done there.”

Here's part of the American way of thinking about management:

"After Don Knauss (who became Clorox CEO) joined the Marines, he quickly learned that officers don't get to jump the line when it's time to eat. In fact, officers eat last. "That was the whole Marine Corps approach -- it's all about your people; it's not about you," Knauss says. 'And if you're going to lead these people, you'd better demonstrate that you care more about them than you care about yourself.' "

Self-Promotion for Professionals from Countries Where Bragging Is Bad

by Dorie Clark and Andy Molinsky | 1:00 PM March 21, 2019

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In India, it's crabs in a bucket — the one who tries to escape is pulled down by his compatriots. In Australia, it's tall poppies — and the tallest one gets its head whacked off. In Japan, the nail that sticks out gets hammered down. Almost every culture has its own metaphor about what happens to people who are judged by their peers to be overreaching.

In the U.S., known for its embrace of assertive self-confidence, it's a different story, however. Personal branding is seen as a positive way to differentiate oneself in the American workplace. But for foreign professionals who grew up with a vastly different set of cultural mores and who now need to succeed in the United States or other contexts where personal branding is important, this can be quite a difficult adjustment.

In our travels as professors and speakers, we've often heard the same refrain. "I understand that personal branding is important," executives and managers often tell us. "But I just can't bring myself to do it!" It's no wonder. [Andy's research](#) has indicated that personal branding, or self-promotion, is one of [six major areas of cultural difference](#) that cause discomfort for people around the world. One Indian manager in Andy's research, for example, compared personal branding to "committing a sin" — perhaps an extreme reaction, but still indicative of how hard it can be to do personal branding, especially if you come from a country like China or India or Korea where modesty, composure, and self-control are more culturally valued characteristics than the ability to toot your own horn.

But [the benefits of personal branding](#) — including taking control of [how you're perceived by others](#), and making them understand the [unique contribution](#) you can make — are vast. So how can foreign professionals reconcile their values with personal branding? Here are a few points to keep in mind.

Rebrand the act of personal branding. Particularly if you grew up in a [culture that emphasizes humility and modesty](#), the idea of drawing attention to yourself — especially to tout your accomplishments — may seem distasteful. However, a key way to mitigate these feelings is to "rebrand" the very act of personal branding itself. For example, instead of thinking of it as blatant self-promotion, think about who else, besides you, can benefit from your efforts. For example, university professors who write books end

up promoting their university in the process. And if you're viewed as a sought-after expert in your field, clients will often hire your company just so they have access to your skills.

Authenticity matters. Part of the reason personal branding raises so many hackles is its association with salesmanship — the idea that you're packaging yourself to appear attractive to “buyers,” and may be willing to sacrifice your true self to do so. But that's not what personal branding is. On the contrary, what we're talking about is thoughtful, [honest self-assessment](#), which many people genuinely believe in. If you have a clear picture of how you can contribute and make others aware of it, you're actually taking a stand *against* being a finger-to-the-wind glad-hander. You're demonstrating enough [honesty and authenticity](#) to be clear on where you excel, where you don't, and the real value you can offer others. Being authentic is also a way to honor those who have helped you become who you are — your bosses and mentors, or even your teachers and parents. By thinking about personal branding as honoring the time and effort they put into your development, it can make the act itself feel more legitimate.

Strike a compromise with yourself. Although you may come from a culture that shuns self-promotion, chances are, there's some part of you that sees the benefits. So, strike a compromise with yourself and find a way to do personal branding that works for you. In our work, we've seen a variety of different ways that professionals who were initially uncomfortable with the idea have ended up embracing personal branding by making a few simple adjustments and [customizing or personalizing](#) their approach. Andy recently met a young professional from Nepal who was very uncomfortable branding herself and her personal achievements in the U.S., since she came from a culture that emphasized the group over the individual. Her solution was to actually blend and combine these two perspectives. She would emphasize her individual accomplishments but only in the context of what the group as a whole was able to achieve — and in the end, this blended solution was successful enough for her to find a job.

The adjustments go both ways: when Dorie visited Asia on a recent speaking tour, she had to reprogram some of her American habits. Stateside, she accepts compliments with a simple, appreciative “thank you” — any self-deprecating remarks (“oh, it wasn't actually that good”) would be viewed as insulting the person making the compliment and indicative of a serious lack of self-esteem. In Asia, however, the mitigating remark is a closely-watched sign that determines whether or not you're perceived as a jerk. It pains her to tamp down the self-confidence that's so prized in American culture, but she makes a point to try.

Some people reject personal branding out of hand because they believe it conflicts with their most cherished values. But by keeping the principles above in mind — and reframing what it means to self-promote — you can ensure you maintain your integrity but still get noticed for all that you do.

GEN J

Why so many of the world's oldest companies are in Japan



By Bryan Lufkin

12th February 2020

The country has 33,000 businesses at least a century old. How have so many survived – and what does it mean for Japan's future?

Japan is changing: a rapidly ageing society, a record-breaking influx of visitors from overseas, and more robots than ever. That's where the country's young people come in. Gen J, [a new series](#)

by [BBC Worklife](#), keeps you up to speed on how the nation's next generation is shaping the Japan of tomorrow.

Tsuen Tea sits on a street corner overlooking a large river and bridge in a sleepy outer suburb of Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital. In a city famous for extraordinary shrines, temples and gardens (and an inundation of tourists armed with selfie sticks), it's a relatively unremarkable structure; a quiet place to enjoy some ice cream or green tea.

But there's something special about Tsuen Tea: it's been open since 1160 AD and claims to be the world's oldest continually operating tea house. It's run by 38-year-old Yusuke Tsuen, who sits cross-legged behind a counter low on the floor pouring green tea from iron kettles. "We've focused on tea and haven't expanded the business too much," he says. "That's why we're surviving."



Yusuke Tsuen, 38, is the proprietor of Kyoto's Tsuen Tea, a tea house nearing 900 years old. He says picking up the family business was a no-brainer to him (Credit: Bryan Lufkin)

Maybe it's not too surprising that this 900-year-old tea house has survived in a city renowned for tradition and craftsmanship. But what *is* surprising is that Tsuen isn't alone. Back in 2008, a Bank of Korea report found that of 5,586 companies older than 200 years in 41 countries, [56% of them were in Japan](#). In 2019, there were over 33,000 businesses in Japan over a century old, according to research firm Teikoku Data Bank. [The oldest hotel in the world](#) has been open since 705 in Yamanashi and confectioner Ichimonjiya Wasuke has been selling sweet treats in

Kyoto since 1000. Osaka-based construction giant Takenaka [was founded in 1610](#), while even some global Japanese brands like Suntory and Nintendo have unexpectedly long histories stretching back to the 1800s.

But what is it about Japan that produces these long-lasting businesses? And in a global era defined by scrappy start-ups that push boundaries at lightning speed, do they have anything to teach us?

‘Respecting tradition’

Yoshinori Hara, dean and professor at Kyoto University’s Graduate School of Management, says these long-standing entities, at least 100 years old, are known as ‘shinise’ – literally meaning ‘old shop’.

Hara, who worked in Silicon Valley for a decade, says that Japanese companies’ emphasis on sustainability, rather than quick maximisation of profit, is a major reason why so many of the nation’s businesses have such staying power. “In Japan, it’s more: how can we move [the company] on to our descendants, our children, our grandchildren?” he explains.

If I didn’t take it over, [the legacy] would have ended – Yusuke Tsuen

At Tsuen Tea, Tsuen says many of his childhood friends in Kyoto also happened to be born into centuries-old family-run companies. To him, picking up the family business wasn’t even a question. “It’s not the business I started – I am operating the business my ancestors started. If I didn’t take it over, [the legacy] would have ended,” says Tsuen. “When you’re little, like in kindergarten and elementary school, you’re asked your dream for the future. I thought I was taking over the business. It was natural.”

Japan’s towns and cities have existed for centuries (compared to the US, for example), so perhaps it shouldn’t be shocking that it has many older companies. But Innan Sasaki, an assistant professor at the University of Warwick’s business school who’s written about Japanese company longevity, says there are other reasons more specific to Japan.

“More generally, we could say that it is because of the general long-term orientation: the culture of respecting tradition and ancestors, combined with the fact that it has been an island country with relatively limited interaction with other countries,” she says, pointing to people’s desire to make the most of what they have for as long as possible by preserving local companies in the community.



Many shinise are recognised brands around the world. Nintendo, headquartered in Kyoto, was founded back in 1889 and specialised in making playing cards (Credit: Alamy)

Many of these oldest companies are medium or small family-owned organisations focusing on hospitality and food, like Tsuen Tea. Several companies have even benefited from the widely-accepted Japanese practice of adopting adult male workers into the family bloodline to ensure an unbroken succession for the business, [something even huge firms like Suzuki Motor and Panasonic have done.](#)

Core skills and customer service

Elsewhere in Kyoto is another shinise company that isn't nearly as old as Tsuen Tea, but much larger: the video game company Nintendo. It's known across the globe for the way it revolutionised at-home entertainment with its electronic gaming system back in 1985.

But most people don't know that the company predates its massive global commercial success. Despite being thought of as a tech company, Nintendo was founded back in 1889, as a maker of playing cards for the Japanese game hanafuda. First imported by the Portuguese in the 16th Century, the game involves collecting cards with various flowers printed on them, each worth different points.

Kyoto University's Hara says Nintendo is a great example of a company sticking to what he calls a "core competency". That's the basic concept behind what a company makes or does, which

helps the company survive – even as the technology or world around it changes. In Nintendo’s case, it’s “how to create fun”, Hara says.

*These long-standing entities, at least 100 years old, are known as **shinise***

Hara also points to kimono companies struggling to stay in business as fewer Japanese women wear the traditional garments. One Kyoto-based kimono manufacturer dating back to 1688, [Hosoo](#), has expanded into carbon fibre production for materials companies. “The core competency is the same: 3-D weaving,” he says.

In Kyoto, many long-standing businesses also tout a dedication to good customer service as an element that keeps them thriving. It’s especially the case with ryokan: [traditional Japanese inns](#) that treat guests like family. Hara says that Japanese businesses value this high-level customer service, [known as omotenashi](#), and [try to anticipate what customers need](#) because they fuel the sustainability that Japanese companies value.



Akemi Nishimura's family has run Hiiragiya, an inn in Kyoto, for six generations. She says family-like customer service is key for the inn's longevity (Credit: Bryan Lufkin)

Akemi Nishimura’s family has run Kyoto’s Hiiragiya ryokan for six generations. The inn celebrated its 200-year anniversary in 2018 and has welcomed guests like Charlie Chaplin and Louis Vuitton. “Heart-to-heart communication – that is the best part of ryokan,” she says.

Flipping through an 80-year-old handbook that details how to run a ryokan, it mentions what to do with a guest's handkerchief: how to wash it, properly fold it and return it. "But some customers wouldn't like that – [the book says] you should ask permission beforehand," Nishimura says.

"These companies prioritise values such as commitment to the family business, continuity, quality, community and tradition over financial logic," says Sasaki. "Consequently, in Kyoto, these firms enjoy a social standing that goes way beyond what stakeholders would ordinarily ascribe to family firms, making them an elite class of organisations."

Good or bad for innovation?

Yet this admiration for longevity does have a downside, particularly when it comes to the nation's start-up scene, which has been criticised as [sluggish in comparison to elsewhere](#), [although that characterisation is changing](#).



Tsuen Tea, founded in 1160 and located in Kyoto, is one of 33,000 "shinise" companies in Japan: businesses over 100 years old at least (Credit: Bryan Lufkin)

"To be in the start-up scene in terms of social acceptance has been challenging, since the 'start-up' world is not as acknowledged as 'shinise' companies. I've had hard times explaining and sharing with my parents or friends what I do and where I work," says Mari Matsuzaki, 27. She works at Queue, [a Tokyo-based education technology start-up](#), and used to run the Tokyo version of Slush, [the international start-up not-for-profit aimed at students](#).

“Out of my graduating class, I am probably the only one who decided to enter a start-up,” she says. “While in other countries, founders are praised for transforming their failures into valued experiences, in Japan, the dominant mindset towards risk and failure is a battle many entrepreneurs have to overcome.”

The ‘start-up’ world is not as acknowledged as ‘shinise’ companies – Mari Matsuzaki

Michael Cusumano agrees. He’s a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who spearheaded entrepreneurship and innovation initiatives at the Tokyo University of Science from 2016 to 2017, and lived and worked in Japan for eight years. “Closing a company or selling it is also considered something of a failure and shame in Japan, and this feeling goes back centuries. So these cultural issues also seem to encourage families to keep firms going,” he says. “Japanese society, and the economy, is not as flexible as the US, and so Japan does not generate big new firms so easily. The tendency is to preserve what they have.”

Yet shinise companies aren’t exempt from hardship. Kongo Gumi, a construction company founded back in 578, lasted a staggering 1,400 years [before going into liquidation in 2006](#) due to debt. In the future, Matsuzaki believes that there will be benefits in combining the strengths of the two business models.

“The key will be to foster more synergy between shinise companies and start-ups,” she says. “Shinise companies’ strength in resources, their reputation in the industry, [a] strong network.” By mixing new technology and rapid decision-making with shinise, she thinks “start-ups can become a lethal weapon for Japan’s future”.

Yet back at Tsuen Tea, current owner Tsuen has no such lofty goals. “I was born here by chance. My ancestors continued the tea business and I’m taking over,” Tsuen says. “My goal is not to make the company bigger or expand sales or go worldwide. What’s most important is to just continue this.”

Additional reporting by Yoko Ishitani and Mari Murakami.

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By Virginie Mangin

20 February 2018

BBC Capital brings back one of our most-read stories of the year as a fresh reminder that appropriate behaviour is never out of date.

Five Chinese women are sitting upright in their chairs, designer handbags at their heels, listening attentively to a trendy Chinese Tatler magazine photographer describe how to pose in public. He is talking makeup, light and cheekbones. The room is decorated with Pierre Frey wallpaper and the participants sip tea out of a Bernardaud tea set. Notepad in hand, they are learning the dos and don'ts of camera etiquette.

The course entitled "How to pose elegantly in front of the camera" is one of many offered by Institute Sarita, a modern-day version of European finishing schools that caters to Chinese nouveaux riche. Other courses offered by the school, located in the trendy Sanlitun district of Beijing, include how to raise children, proper table manners and luxury brand pronunciation.

"Most of my clients had an embarrassing moment, overseas or during a business dinner. They come here because they want to make things easier for themselves," said Sara-Jane Ho, the perfectly groomed school founder, as she sat in a drawing room furnished with imported French antique furniture.

"It's mostly learning about how to behave in an international environment," said Ho, who herself studied etiquette at the Institut Villa Pierrefeu in Switzerland, one of the last proper finishing schools in the world. So far she has attracted a couple hundred wealthy Chinese to her courses. She is opening a Shanghai branch in May.

With 190 billionaires and more than two million millionaires, China tags just behind the US in number of high-net-worth individuals,

according to research from Forbes magazine and Boston Consulting Group.

Many of these fortunes have grown rapidly, in lock-step with China's newly expanding economy and multiplying business opportunities. Some who find themselves newly wealthy have little knowledge or training in how to behave in international business or social events.

"The country was so isolated 30 years ago," said Ho. "The spike in wealth has happened in a compressed time. This transformation has created a lot of pressure on individuals."

As a result, some businesspeople may appear uncouth and blunt to their western or Asian counterparts. Finesse, on the other hand, can smooth many business transactions. "Simply knowing how to be comfortable with a knife and fork can be a deal clincher," said James Hebbert, who represents Seaton, a British etiquette school in China.

Filling a niche

Clients who attend etiquette courses in China include government officials, children enrolled in overseas schools, wives looking to entertain important guests and those who enjoy travelling abroad.



Participants learn everything about a traditional English afternoon tea. (Seatton)

“There is a huge demand all along the spectrum,” said Hebbert, whose clients were first primarily drivers of Rolls Royces wanting to dress the part, then evolved to middle-class customers in search of a British-lifestyle experience. “In just a few years, I have seen a real shift in clientele. More and more Chinese are travelling. They see the advantage of having an international edge.”

If learning how to peel an orange with a knife and fork may seem slightly superfluous in Europe, in China the newly rich are ready to pay what it takes to acquire the manners that come with their new status.

“The next time I visit Milan and dine in a nice restaurant I can confidently tell my husband he shouldn’t hold his knife like a dagger,” said a participant of a two-hour Western dining etiquette course with James Hebbert in Shanghai, who didn't want her name used.

Hebbert charges 20,000 yuan (\$3,243) per group of 10 for an afternoon session.

Institute Sarita's most popular course, "Hostessing", costs 100,000 yuan (\$16,216) for 12 days in which the client learns skills ranging from engaging in small talk to pairing wines with a meal.

Lack of manners

Media and even the Chinese president have been critical of how some Chinese travellers have behaved on trips. On a September trip to the Maldives, Chinese President Xi Jinping suggested Chinese citizens be "**a bit more civilised when travelling abroad.**"

With more than 100 million Chinese travelling in 2018, misbehaviours have grabbed headlines worldwide. Among the most extreme: **defacing an Egyptian sculpture**, throwing **boiling water on a flight attendant** and **urinating outside**.



Miss China 2014 contestants receive training by a Seatton expert. (Darcy Holdorf)

In October, China's National Tourism Administration issued strict guidelines on how to behave while travelling. In a 64-page booklet, Chinese tourists are warned against peeing in swimming pools, stealing life jackets from planes and leaving footprints on the toilet seat. Punishments for such behaviours include fining tour operators and blacklisting rude tourists.

“The Chinese have no manners. It’s just not something that is taught by parents. I am always surprised when men hold the door for me in Paris. This would never happen in China,” said Yue-Sai Kan, a Sino-American TV host and producer, and author of *Etiquette for the Modern Chinese*, a national bestseller that has sold more than three million copies. Today, Kan lectures on etiquette and trains Chinese contestants for the Miss Universe contest.

While some of what is perceived as rude by Westerners stems from cultural issues — the notion of public space and privacy is very different in China — other ill-manners date back to the Cultural Revolution when all that was seen as sophistication was considered bourgeois and severely punished.

“Let’s say that when you’re struggling to get food you are not thinking about private space,” Ho explained.

What can seem to an outsider as impolite today — such as pushing, queue barging, speaking loudly or picking your nose in public — is common behaviour for the majority of Chinese. But as China opens up and engages with the world awareness is growing among the population on how they are being perceived overseas.

A new face

To disassociate themselves from this reputation, many of the new elite are seeking refinement at etiquette schools. At the same time, they are looking to good manners as a new form of status symbol.



Afternoon tea etiquette training begins with props. (Seatton)

“[The Chinese] understand that their position as the most powerful country in the world puts them in a situation where they need to learn about other cultures and behaviours so as to smoothen political and business relationships,” said Viviane Neri, principal of Institut Villa Pierrefeu, in an email.

“Before, it was about owning a big car,” said Hebbert. “Now the rich are looking for something else to make the difference.”

usually be prepared, and in such a way that it might spoil or get cold if the guests are not on time. In synchronic cultures, there is usually more than enough food in case more guests drop by unexpectedly, and it is either not the kind that spoils or else is cooked as wanted.

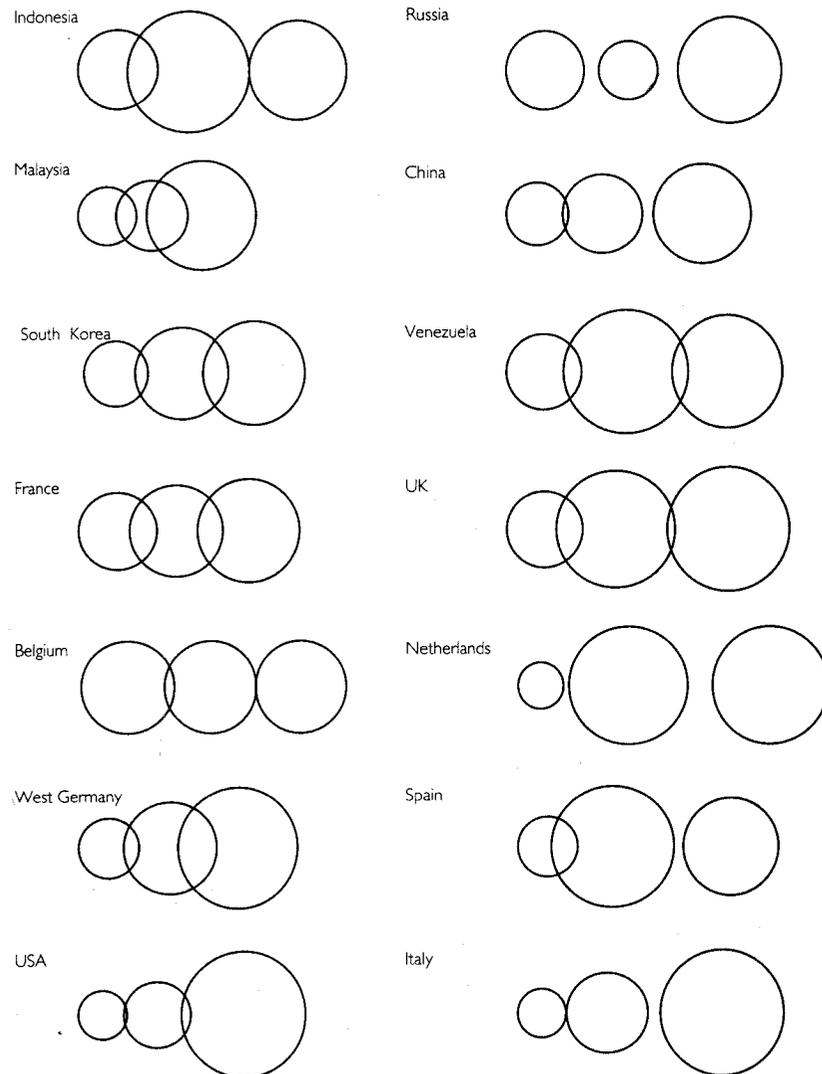
Measuring cultural differences in relation to time

The methodology used to measure approaches to time in this book comes from Tom Cottle, who created the "Circle Test".⁵ The question asked was as follows.

Think of the past, present and future as being in the shape of circles. Please draw three circles on the space available, representing past, present and future. Arrange these circles in any way you want that best shows how you feel about the relationship of the past, present and future. You may use different size circles. When you have finished, label each circle to show which one is the past, which one the present and which one the future.

Cottle ended up with four possible configurations. First, he found absence of zone relatedness. Figure 9.1 shows that on our measurements this is a typically Russian approach to time; there is no connection between past, present or future, though in their view the future is much more important than the present and more important than the past. The second Cottle configuration was temporal integration, the third a partial overlap of zones and the fourth zones touching but not overlapping, hence not "sharing" regions of time between them. Figure 9.1 shows that this last approach is characteristic of the Belgians, who see a very small overlap between present and past but the present and future as just touching. In this they are not dissimilar to the British, who have a rather stronger link with the past but see it as relatively unimportant, whereas the Belgians view all three aspects of time as equally important. Both are quite different from the French, for whom all three aspects overlap considerably; they share this view with the Malaysians and the Venezuelans. The Germans think the present and the future are very strongly interrelated. What the figure does not show is that half the Japanese see the three circles as concentric.

Figure 9.1 Past, present and future



Time orientations and management

Business organisations are structured in accordance with how they conceive of time. Corporations have whole departments given over to planning, to scanning the environment for new trends, to getting production out faster, to shortening the time-to-market, that is, the time interval between a customer demanding a product and that product being designed, manufactured and delivered. Strategies, goals and objectives are all future-oriented. Joint ventures and partnerships are agreements about how the future should jointly be engaged. "Motivation" is about what we can give to a person now so that he or she will work better in the future. Progress, learning and development all assume an augmentation of powers over time, as does the habit of paying senior people more for the experience supposedly accumulated over time. When orientations to time differ within corporations spanning different cultures confusion can occur. Let us return to the sorrows of young Mr Johnson of mcc. A good lunch makes even the most fundamental intercultural misunderstandings seem like ripples on a lake. Johnson had asked that the group reconvene at 2.00pm precisely because they had a tight agenda for the afternoon.

At 1.50pm most participants returned to the meeting room. At 2.05pm Johnson started pacing restlessly up and down. Munoz and Gialli were still down the hall making telephone calls. They came in at 2.20pm. Johnson said, "Now, gentlemen, can we finally start the meeting." The Singaporean and African representatives looked puzzled. They thought the meeting had already started.

The first point on the agenda was the time intervals determining bonuses and merits. All except the American, Dutch and other north-west European representatives complained that these were far too frequent. To Johnson and his Dutch and Scandinavian colleagues the frequency was obviously right. "Rewards must closely follow the behaviour they are intended to reinforce, otherwise you lose the connection." The manager from Singapore said:

"Possibly, but this go-for-the-quick-buck philosophy has been losing us customers. They don't like the pressure we put on at the end of the quarter. They want our representatives to serve them, not to have private agendas. We need to keep our customers long-term, not push them into buying so that one sales person can beat a rival."

The American view of the future is that the **individual** can direct it by personal achievement and inner-directed effort. This is why Johnson, backed by Dutch and Scandinavian managers, is keen to give pay-

for-performance at regular intervals. Yet because the individual achiever cannot do very much about the **distant** future – there are simply too many events that could occur – America's idea of the future is short-term, something controllable from the present. Hence the accusation of "going for the quick buck" and the great importance given to the next quarterly figures. If the future is to be better it is by steadily increasing increments of sales and profits. There is no excuse, ever, for not doing better now, since success now causes greater successes in the future.

It is interesting to compare the French respondents with the Americans. In French culture the past looms far larger and is used as a context in which to understand the present. Past, present and future overlap synchronously so that the past informs the present, and both inform the future. I was once visiting the futuristic La Défense in Paris. As my French colleague was delayed, I picked up a brochure at the reception desk. It was about the company's achievements during the 1980s. I read it with interest and, as my colleague was further delayed, I asked the receptionist for a more recent one. She handed me the same brochure I had just read. She said it had been printed only two months ago and was the most recent available. Future opportunities for this company were very apparently connected to the success of the past.

Human relations and orientations to time

Different orientations are also reflected in the quality of human bonds within an organisation, and between the corporation and its partners. Any lasting relationship combines past, present and future with ties of affection and memory. The relationship is its own justification and is enjoyed as a form of durable companionship extending both far back and far forward. Cultures which think synchronously about time are more we-oriented (collectivist) and usually more particularist in valuing people known to be special.

The cultures concerned with sequential time tend to see relationships as more instrumental. The separation between time intervals seems also to separate means from ends, so that higher pay is the means towards still higher performance and my customer's purchase is the means by which I will receive a higher bonus. The relationship is not entered into for its own sake but in order to enhance the income of each party and the profit of the organisation. The future looms large because present activity is but a means for realising it. The important result is in the (near-term) future. Gratification is postponed because it will soon be greater.

Whether relationships unmediated by calculation of future gain are not closer and more amenable to dialogue is of course a very interesting question. Given the sheer complexity of modern business and the mounting volume of information that must be communicated, the durable, synchronous relationship in which the past, present and future of the partners are bound together in co-evolution may be becoming a more effective way to manage. Certainly the idea that synchronous cultures are somehow "primitive" because their schedules are looser is not borne out. Sequential cultures where human resources are seen as a variation on physical plant, equipment and cash are more likely to have we-them relationships or, to quote Martin Buber, I-it.⁶

Time orientation and authority

In nations in which the past looms large and where time orientations overlap, status is more likely to be legitimised by ascription based on durable characteristics such as age, class, gender, ethnicity and professional qualification. Past qualifications, for example at *les grandes écoles*, explain present eminence and promising futures, all of which are closely connected and synchronised.

On the other hand when a person's career in Hollywood is "only as good as the last performance" the future is a sequence of episodes of relative success and failure. People will disencumber themselves of relationships and dependencies not useful in the next stage of their career, just as the original American immigrants cut off their roots. The authority of the individual will depend upon the latest achievement; those on the up today may be gone tomorrow. Yet the authority of the individual can easily be challenged and assessed. What did they do in the most recent time interval? We find a reflection of this in the project-group organisation pioneered by NASA and popular in North America and north-western Europe. Different parts of the organisation are identified by and rewarded according to the fortunes in the future of the project being undertaken. Successes grow incrementally; failures are pruned back. Within the group those contributing most to the project are also rewarded accordingly.

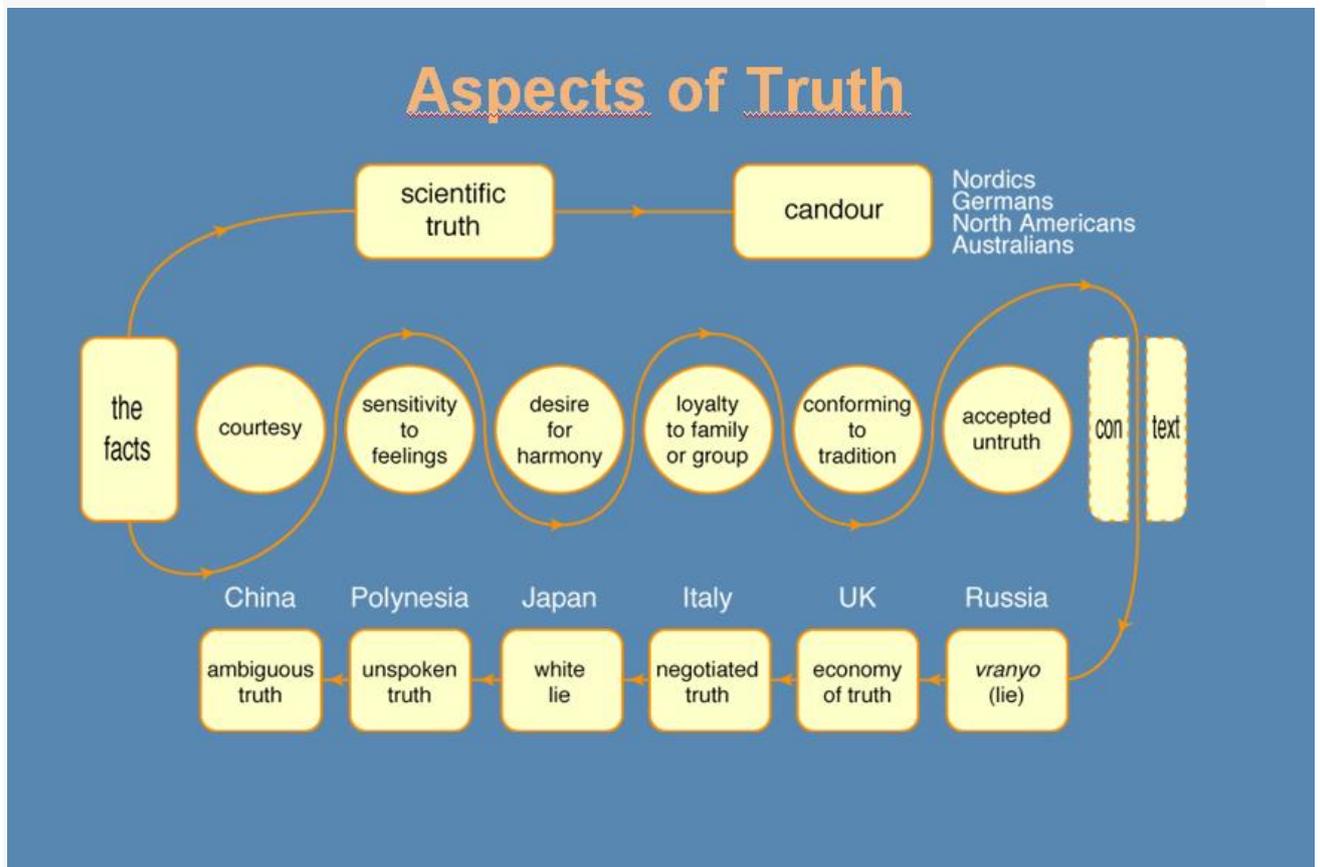
Policies of promotion and assessment

Sequential or synchronous cultures, and those concerned more with the past or with the future, may also assess and promote differently. In sequential cultures the supervisor asks how the employee has performed over the previous interval. The more that employee can be held responsible for a rise or fall in fortune the better, and the supervisors

Contractual Obligations & Attitudes to Truth

Posted on: August 15th, 2021 by Bettina Sarosi

Article by Richard D. Lewis



Aspects of Truth

For many who do business overseas it's a familiar scenario. After weeks – sometimes months – of negotiations you finally get the contract signed. Only a few weeks later, you find that the other side has reneged on the terms or now wants to re-negotiate.

So, when is a contract a contract? When a decision has been entered into the minutes of a meeting; when the ink is dry; or perhaps, when an arrangement is working to the satisfaction of both sides? As many have discovered, what is understood by a contract in one country, e.g. a mutual, binding agreement, is not always taken as such elsewhere.

Contract is Final

The Swiss, Germans, British, North Americans and Finns are among those who regard a written contract as something which, if not holy, is certainly final. When they put their names to an

agreement they will, in most cases, honour it – the good name of the company is at stake. The same principle applies at the national level: British and French adherence to long-standing commitments in transnational projects such as Airbus is taken for granted.

The French tend to be precise, often extremely finicky, in the drawing-up of contracts, and, having got what they wanted, can usually be relied upon to follow through.

Latin Flexibility

Other Latins, however, require more flexibility. The Italians or Argentinians see the contract as an ideal scheme in the best of all worlds, which sets out the prices, delivery dates, standards of quality and expected gain. But the world, as we all know, is not perfect. Things may, and probably will, go wrong.

South Americans and Spaniards may sometimes fail to meet deadlines and deliver late. They will, by way of insurance, have spent considerable time and energy building up a good relationship with their trading partner and will expect understanding if they run into difficulties in meeting the contract. They may also pay late; in this the French join them.

Konepaja, a Finnish machine tool firm, discovered the hard way how Brazilians look at the terms of a contract. Their training partner always paid one year late in spite of having signed 90-day clauses. The Finns, unable to apply any moral pressure and unwilling to sue a regular customer, opted for the course of building a one-year wait for payment into their calculations. Everyone was happy with the contract.

Asian Intent

For the Chinese and most Asians, on the other hand, the contract is often considered as a statement of intent. They will adhere to it as best they can but will rarely feel bound by it – particularly if they feel cheated or legally trapped, if anything in it contradicts common sense or if market conditions suddenly change; new tax laws, currency devaluations and drastic political changes can all, in their eyes, render a previous accord completely meaningless.

The Japanese, meanwhile, see the ‘real’ contract as the one made orally in good faith during a meeting where they trusted the other side, were too polite to offend and, in all probability, understood less than two thirds of what was being said. Equally, they expect the written contract to reflect the harmonious style of the discussion. If the small print turns out to be rather nasty, they will ignore it or even contravene it without any qualms of conscience.

In the 1980s, Kanefo, a large Japanese textile company, sold 1 million white shirts, unwanted in Japan to the Chinese Government's Purchasing Agency for a figure around \$3 per shirt. The shirts subsequently proved unsaleable at the price fixed by the Japanese for their own public. They went back to Kanefo to renegotiate the buying price, which eventually came down to below \$1, whereupon the Chinese bought 4 million shirts.

Correlation with Attitude to Truth?

I am often asked on cross-cultural seminars whether the different attitudes towards contracts that exist around the world are a result of different attitudes towards the concept of 'truth'. Certainly, among some nationalities, there does seem to be quite a strong correlation between the belief that truth should always be presented openly, never concealed, and the belief that contracts should be binding. In this camp are, for example, the Nordic nations, Swiss, Germans and North Americans.

Many Asian and Latin cultures allow their attitude towards truth to be affected by other concerns. Courtesy, desire for harmony, loyalty to family, can all lead to businessmen and women being somewhat economical with the details of a contract.

There is, however, one prominent exception to this correlation which is, perhaps not surprisingly, the British. As mentioned above, they do attach a lot of importance to contracts, but they do not always stick rigidly to the truth. The British are famous for their diplomacy; they often sacrifice truth in order to avoid direct confrontation.

Understandably, contrasting approaches to contracts have led to frequent disputes between Japanese and American firms. The Americans are well known for their love of detailed written agreements, which guard against all contingencies with legal redress. The Japanese who have far fewer registered lawyers compared to the US, regard contingencies to be *force majeure*. In such circumstances they will press for the contract to be sensibly reworked and modified at another, doubtless harmonious, meeting.

As long as you know in advance who you are dealing with and what their attitude to contracts is, you should be able to factor into your business dealings the possibility that some obligations may change in the future.

MODULE 4: COMMUNICATION STYLES

WHEN TO SPEAK UP. WHEN TO SHUT UP.

<https://erinmeyer.com/when-to-speak-up-when-to-shut-up/>

The norms of conducting international business are increasingly becoming standardised. But the behaviour of those around you is fed by cultural backgrounds.

One chilly morning in Paris, I was getting ready for a meeting with an important client. I would be spending the day with one of the top executives of Peugeot Citroën, preparing him and his wife for the cultural adjustments they'd need to make in their upcoming move to Wuhan, China.

Prior to the meeting, I had held several preparatory meetings with Bo Chen, a Paris-based journalist from Wuhan who would be acting as a Chinese cultural expert to assist me in the session. I was confident in the ability of Chen to add value to the learning experience. Articulate, extroverted and very knowledgeable, he had prepared some concrete business examples to illustrate each cultural dimension I would be covering in the programme.

There was a lot at stake. If the day was a success, Chen and I would be hired to provide similar counsel to another 50 couples.

When Monsieur and Madame Bernard arrived, I sat them on one side of the big rectangular table in the office, with Chen and I on the other. As the morning got under way, I explained each dimension of the key issues that would help them make the best out of their time in China. I carefully kept an eye on Chen so that I could facilitate his input.

But Chen did not seem to have any input. After finishing the first cultural dimension in my presentation, I paused briefly and looked at him for his input, but he didn't speak up. He didn't open his mouth or move his body forward. Apparently, he didn't have an example to provide.

Not wanting to make things awkward, I continued with my next point, but when I had finished, Chen again remained silent and almost motionless. He had been nodding politely while I was speaking, but that was all.

Dimension after dimension, until I'd been speaking for three full hours, my initial disappointment with Chen was starting to turn into full-fledged panic. I needed his input for the programme to succeed. Finally, while I didn't want to create an awkward moment, I decided to take a chance and asked, "Bo, did you have any examples you'd like to share?" To my utter relief, he replied "Thank you Erin, I do." and proceeded to explain very pertinent, fascinating examples that backed up my point.

A story of culture

On reflection, it was natural to assume that something about Chen's personality or my personality or the interaction or coordination between us might have led to the difficult situation. My previous meetings with him convinced me that he was neither inarticulate nor shy.

So what happened? Since we were in a cross-cultural training programme, I decided to ask Bo in front of the Bernards. As Chen spoke, the cultural underpinnings of our misunderstanding became vividly clear.

“Were you expecting me to jump in?” he asked with genuine surprise. “In this room, Erin is the chairman of the meeting. As she is the senior person in the room, I wait for her to call on me. And while I am waiting, I should show I am a good listener by keeping both my voice and my body quiet. In China, we often feel Westerners speak up so much in meetings that they do this to show off, or they are poor listeners. Also, Chinese people leave a few more seconds of silence before jumping in than in the West...I kept waiting for Erin to be quiet long enough for me to jump in, but my turn never came.”

Next time...

Having a deeper awareness of cultural nuances enables us to find easy, yet powerful solutions to such misunderstandings. It is easy to let conventional notions of cultural differences lead us astray, especially those between Americans and Chinese. But the facile stereotypes about loud Americans and shy Chinese, only obscures the steps we can take to overcome such misunderstandings in future.

What I took away from this was to make sure I'm more prepared to recognise and address the differing cultural expectations in status and communication, essential pillars in American-Chinese situations. Next time I work with a Chinese cultural specialist in such a scenario, I must make sure to invite him to speak. And if there is no immediate response, allow for a few more seconds of silence before speaking myself.

On the other side, my partner might simply choose to override his natural tendency to wait for an invitation to jump in when working with an American. If this feels too aggressive, he might raise his hand or request the floor to speak.

By recognising the cultural factors that shape human behaviour and analysing the reasons for that behaviour, we can improve our effectiveness at solving thorny cross-cultural misunderstandings or better yet, avoid them altogether.

HOW TO SAY “THIS IS CRAP” IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

<https://erinmeyer.com/how-to-say-this-is-crap-in-different-cultures/>

One Thursday in mid-January I had been holed up for six hours in a dark conference room with 12 managers participating in my executive education program. It was a group-coaching day and each executive had 30 minutes to describe in detail a cross-cultural challenge she was experiencing at work and to get feedback and suggestions from the others at the table.

It was Willem's turn, one of the Dutch participants, who recounted an uncomfortable snafu when working with Asian clients. “How can I fix this relationship?” Willem asked his group of international peers, also attending the same course.

Maarten, the other Dutch participant who knew Willem well, jumped in with his perspective. “You are inflexible and can be socially ill-at-ease. That makes it difficult for you to communicate with your team,” he asserted. As Willem listened, I could see his ears turning red (with embarrassment or anger? I wasn't sure), but that didn't seem to bother Maarten, who calmly continued to assess Willem's weaknesses in front of the entire group. Meanwhile, the other participants—all Americans, British and Asians—awkwardly stared at their feet.

That evening, we had a group dinner at a cozy restaurant. Entering a little after the others, I was startled to see Willem and Maarten sitting together, eating peanuts, drinking champagne, and laughing like old friends. They waved me over, and it seemed appropriate to comment, “I’m glad to see you together. I was afraid you might not be speaking to each other after the feedback session this afternoon.”

Willem, with a look of surprise, reflected, “Of course, I didn’t *enjoy* hearing those things about myself. It doesn’t feel good to hear what I have done poorly. But I so much appreciated that Maarten would be transparent enough to give me that feedback honestly. Feedback like that is a gift. Thanks for that, Maarten” he added with an appreciative smile. I thought to myself, “This Dutch culture is . . . well . . . *different* from my own.”

Both arrogance and dishonesty do exist, of course. There are even times when people give offense deliberately in pursuit of political objectives or in response to personal emotional problems. But in some cases, painful incidents are the result of cross-cultural misunderstandings. Managers in different parts of the world are conditioned to give feedback in drastically different ways. The Chinese manager learns never to criticize a colleague openly or in front of others, while the Dutch manager learns always to be honest and to give the message straight. Americans are trained to wrap positive messages around negative ones, while the French are trained to criticize passionately and provide positive feedback sparingly.

One way to begin gauging how a culture handles negative feedback is by listening to the types of words people use. More direct cultures tend to use what linguists call *upgraders*, words preceding or following negative feedback that make it feel stronger, such as *absolutely*, *totally*, or *strongly*: “This is *absolutely* inappropriate,” or “This is *totally* unprofessional.”

By contrast, more indirect cultures use more *downgraders*, words that soften the criticism, such as *kind of*, *sort of*, *a little*, *a bit*, *maybe*, and *slightly*. Another type of downgrader is a deliberate understatement, such as “We are not quite there yet” when you really mean “This is nowhere close to complete.” The British, who are less direct than Americans and a lot less direct than the Dutch are masters at it. The “Anglo-Dutch Translation Guide” has been anonymously circulating in various versions on the Internet provides an illustration.

What the British say	What the British mean	What the Dutch understand
With all due respect...	I think you are wrong.	He is listening to me.
Perhaps you would think about... I would suggest...	This is an order. Do it or be prepared to justify yourself.	Think about this idea and do it if you like.
Oh, by the way...	The following criticism is the purpose of this discussion is...	This is not very important.
I was a bit disappointed that...	I am very upset and angry that...	It doesn’t really matter.
Very interesting...	I don’t like it.	They are impressed.
Could you consider some other options?	Your idea is not a good one.	They have not yet decided.
Please think about that some more.	It’s a bad idea. Don’t do it.	It’s a good idea. Keep developing it.
I’m sure it’s my fault.	It’s not my fault.	It was their fault.
	Your idea is stupid.	They like my ideas!

That is an original point of view.

To Marcus Klopfer, a German client, this guide was no laughing matter. Klopfer outlined how a misunderstanding with his British boss almost cost him his job:

In Germany, we typically use strong words when complaining or criticizing in order to make sure the message registers clearly and honestly. Of course, we assume others will do the same. My British boss during a one-on-one “suggested that I think about” doing something differently. So I took his suggestion: I thought about it, and decided not to do it. Little did I know that his phrase was supposed to be interpreted as “change your behavior right away or else.” And I can tell you I was pretty surprised when my boss called me into his office to chew me out for insubordination!

I learned to ignore all of the soft words surrounding the message when listening to my British teammates. Of course, the other lesson was to consider how my British staff might interpret my messages, which I had been delivering as “purely” as possible with no softeners whatsoever. I realize now that when I give feedback in my German way, I may actually use words that make the message sound as strong as possible without thinking much about it. I’ve been surrounded by this “pure” negative feedback since I was a child.

All this can be interesting, surprising, and sometimes downright painful, when you are leading a global team. You might sit down for a morning of annual performance reviews and as you Skype with your employees in different cultures, your words are magnified or minimized significantly based on your listener’s cultural context

So you have to be aware. You need to work to understand how your own way of giving feedback is viewed in other cultures. You can begin to recognize when you are using upgraders and downgraders, and to notice when your international colleagues are using them. Then you can experiment a little to adjust your words, to suit the context.

As Klopfer says:

Now that I better understand these cultural tendencies, I make a concerted effort to soften the message when working with cultures less direct than my own. I start by sprinkling the ground with a few light positive comments and words of appreciation. Then I ease into the feedback with “a few small suggestions.” As I’m giving the feedback, I add words like “minor” or “possibly.” Then I wrap up by stating that “This is just my opinion, for whatever it is worth,” and “You can take it or leave it.”

The elaborate dance is quite humorous from a German’s point of view. We’d be much more comfortable just stating *Das war absolut unverschämt* (“that was absolutely shameless”). But it certainly gets my desired results!

What about you? Where do you think your own culture falls in this regard? Despite what your cultural normative pattern might be, of course we all have individual preferences. If I need to tell you your work is total crap, how would you like me to deliver the message?

Communication Styles

Communication is by far the most problematic area for my clients. There has been a great deal of research done on different communication styles between the genders. Add in national origin, culture and subcultures, accents, and language barriers, to name a few, and you can see how the workforce today is faced with a much more complex situation. So, how do you communicate effectively when you are dealing with so many variables? In business, clarity in communication is vital. So, how do you ensure that you are receiving an accurate and complete message?

It is beneficial to start with the concepts of cultural competence and cultural adaptability. These concepts help individuals interact across cultures without judgment. This ability enables them to approach communication issues with more patience and a stronger desire to reach an understanding that works for everyone and that is inclusive. They are not so concerned about doing it “their way” but focus more on finding a middle ground that respects and includes everyone.

The different communication styles we will discuss are:

- High Context versus Low Context
- Direct versus Indirect
- Formal versus Informal

It is important to remember when talking about communication styles for various groups, we are generalizing and there are variations within each group.

High Context versus Low Context

You will also see patterns within the styles; for example, people from high context cultures tend to be indirect and formal communicators. People from low context cultures tend to be direct and informal communicators.

Groups that have high context communication styles combine verbal and nonverbal messages to convey the entire meaning. A listener must read between the lines and add nonverbal nuances to fully understand the message. It is important to have excellent listening and observational skills when interacting with individuals from a high context culture.

If someone appears to be listening to what you are saying but their body language is closed, what are they actually saying? For example, someone appears to be listening attentively; however, they have their arms folded in front of them and a frown on their face. So, while they *appear* to be listening, their body language can best be described as closed to your message. Examples of high context cultures are most countries in: Asia; the Middle East; Africa; and South America.

Low context cultures, on the other hand, rely on the literal and precise meaning of the words they use. They prefer explicit conversations where words convey the bulk of if not the entire message. Groups with this preference prefer written communication as they do not need to include the subtleness of nonverbal communication. Examples of countries with low context cultures are: the United States; Germany; Switzerland; and the Scandinavian countries.

Exercise:

Circle your preferred style

High Context

Low Context

Direct versus Indirect Communication

A second preference is direct and indirect communication. Groups that prefer a direct style of communicating also focus on the explicit meaning of words, similar to low context cultures. The popular saying, “You can take my words to the bank” conveys a belief that individuals say exactly what they mean. Americans, Germans, and Israelis, are direct communicators, each having varying degrees of directness.

This group prefers to deal with conflict head-on and uses statements like, “Let’s put everything on the table” or “Let’s get everything out into the open”. They believe that if you discuss everything, you can resolve the conflict. Direct communicators believe that it is better to say what needs to be said.

Indirect communicators do not believe everything needs to be said. They are often part of a culture that is more group-focused rather than individual-focused. Because of this, they live within societal norms that are different and less focused on individual needs. An important goal of their conversational style is to maintain harmony, or at least the appearance of harmony. Therefore, not everything is said, but rather, much can be implied.

Individuals who prefer an indirect communication style will avoid dealing directly with conflict. When issues arise, they are dealt with privately, through a third party, or through passive resistance. Rather than state their opposition directly, it will be handled in a manner that causes the least amount of open dissension. This style believes strongly in “saving face”, a concept that many direct communicators do not factor in when dealing with conflict. Saving face is simply dealing with an issue or concern in a manner that does not publicly embarrass anyone or cause them to lose respect in their own eyes or those of other individuals. Therefore, blame is not directly placed on anyone but is usually alluded to. Examples of indirect communicators are most of the countries in: Asia; the Middle East; Africa; and South America.

Exercise:

Circle your preferred style

Direct

Indirect

What do direct and indirect communicators think of each other?

Direct communicators think indirect communicators:

- *Are evasive*
- *Are dishonest*
- *Can’t take a stand*
- *Have no opinion*
- *Increase tension by not dealing with issues directly*

Indirect communicators think direct communicators:

- *Are insensitive*
- *Have no tact and are boorish*
- *Are insulting*
- *Are harsh*
- *Increase tension by dealing with issues in a direct manner*

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200129-what-is-reading-the-air-in-japan>

JAPAN

How 'reading the air' keeps Japan running



By Bryan Lufkin

30th January 2020

In "high-context" countries where communication is indirect and messages are inferred - like Japan - situational awareness is king.

This story is part of Gen J, a new BBC Worklife series that spotlights Japan as the country heads into 2020. This is the third story [in that series](#), looking at a societal expectation that even the youngest generation must be prepared to manage.

When you step on an escalator, do you stand to one side to let others pass? When someone in the room says it's hot, do you open a window? If you ask someone on a date and they stare at you blankly, do you withdraw the invitation?

If you don't do any of these things, some unfortunate news: you cannot "read the air".

Knowing the unspoken rules governing social life requires comprehensive understanding of your environment, whatever the setting. It's a skill that's valuable anywhere in the world – but in Japan, where communication tends to be indirect, it is elevated to another level. Reading the air – *kuuki o yomu* in Japanese – is a constant exercise, and misreading the air can blow business deals or ruin relationships.

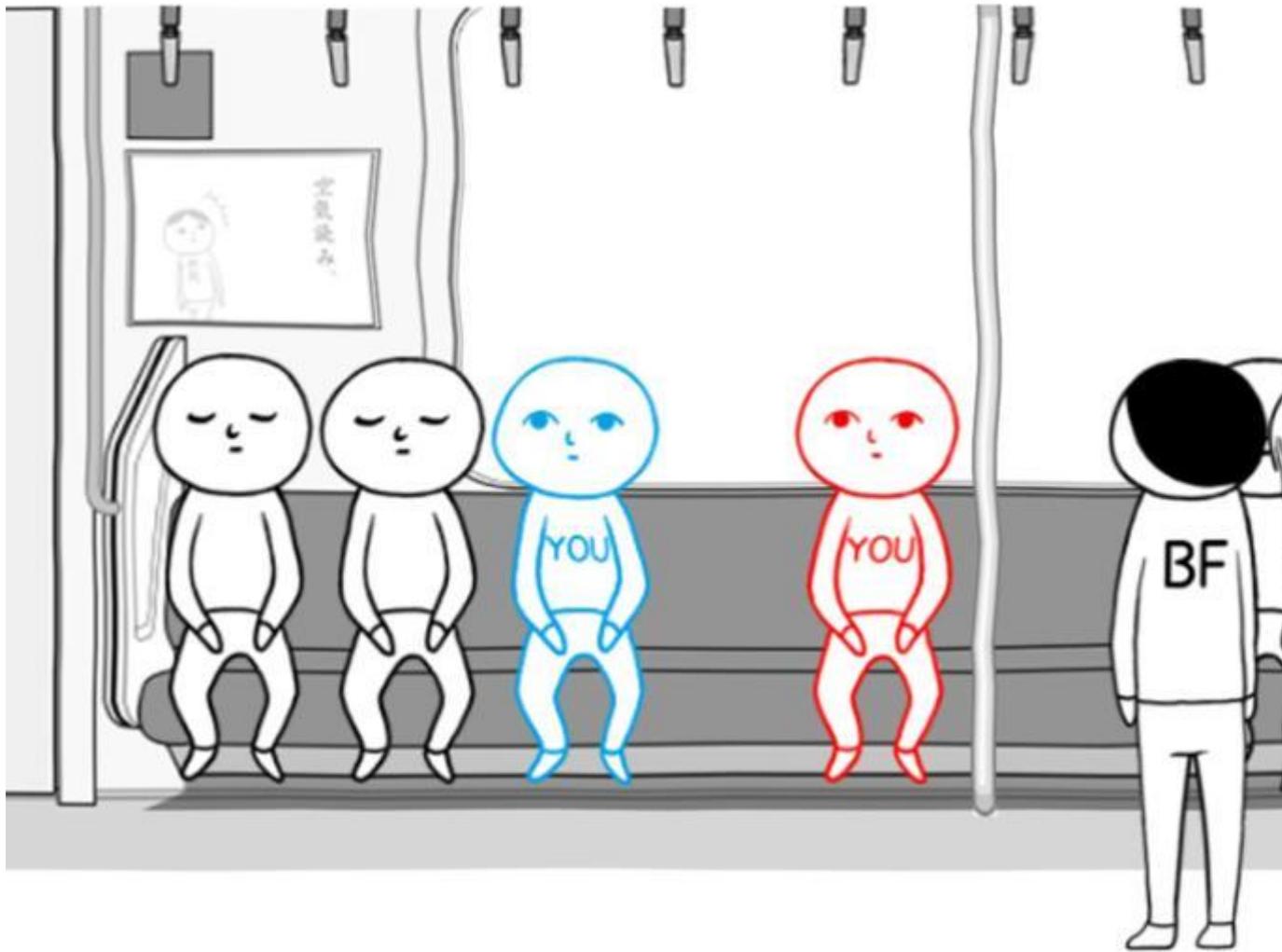
In Japan, *kuuki o yomu* is grappled with in everything from facial recognition technology to video games, showing how ingrained it is in daily life.

Part of this is thinking in the shoes of somebody else – Shinobu Kitayama

Reading the room

Last year, a tweet went [viral](#) in Japan; a businessman in Kyoto met a potential client, and after a while the client complimented the businessman on his watch. At first, the man started to explain the watch's features – but then realised that what the client really wanted was for him to look at his watch, see what time it was and wrap up the conversation.

Rochelle Kopp, who runs cross-cultural training firm Japan Intercultural Consulting, says that while all nations have varying degrees of indirect communication, in Japan the phenomenon is more prominent in society. "In other words, in Japan, it is especially important – and you can expect more problems if you are unable to do it. Put another way, it's an important societal expectation," she says.



Kuukiyomi: Consider It is a video game all about reading the air, which was recently translated into other languages for international release (Credit: G-Mode Corporation)

Yoko Hasegawa, a Japanese language professor at the University of California, Berkeley, says reading the air requires diverse knowledge – cultural and historical, as well as inside knowledge of those in the dialogue. When two people “are praising each other, it might be the case that they are arch-enemies. If you can’t read this ‘air’, you might say something that inflames the hostile relationship,” she explains. “Because my knowledge is frequently inadequate, I can’t read the air in social gatherings [here] in the US.”

In Japan, for example, if you’re the person speaking loudly in an otherwise silent train car or talking to a client who has long since lost interest, you risk being labeled KY – **a pejorative Japanese slang term** that stands for “kuuki ga yomenai”, or “unable to read the air”.

“Every group has a few people who are labeled as KY,” says Shinobu Kitayama, editor for the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and professor at the University of Michigan in the US. “Often times, you’ll be kicked out from important discussions in many organisations. And sometimes, that can be part of the reason for school bullying. If you find [reading the air] stressful, that’s a problem.”

Mastering micro expressions

A big part of “reading the air” is picking up on non-verbal cues. David Matsumoto, a psychology professor at San Francisco State University who specialises in cross-cultural and non-verbal communication, studies micro expressions: tiny involuntary facial tics that can give away a person’s true emotions.

When, for example, a client at work says they’re happy with the job you’re doing, a very subtle lip twitch or eyebrow raise could mean they’re fudging the truth. Noticing micro expressions, along with other non-verbal communication, is important in any interaction, no matter where you are.

“Silence is one non-verbal cue. Shifting of posture is a non-verbal cue. A social smile could be another cue,” says Matsumoto. “All of these are part of the non-verbal package that contribute to that contextual meaning.”

It definitely forces you to pay attention, and to think about what signals the people around you are putting out – Rochelle Kopp

Matsumoto runs Humintell, a company that provides workshops on how to get better at deciphering micro expressions and other non-verbal signals. Others provide such services, too; in Tokyo’s Toranomon business district, researcher Kenji Shimizu runs the Institute for Science and Being Sensitive to the Situation.

Like Matsumoto, Shimizu teaches people – mostly Japanese businesses or government agencies – how to master micro expressions. Shimizu uses a system developed by US psychologist Paul Ekman, who coined the term and describes the subtle facial changes as “[involuntary emotional leakage](#)”.

Shimizu uses visual materials to show clients what to look for, like [this interview with New York Yankees player Alex Rodriguez in 2007 when he lied about using performance-enhancing drugs](#) (watch for the twitch at the side of his mouth). He sometimes employs software that uses a laptop camera to track seven basic human emotions on a person’s face in real time, to help them better understand the signals they’re sending out.

“If you notice someone’s disgust – wrinkling around the nose – or anger – brows lowering, eyes widening, lips pressing – [and yet those expressions are] masked by smiles, you can consider their wishes,” Shimizu says, “and ask them what they really want you to do.”



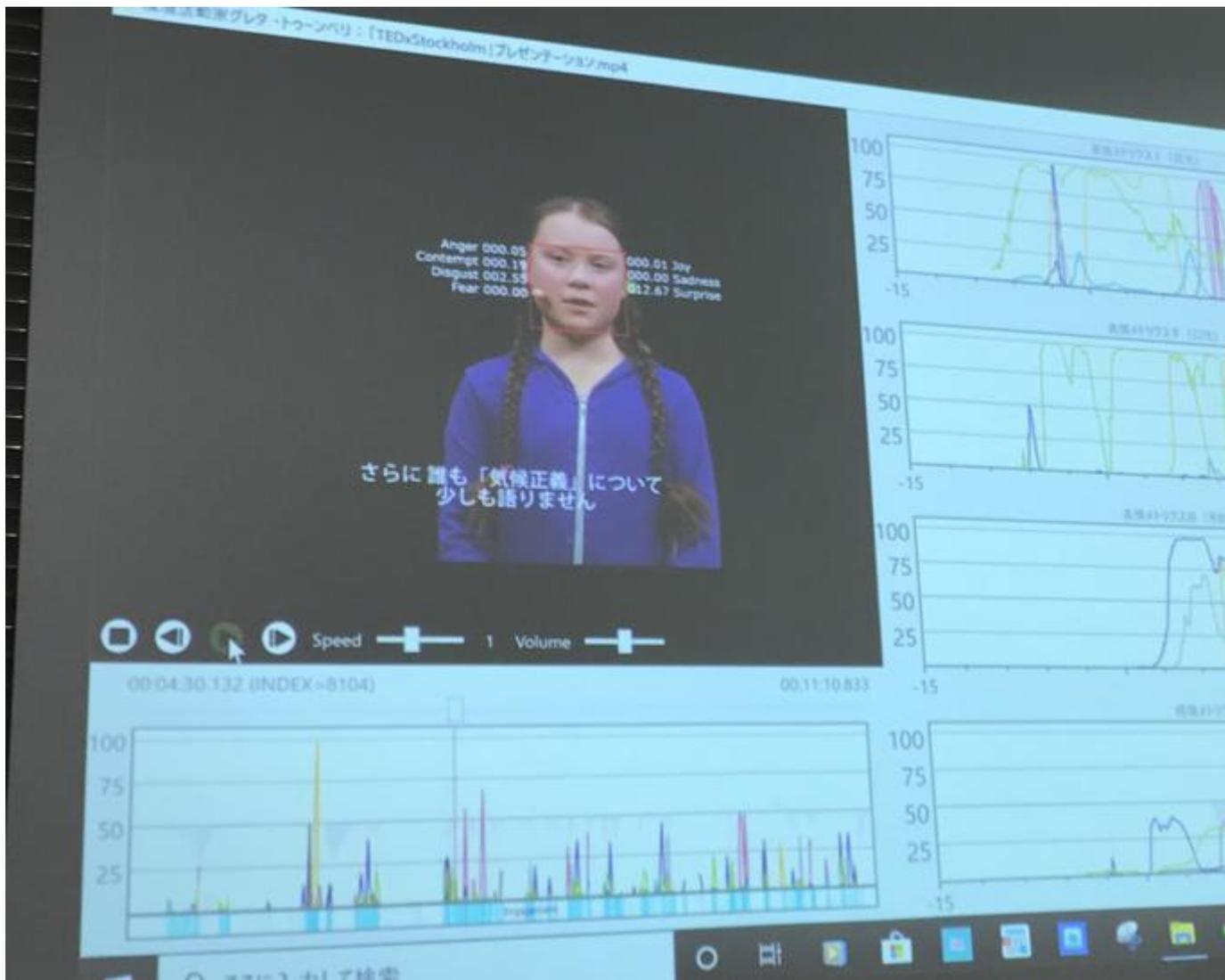
Kenji Shimizu is a researcher based in Tokyo who helps people get better at reading body language to pick up on hidden messages (Credit: Bryan Lufkin)

Gaming the system

Still, deciphering body language is just one part of the much larger skill that is reading the air. It's also about knowing the context of a situation. That's especially important [in a “high-context” country like Japan](#) – where messages are not always spoken, but instead implied and must be inferred.

Reading the air is so entrenched in Japanese culture that there's even a video game about it. Last month, [Kuukiyomi: Consider It](#) was released for Nintendo Switch. Players are put in over 100 delicate situations and scored on how well they read the air. In one scenario, you're sitting on a train with an empty seat next to you and a couple get on. What do you do? If you read the air, you stand up so both can sit together.

It's a chance to hone your skills – or rebel against the status quo. And in a country that runs on reading the air, that might be welcome relief, says developer Koichi Takeshita. “Most [Japanese] players enjoy not reading the air purposely in this game,” he comments.



Nonverbal communication is just one part of reading the air, but there's software that tracks facial movements to train people to improve in that area (Credit: Bryan Lufkin)

Improve your reading

So how can you get better at reading the air – especially if you're lacking key cultural or insider knowledge?

“Part of this is thinking in the shoes of somebody else,” Kitayama says. Even when it feels stressful, rest assured: “You can cultivate those skills.” Sometimes practice makes perfect; Hasegawa recommends “trial and error through socialisation” and to “cultivate the desire to behave like others”.

Kopp says it's hard to train people on, but she simply “urges them to keep their antennae out”, pay attention to those non-verbal signals and proactively ask questions about what will be expected in a certain situation.

Having even a little cultural knowledge can help you figure out what to do next, adds Matsumoto, whether you're looking at someone's face or reading the room. “It comes down to some really basic things, like being respectful of the other culture, and be interested. If you're interested, that will help you listen better and be an active listener, and also active observer,” he says.

“[Kuuki o yomu] definitely forces you to pay attention, and to think about what signals the people around you are putting out,” says Kopp. “That is indeed a good habit for any businessperson to have, no matter what the situation.”

Additional reporting by Yoko Ishitani.

Bryan Lufkin is BBC Worklife's features writer. Follow him on Twitter @[bryan_lufkin](#).
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Hygge: A heart-warming lesson from Denmark

By Justin Parkinson
BBC News Magazine

Published
2 October 2015

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A UK college has started teaching students the Danish concept of hygge - said to make homes nicer and people happier. But what exactly is it and is it exportable?

Sitting by the fire on a cold night, wearing a woolly jumper, while drinking mulled wine and stroking a dog - probably surrounded by candles. That's definitely "hygge".

Eating home-made cinnamon pastries. Watching TV under a duvet. Tea served in a china set. Family get-togethers at Christmas. They're all hygge too.

The Danish word, pronounced "hoo-ga", is usually translated into English as "cosiness".

But it's much more than that, say its aficionados - an entire attitude to life that helps Denmark to vie with Switzerland and Iceland to be the world's happiest country.



IMAGE COPYRIGHTTHINKSTOCK

Morley College, in central London, **is teaching students** how to achieve hygge as part of its Danish language course. "We have long, cold winters in Denmark," says lecturer Susanne Nilsson. "That influences things. Hygge doesn't have to be a winter-only thing, but the weather isn't that good for much of the year."

With up to 17 hours of darkness per day in the depths of winter, and average temperatures hovering around 0C, people spend more time indoors as a result, says Nilsson, meaning there's greater focus on home entertaining.

"Hygge could be families and friends getting together for a meal, with the lighting dimmed, or it could be time spent on your own reading a good book," she says. "It works best when there's not too large an empty space around the person or people." The idea is to relax and feel as at-home as possible, forgetting life's worries.

The recent growth in Scandinavian-themed restaurants, cafes and bars in the UK is helping to export hygge, she adds, with their intimate settings, lack of uniformity in decor and concentration on comforting food. Most customers won't have heard of the term, but they might get a sense of it.

In the US, the wallpaper and fabric firm Hygge West explicitly aims to channel the concept through its cheery designs, as does a Los Angeles bakery, called Hygge, which sells traditional Danish pastries and treats.

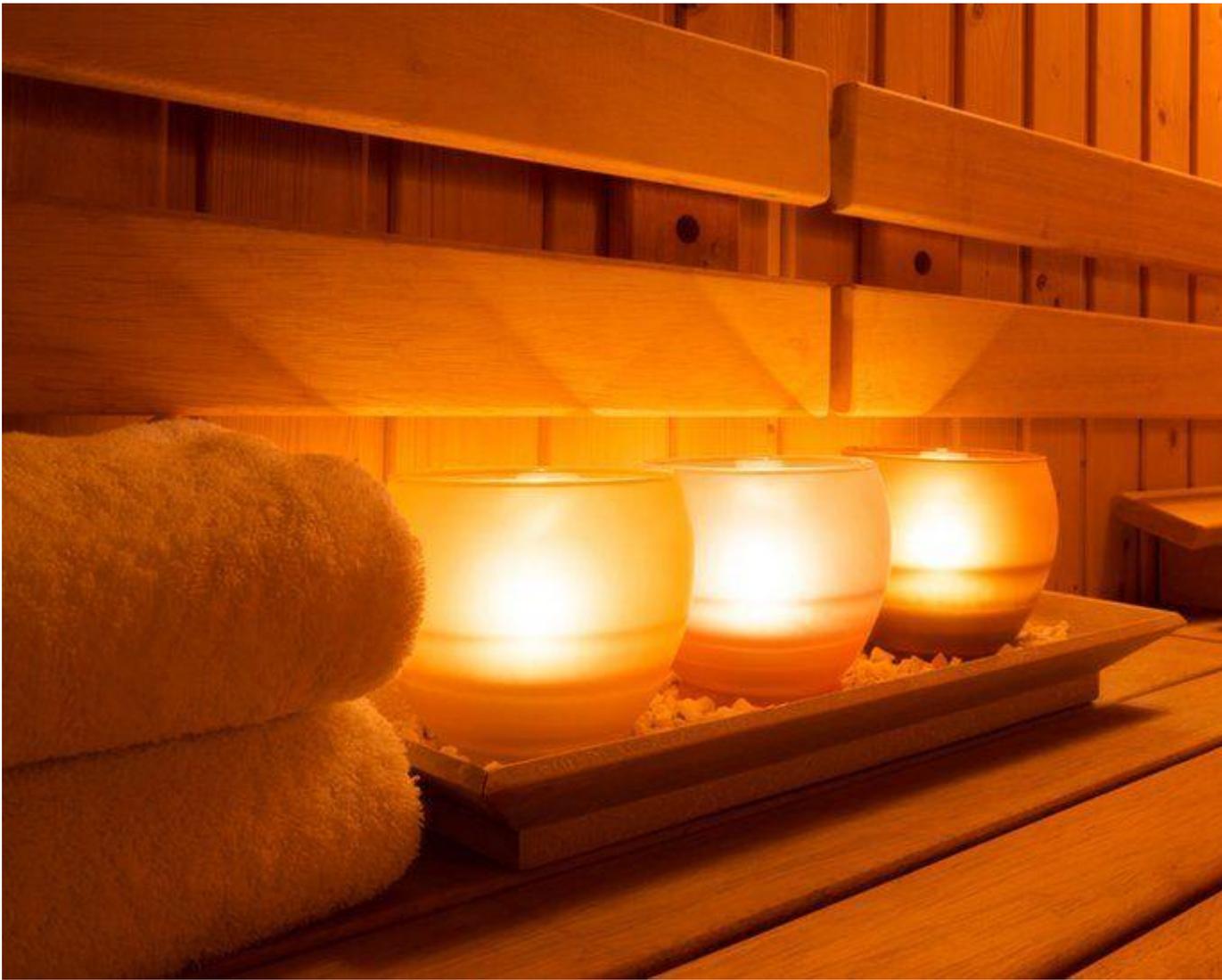


IMAGE COPYRIGHTTHINKSTOCK

"The rest of the world seems to be slowly waking up to what Danes have been wise to for generations - that having a relaxed, cosy time with friends and family, often with coffee, cake or beer, can be good for the soul," says **Helen Russell**, author of *The Year of Living Danishly: Uncovering the Secrets of the World's Happiest Country*. "Hygge seems to me to be about being kind to yourself - indulging, having a nice time, not punishing or denying yourself anything. All very useful come January when in the UK everyone's on diets or manically exercising or abstaining from alcohol.

"There isn't so much enforced deprivation in Denmark. Instead you're kinder to yourselves and so each other. Danes don't binge then purge - there's not much yo-yo dieting in Denmark. No wonder they're happier than we are in the UK."

The adjectival form of hygge is "hyggeligt", a word offered as a compliment to a host after a pleasant evening at their home.

"Hygge isn't just a middle-class thing. Absolutely everyone's at it from my dustbin man to the mayor," says Russell. "Hygge is so crucial to living Danishly that the other day on the motorway, I saw a camper van driving along with lit candles in the windows. This is probably illegal but Vikings don't tend to be too hung up on health and safety.

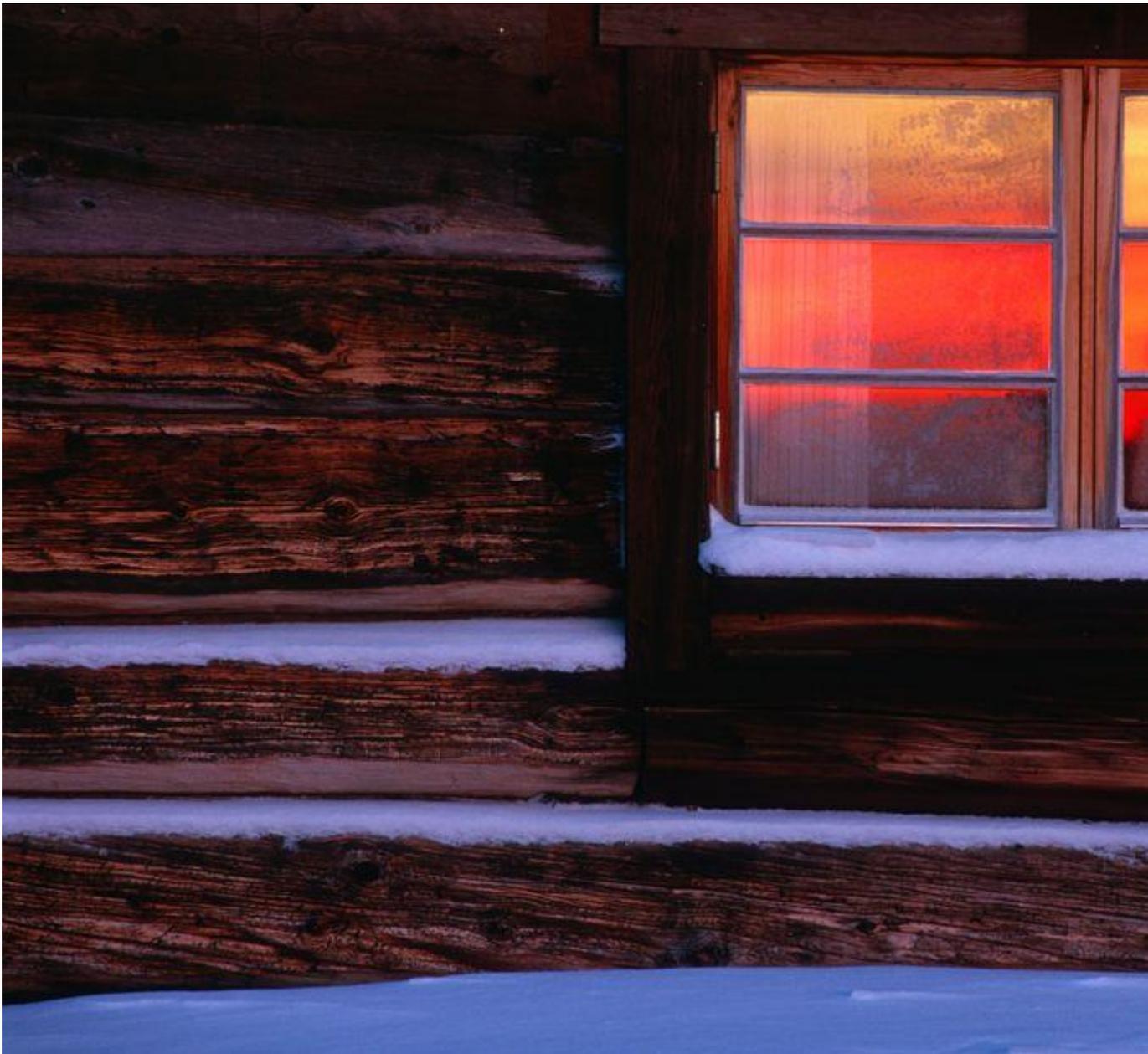


IMAGE COPYRIGHTALAMY

"My most hygge experience to date was probably watching the sun set from a hot tub in a blizzard in January, beer in hand. But it needn't be anything quite so dramatic. I generally light a candle at my home office desk while I'm working."

There's increased discussion of hygge in the UK. "I think I first saw the word in Trine Hahnemann's book *Scandinavian Christmas*, and it immediately made sense to me," says Kayleigh Tanner, author of the [Hello Hygge blog](#). "It's a pretty hard thing to describe because it's so abstract, but I think it resonates with a lot of people."

Origin of 'Hygge'

- Term comes from a Norwegian word meaning "wellbeing"
- First appeared in Danish writing in the 19th Century and has since evolved into the cultural idea known in Denmark today

"It's interesting that the word doesn't really translate into other languages. Hygge isn't restricted to Denmark, so why is it so hard to describe without borrowing a Danish word?"

It sounds a bit like the English word "hug", for which the Oxford English Dictionary lists no origins. The 19th/early 20th Century philologist Walter William Skeat thought it **might be of Scandinavian origin**. Notionally the effect of hygge and a hug is similar - comforting and secure. An obsolete meaning of hug is "to cherish oneself; to keep or make oneself snug", according to the OED.

"Sometimes you see or do things that you would call 'hyggeligt' in the UK but you wouldn't use that word to describe them because people wouldn't know what you're talking about," says Nilsson.

Some older Danes feel that hygge isn't what it used to be, as the stress on socialising has lessened. It's now generally considered hyggeligt to watch TV alone or watching a DVD set, perhaps while eating crisps.

Hygge was never meant to be translated - it was meant to be felt

ToveMaren Stakkestad



Other countries and cultures have similar expressions. In German there's **Gemutlichkeit**, a sense of wellbeing based on good food, company and perhaps a drink. But Danes insist hygge is unique.

The blogger Anna Lea West, has **offered "cosiness of the soul"** as an English definition. "Hygge was never meant to be translated. It was **meant to be felt**," translator ToveMaren Stakkestad has written. Maybe the only way to understand this slippery cultural idea is to visit Denmark, rather than read about it.

"It's an idea so rooted in the Danish sense of togetherness, and perhaps even in Denmark's social democracy, that a Brit might struggle to grasp its historic and social significance," says **Patrick Kingsley**, author of the travel book *How To Be Danish*.

"But that said, in essence hygge is about a group of slightly gloomy friends huddling under the duvet on a cold winter's night. And there is little more British than that."

Japan's formula for life satisfaction

The term **ikigai** is a succinct way to describe what gets you up in the morning – be it work, family or a well-loved hobby – much like a prosaic version of the French *raison d'être*.

- **By Lily Crossley-Baxter**

11 May 2020

Stretched out across the seat on the late-night train, fast asleep and far from the sounds of his ringing phone, the man opposite me was oblivious to the hard stares of his neighbouring passengers. This was no drunk student returning from a night out, however. His smart suit may have been dishevelled and his polished shoes abandoned on the floor (a habit impossible to shrug off even in the depths of drunkenness), but he was a salaryman, and a seemingly successful one at that.

This is a common sight when exploring Tokyo late at night: the sprawled-out bodies of corporate workers can be found draped across benches, slumped in doorways and dotted around train stations. Their incongruous forms have been popularised on Instagram accounts and captured by photographers, feeding the world's curiosity. Working long hours and encouraged to go drinking with colleagues after leaving the office, many miss trains home and spend the night on the street instead. While initially comical, their perpetual presence is a disquieting reflection of a nation obsessed with work.



The concept of Ikigai is at the core of Japan's world-famous work ethic (Credit: AzmanL/Getty Images)

Even to visitors, the sight of a sleeping salaryman soon becomes normal. But when paired with octogenarian taxi drivers, ever-present **convenience store workers** and rush hours lasting well into the night, Japan's pervasive work ethic becomes disconcertingly apparent. While economic factors play a heavy role, the concept of *ikigai* may well be at the core of Japan's work-life imbalance – as well as the key to fixing it.

If you worked for your company, you were very strongly urged to make the company your ikigai

Formed by combining “*iki*”, meaning “life”, and “*gai*”, meaning “to be worthwhile”, the term is a succinct way to describe what gets you up in the morning – be it work, family or a well-loved hobby – much like a prosaic version of the French term *raison d'être*.

“It's something you live for,” explained ex-corporate worker Masataka Shintoku, simply, when asked to define the ancient term. “If you have a great time when you are working, it could be ikigai. If you have a family you love and you can do something for, it's also ikigai.”

However, while a burst of international attention has seen the term appear on lists of inspirational, untranslatable words, its homeland is struggling to unite concept and reality. The disconnect between the discovery of a deep motivation that makes life worth living and the reality of 14-hour days in front of computer screens seems stark, but not entirely unfathomable, when seen in context of Japan's drastic 20th-Century development.



Many of Japan's convenience stores remain open around the clock (Charly Triballeau/Getty Images)

Dating back as far as the 14th Century and long considered role-focused due to the hierarchical nature of society, the term was returned to the modern spotlight with Natsume Soseki's novel, *Kokoro*, which was serialised in 1912. Meaning "the heart of things", the tale followed a student's journey of self-exploration with the support of an aging mentor. Published in the final year of the Meiji era, as Japan emerged from isolationism and embraced the international, industrial world, *Kokoro* piqued the interest of a nation embracing a new way of life.

You may also be interested in:

- [Japan's unusual way to view the world](#)
- [A country obsessed with the past](#)
- [Is this Japan's best breakfast?](#)

Towards the middle of the century, World War Two brought with it a return of survivalist and role-related focus. Soon after, however, Japan entered a new age of growth known as the “economic miracle”. Offering affluence and increasingly extended life-expectancy, the newfound freedom allowed the topic of ikigai to return to the forefront of popular debate.

While countless studies and articles mulled on its meaning in the public eye, the term was quietly being co-opted for the greater cause. Gordon Mathews, professor of anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, notes that by providing certain limitations or rewards, societal institutions are able to “encourage’ the individual down one ikigai path instead of another”, thereby shaping their pursuit to fit the needs of society.



Perseverance in a chosen field has always been highly respected in Japan (Credit: RichVintage/Getty Images)

In an age of economic success, increased work output was key. “There was a lot of ikigai pressure,” explained Mathews. “If you worked for your company, you were very strongly urged to make the company your ikigai, and if you didn’t, there was something wrong with you.”

Although it may seem too easy an exploitation of the concept, the framing of work as ikigai, in fact, draws on one of the more

traditional interpretations of the term. Known as *ittaikan*, the idea of fulfilment derived from “commitment to one’s group” appeals to the Japanese sense of *wa* (harmony). Japan’s economic success and the re-emergence of a corresponding interest in a personal *ikigai* blossomed simultaneously, soon becoming irreversibly entwined and placing men in the office, women in the home – and shaping the work-life balance for decades to come.

This requirement for men’s professional prioritisation was paired with a unique work structure that valued not only company loyalty but input factors such as time and effort over output factors like results or progress. Long hours and sacrificed leisure time were (and still are) seen as positive virtues, while the “*ganbaru*” trait – meaning “trying hard” – is valued above all. While not limited to salarymen, these attributes soon became an embodiment of the working ideal, dedication included.



Japan has a huge number of craftsmen, reflecting the immense value placed on devoting your life to a single purpose (Credit: JGalione/Getty Images)

This is not to say that dedication was limited to white collar roles, however, nor was it a new expectation. From chefs to craftsmen, perseverance in a chosen field has always been highly respected in Japan. Whether you’re selecting a hobby or are a young student choosing a career, a singular focus is encouraged early on – a value reflected in the highly specialised nature of shops

and restaurants across the country. Be it a tiny hole-in-the-wall joint offering smoked ramen or a store selling nothing but freshly baked sweet potato, you can trust that the chefs involved are entirely focused on perfecting their chosen dish.

As Japan has become poorer, it's probably become happier and more ikigai-enhancing

Likewise, the skills of craftsmen are passed on from generation to generation, often resulting in their family name becoming synonymous with the quality products they create. A pair of scissors from Tokyo's Ubukeya is crafted with more than 200 years of collective experience, while Kyoto's knife makers, Aritsugu, can trace their history to the 16th Century. Admittedly the quality of dedication in itself is not unique to Japan, but the incredible number of artisans – from those continuing centuries of experience to those just starting out – reflects the immense value placed on devoting your life to a single craft.

Although the traditional working environments remain strict in terms of hours and available leave, the [economic downturn](#) has opened up new opportunities. Those seeking to combine ikigai with work are now considering unconventional roles in start-ups, as freelancers or doing remote work, and co-working spaces are flourishing in Tokyo.



Japan's approach to work has changed in recent years, with co-working spaces now flourishing in Tokyo (Credit: Torsakarin/Getty Images)

“Today there's a different Japanese world, and there's more freedom for people to find their own ikigai in a variety of different ways,” Mathews explained. “As Japan has become poorer, it's probably become happier and more ikigai-enhancing as a society because there are more patterns by which to live.”

While the balance is by no means at an ideal level in Japan, as demonstrated by the [dedicated sushi-chefs still working seven days a week](#) and the increasing numbers retirees retraining as security guards, park officers and museum guides, it is certainly improving when it comes to opportunity.

In the last few years, there's been a new awareness of individual value: with job-hopping no longer the taboo it once was, [according to The Japan Times](#), workers are free to seek out their ikigai in new roles, combining skills and broadening their focus. This option isn't purely open to corporate workers either; while they remain the poster boys of overwork, the culture has influenced all corners of working society.

Ayuko Kokado, who worked as an English teacher for 20 years before opening one of Japan's first cookery schools in 2011 explained: “I was working six or seven days a week, very long hours. Sometimes as a full-time teacher you just have to be there. It's a very typical Japanese style of working, but it's very stressful.”



Ikigai is anything that gets you up in the morning – be it work, family or a well-loved hobby
(Credit: Tunart/Getty Images)

While she loved teaching, she saw a way to combine it with her other passions of food and travel, escaping the limited confines of her full-time position. Now a qualified sushi and sake instructor, she welcomes students from around the world at [Buddha Bellies Cooking School](#) while also travelling to work as a private chef. Relishing the freedom and opportunities, Kokado believes this multi-faceted approach to a career is key to balancing work and ikigai: “Ikigai shouldn’t be fixed. If you fix it, you can push yourself too much and lose the passion. If you have a variety of skills, you can be flexible and continue for longer – that’s my style of ikigai.”

As the younger generations begin to untangle the connections between true ikigai and work, reforming them for their own interpretation, it seems a more balanced future might be possible for Japan’s work-life struggle.

Nomunication

The other day, I complained to my classmates that I didn't like the fact that most of our student parties involved in alcohol. Even worse, there were many 1st or 2nd year students who did not seem to care about the fact that they were drinking illegally.

My Japanese friend said, "Don't worry! It's our "nomunication."

As I rolled my eyes, he explained the word "nomunication" was a slang formed by combining two words "nomu" (to drink) and "communication." As we all could have guessed, the word represented the Japanese drinking culture – people socialize around a bottle of sake/beer. And, this is definitely something I don't like.

I do not consider myself a drinker, and I do not like the taste of most alcohol drinks. I never had a problem back home when I refused a drink at a party or alike, but it is hard in Japan. Here, it seems hard to not involved alcohols at a social gathering. My friend says drinking is considered a "standard" social activity here. Every one goes to izakaya (Japanese taverns or pubs) after school, work, and even for "extra" work. Do not expect to find a job in Japan that does not involve drinking. Also, you cannot refuse a drink from your boss or someone at a higher status than you because that is considered very rude ('_').

I don't think I could ever get into this "nomunication" thing, but I think I can understand why this has become such an essential thing in Japanese culture. From a foreigner's view, the Japanese always seem to be too stiff, polite, and tend to maintain a calm face regardless of their actual inner state. However, after a few drinks, everyone become "loose" and more comfortable to open up to others. After all, we can use "getting drunk" at an excuse for anything, right?

I have heard stories of crazy drinking games (and have seen some too). I have noticed drunken sleeping in every corner of the station on Friday night, and sometimes I have to be careful not to step onto them when I walk by. This part of the Japanese culture is probably too much for me.

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20191008-jantelagen-why-swedes-wont-talk-about-wealth>

Jantelagen: Why Swedes won't talk about wealth



By Maddy Savage

9th October 2019

A high income is a badge of success in many countries, but in Sweden a deep-rooted cultural code called Jantelagen stops many from talking about it.

A

As we head into 2020, we're running the best, most insightful and most essential Worklife stories from 2019. Read all of the year's biggest hits [here](#).

In Stockholm's richest inner-city neighbourhood, Östermalm, private yachts and floating cocktail bars hug the marina. The adjacent tree-lined boulevard, Strandvägen, boasts some of the most expensive real estate in the Swedish capital, as well as exclusive boutiques and independent restaurants. Nearby, ornate 18th Century buildings house luxurious office spaces and private member's bars.

The area is packed with people in designer sunglasses soaking up the autumn sunshine. But finding someone who's comfortable talking about their wealth is almost impossible.

I'm not going to tell you how much I make because I don't know why I should – Robert Ingemarsson

"I'm not going to tell you how much I make because I don't know why I should," says 30-year-old Robert Ingemarsson, who has a senior job in marketing. Asked what he does with his money, he says simply: "I spend it on stocks. I like investing".

Victor Hesse, 24, who's out shopping, says he's about to embark on an international talent programme for a major Swedish brand. But when asked about his salary, he says: "That's classified".

Standard narratives about Sweden tend to highlight its social democracy, high taxes and low income inequality by global standards. But while this stereotype is rooted in facts, the gap between the rich and the poor has been steadily widening since the 1990s. The top 20% of the population [now earn four times as much as the bottom 20%](#).

Why Swedes won't talk about wealth

Video by Maddy Savage and Benoît Derrier.

A high income is a badge of success in many countries, but Swedes have a deep-rooted aversion to talking about their cash. Our repeated efforts to arrange interviews with young, wealthy Swedes proved tricky; off-the-record, people were happy to talk about large second homes, family yachts, sports cars or champagne sprees in nightclubs, but getting them to formalise their comments was a struggle.

"I have a feeling that it will come across as bragging, which unfortunately I don't feel comfortable with," read one text message that seemed representative of the sentiment felt by many. Others agreed to be interviewed and then became "too busy" or simply ghosted us.

But why is this? While discussing your wealth feels perfectly appropriate in some parts of the world, why does it seem like nobody in Stockholm is proud of being rich?

The concept of *Jantelagen*

Lola Akinmade Åkerström, an author on Swedish culture who's been living in Stockholm for more than a decade, says talking about money is "a very uncomfortable subject" in Sweden. She argues that boasting about wealth – or even discussing a moderate salary with a stranger – is

such a taboo that many Swedes would actually feel “more comfortable talking about sex and bodily functions”.

It is a view shared by Stina Dahlgren, a 28-year-old Swedish journalist who spent several years living in the US. “Over in the States, when you say that you're earning a lot of money, people are cheering for you and they say: ‘good for you, good work’. But over here in Sweden, if you say that you have a good salary... people think you're weird,” she says. “You don't ask about salaries, you don't ask about money.”



Many Swedes refuse to discuss finances with strangers and would feel more comfortable talking about sex, as observed by author Lola Akinmade Åkerström (Credit: Benoit Derrier)

Many cultural commentators agree that a large part of the taboo can be explained by a deep-rooted Nordic code called *Jantelagen*, which promotes the idea of never thinking you are better than anyone else and calling out those who break this norm.

“Jantelagen is an unspoken societal rule that exists here in Sweden and a lot of the Nordics,” explains Akinmade Åkerström, who explores the topic in her book *Lagom: The Swedish Secret of Living Well*. “It’s about not being too flashy, not bragging unnecessarily, and it’s a way of kind of keeping everybody – for the most part – equal... to remove sources of stress within group settings.”

Jantelagen... is about not being too flashy, not bragging unnecessarily, and it's a way of kind of keeping everybody – for the most part – equal – Lola Akinmade Åkerström

Jantelagen – which translates to The Law of Jante in English – takes its name from a rule-abiding town called Jante which featured in a fictional book by Norwegian-Danish author Aksel Sandemose in 1933. But Dr Stephen Trotter, a Scottish-Norwegian academic who [wrote about the concept](#) while he was working at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, says its sentiment has existed in the Nordics – especially in rural areas – for centuries.

“Jantelagen is a mechanism for social control,” he argues. “It’s not just about wealth, it’s about not pretending to know more than you do or acting above your station.”

As a shorthand for celebrating modesty and humbleness, Jantelagen is not dissimilar to [tall poppy syndrome](#), a popular term in Australia and New Zealand that embraces putting down those who are showy about their wealth or status. In Scotland people talk of the ‘[crab mentality](#)’ – a way of thinking that nods to a crab trying to escape from a bucket, yet being pulled back by its fellow hostages. “You could say that Scandinavia just found a buzzword that fits and sums it up better than anyone else,” says Trotter.

Yet he also points out that the way Jantelagen plays out in Sweden and other Nordic societies is linked to specific cultural norms in those nations.



Embedded deeply in Nordic culture, Jantelagen is an unspoken rule that aims to keep everybody seemingly equal and reduce social tensions (Credit: Benoit Derrier)

“You can chat about your cabin in the woods and getting underfloor heating and a patio. People [are] not surprised by that – that is a common idea in the Nordics and a lot of people have a second home here,” he argues. “But to say you’d spent the same money on two Lamborghinis – you would probably get a bit laughed at!”

Akinmade Äkerstöm argues that while Sweden has fought hard to maintain a global image as a classless social democracy, many Swedes still surround themselves with people in similar income brackets. This, she says, means that the rules of *Jantelagen* can therefore shift depending on the company; bragging is more acceptable among those with similar backgrounds.

“Behind closed doors with others of the same socio-economic status, they [richer people] are more comfortable. They can talk about their summer homes or their cars with everybody on the same level.”

Back in Östermalm, Andreas Kensen, 33, who doesn’t live in the area but is spending the afternoon visiting its smart boutiques, agrees that *Jantelagen* is contextual. “I would definitely tell my friends that we’ve been out travelling or, you know, show it off on Instagram or Facebook. But it’s nothing I would tell a stranger I just met,” he explains.

A vocal backlash

However, growing numbers of young, successful Swedes are starting to criticise Jantelagen, and calling for a more vocal conversation about wealth and success.

These include Nicole Falciani, 22, who began earning money from blogging as a teenager and is now a major influencer, with 354,000 followers on Instagram. At a glamorous wedding-themed jewellery shoot at an out-of-town allotment cafe, she doesn't bat an eyelid when asked to tell us her typical fee: around \$20,000 per campaign. It's money she mostly spends on designer bags and travel, having bought a city centre apartment at the age of 20.



Andreas Kensen says Jantelagen is contextual: you might show off a trip you've taken on social media, you just wouldn't brag to a stranger (Credit: Benoit Derrier)

“I would love it if Jantelagen would disappear, because I think that would be so much better for everyone living here... Our society would be much more open if we could talk about money,” she argues. “It's quite a nice thought that everyone should be equal and that we are all the same. But it doesn't work, because if you're working harder than anyone else, then you should be proud of it.”

Our society would be much more open if we could talk about money – Nicole Falciani

Cornelius Cappelen, an associate professor in comparative politics at the University of Bergen in Norway, believes the rise of social media is behind the youth backlash against Jantelagen. He

argues that blogging and video-blogging in particular support the kind of “rampant individualism” that promotes standing out from the crowd, which has, until recently, been far less prevalent in Nordic countries than other western nations, particularly the US.

“More and more people use the term [Jantelagen] as an abuse – especially many young people explicitly claim that they hate the mentality,” he argues.



Young people like Nicole Falciani who turn to social media for success see Jantelagen as a barrier preventing the recognition of hard work (Credit: Benoit Derrier)

Akinmade Åkerström also believes that social media has had a major impact. Since bragging has become commonplace on Facebook and Instagram, Swedes whose personal achievements stand out have started to feel more comfortable making their success public, she argues.

“There are very skilled, talented people that have been suppressed by Jantelagen, but then they’ve seen mediocre people bragging (online) with confidence.”

“I think Jantelagen is going to slowly fade out because those people that have been repressed will start standing up and saying, ‘you know, I’m good at this!’... And social media also connects you to a wider audience that isn’t familiar with Jantelagen.”

The author believes that Jantelagen is also becoming less popular due to a rise in immigration. In Sweden, the most diverse of the Nordic nations, around 25% of people were born abroad or have

two foreign parents. “What other cultures are bringing in is celebrating your success, celebrating talented people, celebrating skills,” she says.

It’s a theory welcomed by Nicole Falciani, who was born and raised in Sweden but has two Italian parents. She says that she sometimes found it tricky to work out which of the topics that she discussed at home or with relatives in Italy were socially acceptable to talk about in Swedish society.



With increased immigration and influx of foreign cultures, the Nordic concept of Jantelagen seems to be disappearing but to what extent remains to be seen (Credit: Benoit Derrier)

“I think it will get better, because we're getting more European, we have more foreigners living in Sweden taking their culture here. And we have a lot of American TV programmes and they don't have Jantelagen at all,” she says. However, she doubts the concept will disappear completely because it is “so rooted in Swedish culture or in Scandinavian culture”.

Cornelius Cappelen, the associate professor, says he’s also uncertain about the concept’s potential to disappear.

“Will it stick around in the future? Well, my guess is as good as yours. But I will say this: I hope the nice aspect of it – the modesty code of not sticking one’s neck out – will continue to exist and I hope that the negative aspect of it – ‘cutting people down to size’ – will wither away.”

Meanwhile some immigrants to Sweden say they have embraced Jantelagen, including 35-year-old Natalia Irribara, who moved to Stockholm from Chile three years ago.

“I think in Chile we have a really narcissistic society where accomplishments are really important – like academic qualifications, sport, being pretty... the car, the school, the house,” she says. “[Here] we have a model as a neighbour, but they never talk about ‘oh, I was in this magazine’. Another neighbour is a photographer who accomplished great things, but never talks about it.”

“For me humbleness is really important, and the thing I like in Sweden is that with Jantelagen it’s not that important, those material things.”

Additional research by Emelie Svensson.

The Greek word that can't be translated

'Love of honour', its official translation, is a utilitarian yet insufficient attempt to convey the constellation of virtues squeezed into the word's four syllables.

- **By Stav Dimitropoulos**

7 June 2017

In his second summer in the lonesome Greek village of Tolo on the east coast of the Peloponnese, German senior civil servant and writer Andreas Deffner committed a cultural blunder that led him to the celebrated concept of Greek *philotimo*.

"Good morning, how are you?" Grandma Vangelió, owner of the pension where he was staying, warmly greeted him one day.

"So, so," Deffner sleepily answered.

Next thing the German tourist knew, he was sweating over a bowl of delicious, steaming-hot chicken soup, the watchful eyes of Grandma Vangelió and her daughter Irini glued on him. When Irini started wildly gesticulating at her brother Pericles, who had just arrived, Deffner broke out in cold sweat. "What've I done?" he asked, warily.

"You said to Vangelió that you weren't feeling well?" Pericles replied.

"I beg your pardon? I just said I was so, so."

"If you answer 'so, so', locals think you're sick and their sense of *philotimo* urges them to heal you, thus the chicken soup," Pericles replied, roaring with laughter.

The guest sighed with relief. “This was my first experience with philotimo, and certainly not the last,” Deffner, **who later wrote a book on the topic**, told me.

Philotimo belongs to the pantheon of Greek lexical items that defy easy explanation

The exact meaning of philotimo is hotly debated, given that the word belongs to the pantheon of Greek lexical items that defy easy explanation. ‘Love of honour’, its official translation, is a utilitarian yet insufficient attempt to convey the constellation of virtues squeezed into the word’s four syllables. When I asked various Greeks about their own perception of philotimo, I received very different responses.

“Doing the right thing,” Pinelopi Kalafati, a doctor, told me. “Loving and honouring God and your society,” said priest Nikolas Papanikolaou. “Striving for perfection,” answered actor Kostis Thomopoulos. “Stepping out from your comfort zone to help someone in need,” suggested Tatiana Papadopoulou, a volunteer in Malakasa detention camp for refugees.

It seems that not only does the word remain untranslatable, but even Greeks themselves have trouble agreeing on a single definition.

“The mythology that accompanies this elusive concept is without precedent. Indeed, the word cannot be translated precisely to any other language,” said Vassilios P Vertoudakis, lecturer in Ancient Greek philology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. “All the same, philotimo has become one of the building blocks of the Greek disposition because of the unique standing of Greece in relation to what we call the West.”

Even Greeks themselves have trouble agreeing on a single definition

He explained that philotimo comes from the Ancient Greek word philotimia (φιλοτιμία), of which the first attested written reference dates to the dawn of the Greek classical period (6th and 7th

Centuries BC) in the writings of lyric poet Pindar. For Pindar and other early writers, the word meant love of honour or distinction, or ambition, but often in a negative way. In mythology, for example, Achilles' philotimo was wounded when King Agamemnon took away Queen Briseis, his prize for bravery on the battlefield.

It was only after the consolidation of democracy in classical Athens around the 4th and 5th Centuries BC, when competition was replaced by co-operation, that the word gained a more positive connotation. At that time, “a man with philotimo signified someone who loves to receive the praises of his city, but first serves the community,” Vertoudakis said.

The concept really took off around the 15th Century in the High Middle Ages, when Ottoman rulers enslaved Greece, forced a large part of the population into subsistence farming through heavy taxation and limited education, and cut each region off from both the rest of the country and Western Europe.

“While the West was experiencing Enlightenment and developing modern states that tied together individuals under the rule of law and an abstract sense of responsibility, the subjugated and inward-looking Greeks were bound by pride, localism and interpersonal relationships,” Vertoudakis said. “Instead of developing the kind of institutional consciousness seen in Western Europe, Greek communities were imbued with philotimo, which was triggered not by law and logic but intense emotion and some degree of intimacy.”

And this emotional side to the national character can be seen throughout modern Greek history. In May 1941, when **the Axis powers launched an airborne attack** on the legendary Minoan island of Crete, locals not only grabbed kitchen knives or unsophisticated weapons to go out and fight the enemy, but also trudged through the towering, rugged mountains and steep gorges of Crete to find the best hideouts for the British and Australian soldiers. Neither the fact that they were half-starved due to the Nazi-induced Great Famine nor the death penalty for sheltering

soldiers fazed them; their sense of duty, honour and courage took precedence.

Almost 76 years later, locals on the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Kos, places renowned for their beauty and touristic prowess – yet all in years of deep recession – have been jumping in boats to rescue refugees reaching the Eastern Aegean shores in droves. Some have even been witnessed plunging in icy waters as the rickety boats approach the islands.

“Why are you congratulating me, my children?” **asked 86-year-old Emilia Kamvisi** when journalists asked her why she and her friends, 90-year-old Efstratia Mavrapidou and 86-year-old Maritsa Mavrapidou – who were later **nominated for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize** – go to the coast of Lesbos every day to help weary female refugees and their children. “What special am I doing? Wouldn’t you do the same?” she continued.

We may not return with our nets full of fish, but our hearts are warm

Also nominated was 41-year-old fisherman, Stratis Valiamos, **who often takes his tiny wooden boat** into the Aegean to rescue people off his own accord. “I’m out fishing, I can see people shouting for help. What can I do? Pretend I can’t see? Pretend I can’t hear? That’s the right thing to do”.

“We may not return with our nets full of fish, but our hearts are warm,” Diamantis Zannikos, a fisherman-rescuer from Chios told me. “We have philotimo.”

I am sure Kamvisi, Valiamos and Zannikos are all uninterested in whether philotimo is an emotional crutch or an indefinable cultural trait. For the hundreds of fishermen, housewives, retirees, teachers, volunteers, artists and students who wait by the beach every day to offer dry clothes, water, food and shelter, and open their arms and homes to people fleeing war and terror, the emotional and moral satisfaction drawn from exhibiting philotimo

far outweighs any attempt at conceptualising it. For them, philotimo is simply a way of being.

The emotional and moral satisfaction drawn from exhibiting philotimo far outweighs any attempt at conceptualising it

Deffner, meanwhile, is packing his suitcases for one more summer holiday with Grandma Vangelió and family.

“What is your definition of philotimo?” I asked him.

“Two to three positive thoughts, one litre zest for life, 500 grams of hospitality, 10 drops of sympathy, an ounce of pride, dignity and your inner guide,” he replied.

Japan's usual way to view the world

Wabi-sabi offers a refuge from the modern world's obsession with perfection, and accepts imperfections as all the more meaningful – and, in their own way, beautiful.

- **By Lily Crossley-Baxter**

27 April 2020

As people the world over are sheltering in place, many are looking to find comfort and contentment amid a very difficult situation. To help people cope, BBC Travel is updating some of our most popular stories on uplifting cultural practices around the globe that offer inspiring ways to find hope when times are tough.

The concept of wabi-sabi highlights the importance of acceptance in Japanese culture, a society forced to contend with devastating natural disasters on a semi-regular basis. Rather than casting nature solely as a dangerous and destructive force, it helps frame it as a source of beauty, to be appreciated on the smallest of levels.

Withdrawing my hands reluctantly from the slowly spinning bowl, I watched its uneven sides slowly come to a stop, wishing I could straighten them out just a little more. I was in the ancient pottery town of Hagi in rural Yamaguchi, Japan, and while I trusted the potter who convinced me to let it be, I can't say I understood his motives.

Smiling, he announced, "it has *wabi-sabi*" – and whisked the bowl away for firing. I sat, contemplating the lack of symmetry and wondering what on Earth he meant.

As it turns out, failing to understand this phrase is not unusual. A key part of the Japanese Aesthetic – the ancient ideals that still govern the norms on taste and beauty in Japan – **wabi-sabi is not**

only untranslatable, but also considered undefinable in Japanese culture. Often muttered in moments of profound appreciation, and almost always followed by the word *muri!* (impossible!) when asked to expand, the phrase offers an unusual way to view the world.



Wabi-sabi is a key part of the Japanese Aesthetic (Credit: Nathaniel Noir/Alamy)

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Originating in Taoism during China's Song dynasty (960-1279) before being passed onto Zen Buddhism, wabi-sabi was originally seen as an austere, restrained form of appreciation. Today it encapsulates a more relaxed acceptance of transience, nature and melancholy, favouring the imperfect and incomplete in everything, from architecture to pottery to flower arranging.

Wabi, which roughly means 'the elegant beauty of humble simplicity', and *sabi*, which means 'the passing of time and subsequent deterioration', were combined to form a sense unique to Japan and pivotal to Japanese culture. But just as Buddhist monks believed that words were the enemy of understanding, this description can only scratch the surface of the topic.

Prof Tanehisa Otabe, professor at Tokyo University's Institute of Aesthetics, suggests that the ancient art of *wabi-cha*, a style of tea ceremony established by tea masters Murata Juko and Sen no Rikyu from the late 15th to 16th Centuries forms a good introduction to wabi-sabi. By choosing common Japanese pottery over the popular (and technically perfect) imported Chinese examples, the men challenged the rules of beauty. Without bright colours and ornate designs to rely on as signifiers of accepted beauty, guests were encouraged to study subtle colours and textures that would previously have been overlooked.

Wabi-sabi leaves something unfinished or incomplete for the play of imagination

As to why they sought imperfect, rustic pieces, Prof Otabe explained that “wabi-sabi leaves something unfinished or incomplete for the play of imagination”. This opportunity to actively engage with something considered to be wabi-sabi achieves three things: an awareness of the natural forces involved in the creation of the piece; an acceptance of the power of nature; and an abandonment of dualism – the belief that we are separate from our surroundings.

Combined, these experiences allow the viewer to see themselves as part of the natural world, no longer separated by societal constructs and instead at the mercy of natural timelines. Rather than seeing dents or uneven shapes as mistakes, they are viewed as a creation of nature – much as moss would grow on an uneven wall or a tree would curve in the wind.

“The aesthetics of wabi-sabi opened our eyes to everyday life and gave us a method of handling what is common in an uncommon, aesthetic way,” Prof Otabe said, highlighting the importance of acceptance in Japanese culture, a society forced to contend with devastating natural disasters on a semi-regular basis. Rather than casting nature solely as a dangerous and destructive force, it helps frame it as a source of beauty, to be appreciated on the smallest of levels. It becomes a provider of colours, designs and

patterns, a source of inspiration, and a force to work alongside, rather than against.



Originating in Taoism before being passed onto Zen Buddhism, wabi-sabi encapsulates a more relaxed acceptance of transience, nature and melancholy (Credit: Lily Crossley-Baxter)

It is the inevitable mortality embound in nature, however, that is key to a true understanding of wabi-sabi. As author Andrew Juniper notes in his book [Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence](#), “It... uses the uncompromising touch of mortality to focus the mind on the exquisite transient beauty to be found in all things impermanent”. Alone, natural patterns are merely pretty, but in understanding their context as transient items that highlight our own awareness of impermanence and death, they become profound.

This idea brought to mind a story a Japanese colleague told me when we discussed wabi-sabi. Visiting Kyoto as a teenager, she had hurried through the grounds of Ginkakuji, a wooden Zen temple with quiet gardens, eager to see the more famous Kinkakuji, an ornate temple covered in gold leaf and perched above a reflective pond. Bright, stunning and glamorous, it lived up to her expectations, a far more impressive beauty than its traditional sister temple.

A few decades later, however, she returned to find the gold garish and, while it was certainly eye-catching, there was little beyond the immediate gratification of the gold leaf. Ginkakuji, however, offered a new fascination: the aged wood held countless hues and patterns, while the Zen moss and dry sand gardens offered a frame for nature's many shapes. Unable to appreciate these things as a child, she had grown to see the ravages of time as a deeper source of beauty, far greater than a two-dimensional flash of gold.



Rather than seeing dents or uneven shapes as mistakes, in Japan they are viewed as a creation of nature (Credit: Christian Baumert/Alamy)

Intrigued by the personal element of this appreciation, I contacted artist Kazunori Hamana, whose unique pieces are often considered to have an element of wabi-sabi. As we walked through the grounds of his tumbledown farmhouse in the rural idyll of Izumi in Chiba prefecture, he agreed with the need for age.

“You have different feelings when you’re young – everything new is good, but you start to see history develop like a story. After you’ve grown up, you see so many stories, from your family to nature: everything growing and dying and you understand the concept more than you did as a child.”

This appreciation for the marks of time is a key feature in Hamana's works, which he chooses to display in derelict Japanese farmhouses. Explaining that the wooden doorframes have been blackened by years of smoke from the *irori* (an indoor hearth) and pointing out how the mud walls have started crumbling, he says he feels the history of the houses lend a fitting backdrop to his pieces, avoiding the cold duality of impersonal white gallery spaces.



Though not as ornate as its sister temple, Kinkakuji, the Ginkakuji temple in Kyoto exhibits a deeper source of beauty (Credit: dave stamboulis/Alamy)

Creating sculptures with natural clay from Shiga, an area with a reputation for high-quality clay and a long history of pottery making, Hamana embraces the important wabi-sabi concept of mutual creation between man and nature.

“I design a little at first, but clay is a natural thing, so it changes. I don't want to fight with nature so I follow the shape, I accept it,” he said.

Not only does he allow nature to aid in the shaping of his pieces, but in their later appearance too. In an overgrown bamboo forest in the farmhouse grounds, he showed me the pieces he'd chosen to leave outside, buried in the undergrowth for years at a time. There they've developed unique patterns from extreme

temperatures and surrounding plant life, as well as being occasionally broken. Studying them closely, I found that this simply added to the beauty of each piece, with the cracks offering another opportunity to add to the story.



Kazunori Hamana's clay artwork is often considered to have an element of wabi-sabi (Credit: Lily Crossley-Baxter)

Often associated with wabi-sabi is the art of *kintsugi* – a method of repairing broken pottery using gold or lacquer. The process highlights, rather than conceals, the cracks, allowing them to become a part of the piece, too. When his daughter accidentally broke some of his work, Hamana said, laughing, he decided to leave the pieces outside for a few years, allowing them to be coloured and shaped by nature. When it was repaired by a local kintsugi specialist, the different colours created a contrast so subtle, so uneven, that could never have been intentionally created. Embracing the effects of nature and allowing family history to be visible in a piece creates a unique value for something which would, in many cultures, simply be discarded as worthless.

Prioritising flawlessness and infallibility, the ideal of perfection creates not only unachievable standards, but misguided ones

In fact, the term 'perfect', which stems from the Latin *perfectus*, meaning complete, has been placed on an undeserved pedestal in many cultures, especially the West. Prioritising flawlessness and infallibility, the ideal of perfection creates not only unachievable standards, but misguided ones. In Taoism, since no further growth or development can take place, perfection is considered equivalent to death. While we strive to create perfect things and then struggle to preserve them, we deny their very purpose and subsequently lose the joys of change and growth.

Although seemingly abstract, this appreciation of transient beauty can be found at the heart of some of Japan's most simple pleasures. *Hanami*, the annual celebration of cherry blossoms, involves parties and picnics, boat rides and festivals, all beneath the often already-falling petals, considered as beautiful in their haphazard patterns on the floor as they are on the branches. The pure acceptance of a fleeting beauty that would garner no more than a few photos in the West is something of an inspiration. While the appreciation may be tinged with melancholy, its only lesson is to enjoy the moments as they come, without expectations.



The appreciation of transient beauty is at the heart of some of Japan's most simple pleasures, such as the annual celebration of cherry blossoms (Credit: Alex Ramsay/Alamy)

The dents and scratches we bear are all reminders of experience, and to erase them would be to ignore the complexities of life. By retaining the imperfect, repairing the broken and learning to find beauty in flaws – rather than in spite of them – Japan's ability to cope with the natural disasters it so often faces is strengthened. When my bowl from Hagi arrived in the post months later, its uneven edges were no longer a defect, but instead a welcome reminder that life is not perfect, and nor should I try to make it so.