

Summing up what was learned from the interactions in intercultural business settings

"Learning the Ropes" -- Japanese / American

Based on the critical incident "Learning the Ropes," where would you place Japan and the US in these areas. [On the line, indicate the US with a triangle and Japan with a circle]

harmony in office is valued  _____  expressing feelings openly in office is valued

behavior in office isn't so different from behavior on social occasions _____ behavior with colleagues can be VERY different in the two contexts

"Engineering a Decision" -- French / Japanese

Based on the critical incident "Engineering a Decision," where would you place Japan and France in these areas. [On the line, indicate France with a triangle and Japan with a circle]

collectivist _____ individualist

loyalty to company _____ value individual freedom

concern for spouse's (or family's) needs _____ concern for company's needs

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"The Sick Secretary" -- Korean / American

Based on the critical incident "The Sick Secretary," where would you place America and Korea in the following areas. [On the lines, indicate Korea with a triangle and the U.S. with a circle.]

low context culture _____ high context culture
high value on "talking things out" _____ expectation that feelings & behaviors will be noticed
less concern about public "face" _____ losing face in public is dreaded

"The Quiet Participant" -- Indonesian / American

Based on the critical incident "The Quiet Participant," where would you place America and Indonesia in the following areas. [On the lines, indicate Indonesia with a triangle and the U.S. with a circle.]

collectivist _____ individualist
standing out is valued _____ not bringing attention to oneself is valued

"The Shinto Priest" -- Japanese / American

Based on the critical incident "The Shinto Priest," where would you place America and Japan in the following areas. [On the lines, indicate the U.S. with a triangle and Japan with a circle.]

businesses try to exclude religious practices _____ in some cases, religious practice may be allowed
supernatural explanations for failures are accepted _____ supernatural explanations may be ridiculed

US & Indonesia

The Quiet Participant

Machmud had recently been promoted to a position of authority and was asked to represent his company and Indonesia's needs at the head office in Butte, Montana. His relationships with fellow workers seemed cordial but rather formal from his perspective. He was invited to attend many policy and planning sessions with other company officials; where he often sat rather quietly as others generated ideas and engaged in conversation.

The time finally came when the direction the company was to take in Indonesia was to be discussed. A meeting was called to which Machmud was invited. As the meeting was drawing to a close after almost 2 hours of discussion, Machmud, almost apologetically, offered a suggestion—his first contribution to any meeting. Almost immediately, John Stewart, a local vice president, said, "Why did you wait so long to contribute? We needed your comments all along." Machmud felt that Stewart's reply was harsh.

How would you best explain this incident? Focus on a specific cultural difference in Machmud's experience compared with the experience of the Americans in Butte.

1. It is common in Indonesia for decisions to take a long time to be made. Machmud was expecting much more discussion before the company adopted a new policy. When suddenly faced with the realization that his thoughts had not been heard, he let them be known at the last minute.
2. Machmud did not want to stand out as an individual and therefore he did not make his contribution earlier.
3. Machmud was overwhelmed by new policies, procedures, people, and customs, and was not able to function appropriately within this new context.
4. Machmud was not confident with his use of the English language, and therefore was reluctant to participate.

Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

1. This is a good answer and the one selected as most probable by our validation sample. Although it is often a stereotype that in many developing nations it takes longer to complete some tasks, in the United States also many decisions are reached only after a long time. In fact, Machmud had been exposed to a sufficient number of meetings to know about technical or structural matters, such as time. However, he may not have been in the United States long enough to assimilate behavior reflecting a deep cultural difference. Such a cultural difference is present, and another alternative reflects this.
2. This is the response that best reflects culturally determined behavioral differences. In Indonesia, the group often comes before any action of the individual. Machmud was acting as one would in a meeting in his home country. Rather than stand out as an idea person seeking attention, an individual may present suggestions quickly toward the close of a meeting, with the hope that little attention will be paid to him or her. It is important that a leader understand the group dynamics and decision-making processes of the cultures represented in a group to benefit fully from all possible input and to prevent misunderstandings.
3. Although Machmud may have had difficult moments adjusting to his new environment, there is no indication that this was the cause of his behavior. Please select again.
4. There is no indication in the story that this was a problem. The fact that Machmud had been invited to many such meetings excludes the possibility that his language ability was poor. There is a better explanation. Please choose again.

Japan & US

The Shinto Priest

The U.S. branch of a Japanese manufacturing company had been operating successfully for some years, but in recent months a series of seemingly unrelated incidents had caused concern. First, there was a rash of accidents in the plant itself, then one of the Japanese executive's children died of a rare illness and another executive's car caught fire, severely burning him. Rumors of a jinx on the company began to spread among the employees, and morale lowered. Consequently, the management called a meeting of the executives to decide how to react to the situation. The American managers suggested that all safety and quality control procedures be reviewed so as to reassure the workers that their welfare was taken seriously. The Japanese managers, however, held that this had already been done; they felt that other forces were at work. They wished to bring in a Shinto priest to bless the company and protect it against evil spirits—this was the only course of action that would reassure them. The Americans were reluctant to adopt such an action and preferred the idea of seeking suggestions from the employees. The meeting ended in disagreement.

What was the underlying reason for the disagreement between the American and Japanese managers?

1. Many of the American managers were probably Christians and objected to Shinto rituals being performed on company property.
2. The Americans regarded the Japanese proposal as based in mere superstition.
3. The Japanese were unwilling to admit that their safety procedures were at fault and sought to blame other forces.
4. The Japanese managers did not like the idea of calling for employee suggestions as this would undermine their authority.

Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

1. Although many of the managers who were Christians may have felt uneasy about such practices, there is no indication in the story that this was the principal motive behind their reluctance to concur with the Japanese managers' proposal. There is a more likely explanation. Please try again.
2. This is the most probable explanation. Western societies are strongly secular and tend to view any regard for supernatural forces or spirits as mere superstition. Thus the American managers viewed the Japanese proposal as ineffective and unlikely to reassure the workforce. To the Japanese, however, the series of events had no obvious rational explanation, and they thus saw more irrational or supernatural forces at work that somehow must be controlled. Whether the Americans were willing to accept such beliefs or not, they should still have recognized that the Shinto blessing could well reassure the Japanese workers and help restore morale. Moreover, in dismissing rituals and behaviors of other cultures as superstition, Westerners often fail to recognize the extent to which superstition persists in their own societies— from avoiding having thirteenth floors in hotels to keeping lucky charms and reading daily horoscopes. Such actions, although trivial, have no rational basis. Superstition exists to varying degrees in all cultures.
3. The Japanese are generally very concerned with correct procedures, and these managers would probably be quite willing to review the procedures if they felt they could possibly be at fault. Moreover, this explanation does not take into account that some of the incidents happened outside of the workplace. There is a more appropriate explanation. Please try again.
4. This seems unlikely, as Japanese management practices usually encourage employee participation where appropriate. The Japanese managers probably had no strong objections to the Americans' proposal; rather, they saw it as unlikely to bring any solution to the problem. There is a better explanation for the disagreement as to the course of action. Please select another explanation.

US & Korea

The Sick Secretary

Todd works for an American company in Korea. Sometimes he wonders why he ever accepted a position overseas—there seems to be so much that he just doesn't understand. One incident in particular occurred the previous Friday when his secretary, Chungmin, made a mistake and forgot to type a letter. Todd considered this a small error, but made sure to mention it when he saw her during lunch in the company cafeteria. Ever since then, Chungmin has been acting a bit strange and distant. When she walks out of his office, she closes the door more loudly than usual. She will not even look him in the eye, and she has been acting very moody. She even took a few days of sick leave, which she has not done in many years. Todd has no idea how to understand her behavior. Perhaps she really is ill or feels a bit overworked.

When Chungmin returns to work the following Wednesday, Todd calls her into his office. "Is there a problem?" he asks. "Because if there is, we need to talk about it. It's affecting your performance. Is something wrong? Why don't you tell me, it's okay."

At this, Chungmin looks quite distressed. She admits the problem has something to do with her mistake the previous Friday, and Todd explains that it was no big deal. "Forget it," he says, feeling satisfied with himself for working this out. "In the future, just make sure to tell me if something is wrong." But over the next few weeks, Chungmin takes 6 more sick days and does not speak to Todd once.

Paying close attention to the details of the story, how can you best interpret these events?

1. Todd is using American managerial techniques for a Korean workplace. He should pay more attention to his staff's feelings and actions.
2. Chungmin should not have become so upset over what her boss considers a minor error. He would have forgotten the whole episode.
3. Todd should never have scolded Chungmin for her mistake in public. This is considered very rude behavior in Korea.
4. Chungmin and Todd have different expectations about how to communicate and resolve problems.

Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

1. This alternative explains part of the problem. That Todd is using American managerial techniques means two things: (a) He is counting on Chungmin to come to him and complain if she has a problem, and (b) he will rely on verbal communication, or "talking it out," to solve the problem. If Todd were to pay more attention to his staff's feelings and behaviors, he would realize that these two techniques for resolving conflicts do not work well in Korea. In fact, what Chungmin's behavior should tell him is that the Korean system is almost the opposite. Unlike in the United States, where the responsibility for reporting a problem rests with the complainant, in Korea the other person is supposed to pick up from the complainant's nonverbal cues that something is wrong. Moreover, in Korea, verbal communication is seen as a last resort. If the problem must actually be talked about, then it is extremely serious. As a manager in Korea working with a Korean staff, if Todd wants to accomplish his goals, he should realize these differences and start behaving as a Korean boss would. There is a more complete explanation, however. Please choose again.
2. Although, from Todd's perspective, and even in Chungmin's eyes, the mistake seems minor, Chungmin is reacting to the context in which the reprimand took place. She would not have become upset if Todd had simply mentioned the error to her in his office. However, the fact that he mentioned it during lunch, in a public forum, resulted in a loss of face for Chungmin. As a result, she can hardly forget about it. There is a more complete explanation, however. Please choose again.
3. This response explains part of the misunderstanding. Although from Todd's point of view he just casually mentioned the mistake during lunch, from Chungmin's point of view Todd scolded her in public and therefore made her lose face in front of her colleagues. The context in which he scolded her, then, and not his supposedly casual mentioning of the error, is the real reason for her complaint. There is a more complete explanation, however. Please choose again.
4. This is the best response because it explains both issues involved in the incident: how (and more specifically, in what context) to communicate a problem and how it may be resolved. Todd's original mistake was mentioning the error to Chungmin at lunch. Chungmin considers this very rude, as it embarrassed her in front of her colleagues. No matter how small an error, this public scolding made her look very bad. Chungmin has lost face and has become upset with Todd for his thoughtlessness. Later on, the second problem developed when Todd failed to respond to Chungmin's cues indicating she was upset. They used two different styles of conflict resolution. In the United States, it would be Chungmin's, and not Todd's, responsibility to voice the problem. In Korea, a female secretary would never complain to her boss that he did something rude and "wrong" according to Korean culture. On the contrary, it is the boss's responsibility to figure out, based on nonverbal cues, that his worker has a complaint and then to resolve the conflict without verbal communication. Todd, however, tells Chungmin to talk to him if she has a problem. Chungmin is not accustomed to this style of conflict resolution, which she views as a last resort. Thus if Todd wants to run a successful business in Korea, he needs to adapt not only in how he communicates a problem, but also in how he resolves conflicts.

Engineering a Decision *Japan & France*

M. Legrand is a French engineer who works for a Japanese company in France. One day, the company's general manager, Mr. Tanaka, calls M. Legrand into his office to discuss a new project in the Middle East. Mr. Tanaka tells him that the company is very pleased with his dedicated work and would like him to act as chief engineer for the project. It will mean 2 to 3 years away from home, but his family will be able to accompany him and there will be considerable personal financial benefits to the position—and, of course, he will be performing a valuable service to the company. M. Legrand thanks Mr. Tanaka for his confidence in him, but says that he will have to discuss it with his wife before deciding. Two days later, he returns and tells Mr. Tanaka that both he and his wife do not like the thought of leaving France, and so he does not want to accept the position. Mr. Tanaka says nothing but is somewhat dumbfounded by the decision.

Why is Mr. Tanaka so bewildered by M. Legrand's decision?

1. He believes it is foolish for M. Legrand to refuse all the financial benefits that go with the position.
2. He cannot accept that M. Legrand should take any notice of his wife's opinion in the matter.
3. He believes M. Legrand is possibly trying to bluff him into offering greater incentives to accept the offer.
4. He feels it is not appropriate for M. Legrand to place his personal inclinations above those of his role as an employee of the company.

Rationales for the Alternative Explanations

1. There is little evidence for this in the story. Although the financial benefits are relevant, to Mr. Tanaka they are probably a minor consideration in the situation. Please choose another explanation.
2. It is quite probable that, coming from male-dominant Japanese society, Mr. Tanaka does think it odd that M. Legrand should mention his wife's opinion. However, the decision not to go to the Middle East also appears to be M. Legrand's personal inclination, so this does not fully account for Mr. Tanaka's bewilderment. There is another explanation. Please choose again.
3. It is unlikely that Mr. Tanaka would consider this. There are factors far removed from personal gain dominating his concern. Please choose again.
- ④ This is the most likely explanation. In Japanese and many other collectivist societies, a person is defined much more as a collection of roles (parent, employee, servant, official) than by his or her individual identity. As such, fulfilling these roles to the best of one's ability is regarded as more important than one's personal inclinations. Thus Mr. Tanaka would understand M. Legrand's responsibility as a company employee to be to accept the position, whether or not he is personally happy about the idea. M. Legrand's refusal is thus bewildering and makes Mr. Tanaka think that his belief in M. Legrand's dedication has been completely misplaced. M. Legrand, however, comes from a culture where individual freedoms are highly valued and so exercises his right to refuse the offer with little compunction. The cultural conflict thus resides in different strengths of values applied to the roles occupied by a person in the culture.