

An Insider's Guide to The Real Japan!

Understanding & Dealing With
The Culture & Character of the Japanese

Boyé Lafayette De Mente

Part I: Doing Business with the Japanese

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PREFACE:

Aspects of the Real Japan

The first Westerners to take up residence in Japan—epochal events that occurred in the mid-1500s—were astounded by the character and culture of the Japanese. They found some of aspects of Japanese culture so pleasing, so satisfying, that they felt as if they were in some kind of paradise.

In startling contrast to this, they found other elements of Japanese attitudes and behavior so shocking, so repellent, that they defied understanding. It seemed from the Western viewpoint that for every positive element in the character and culture of the Japanese there was an equally powerful negative.

Contradictions in the attitudes and behavior of the Japanese were so common that some of these early Western residents questioned the ability of the Japanese to think and behave rationally.

Over four centuries have passed since these first encounters took place and despite more than a century of intercourse and cultural exchanges between Japan and the rest of the world, cultural differences—both positive and negative—remain a significant factor in all Japanese/foreign relationships.

The reasons for these differences are simple enough to understand. The typical Japanese mindset is a product of philosophical and metaphysical factors derived from Shinto, Buddhism Confucianism, Taoism and Zen. The typical Western mindset is primarily a product of the major themes of Christianity fused with logic and scientism.

Still today the cultural differences between Japanese and Westerners are sufficient to create handicaps that result in misunderstandings and friction.

In the West, the level of knowledge about Japanese culture remains abysmally low, and those who have gained an understanding of Japanese attitudes and behavior and developed the ability to interact effectively with the Japanese, remain few in number.

There are, in fact, areas in business and personal relationships where the cultural differences cannot be resolved in the sense of ignoring them or favoring one side over the other. The only equitable solution is for the two parties to compromise their positions until they arrive at a workable relationship.

In this book, I have attempted to identify and explain key areas in the attitudes and behavior of Japanese in an effort to make it possible, or more likely, that such compromises can take place.

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Part I: Doing Business with the Japanese

Doing Business on Japan's Permanently Tilted Playing Field

*All relationships in Japan—business as well as personal—
are naturally colored by the prevailing culture.
But the “tilt” that foreigners often encounter
in the business world is a mirage
of their own making.*

The view that foreign businessmen have of Japan as a tilted playing field has two dimensions. The first dimension is a genuine reflection of the business environment. The second dimension is something like a mirage that results from a combination of ignorance and the linear glasses Westerners generally wear when they look at Japan.

Unfortunately, the problems caused by this uneven field cannot be quickly resolved because no amount of goodwill or legislation by Japan—which so far has not been that forthcoming—or a clearer perspective on the foreign side, can suddenly alter the deeply rooted attitudes and practices that are responsible for the uneven character of the marketplace.

This leaves foreign businessmen with only one practical choice—and that is to learn how to deal more effectively with the Japanese market, as well as with Japanese competition in their own home markets, by learning how to maintain their balance on uneven ground.

In order for foreign businessmen to keep their balance on this permanently skewed field, it is first of all necessary that they be able to interpret correctly, in cross-cultural language, what they see and hear. And the problem begins, of course, with the fact that what they see and DE hear is usually not what they get.

For an accurate understanding of what is going on in Japan, Westerners must know what such words as equality and fairness mean to the Japanese. There is a word in Japanese for equality but it is seldom used. In the Japanese context of things, true equality virtually never exists outside of physics. In business and political associations, as in just about everything else in Japanese life, there are inferiors and superiors.

Equality in any Japanese business relationship is therefore a situational thing that has to be interpreted in Japanese cultural terms, not according to abstract Western principles. In the Japanese system it is automatically assumed that whatever party is stronger, smarter and /or more clever is more equal than the other, and will take more of the benefits.

FAILURES IN JOINT VENTURES

Neither the "good Samaritan" principle nor looking out for the underdog were ever officially promoted or accepted parts of the historical experience of the Japanese. Failure by the Western side to recognize this aspect of joint ventures with Japanese companies

has contributed significantly to the tendency of such relationships to come apart at the seams in a few years.

Of course, the virtual inevitability of rifts developing in joint Japanese-foreign enterprises also grows out of a fundamental difference in goals. Generally speaking, the Japanese side wants new technology, new products and larger market share for its own growth and profitability, and goes into these relationships with the clear intention of using the foreign partner.

All too often, foreign businessmen go into joint ventures with Japanese companies because it offers the easiest and cheapest way out. They either do not perceive, or ignore, the fact that such joint ventures often do not make good business sense, especially on a long-term basis. When things go sour they more likely than not blame the Japanese side.

The concept of fairness in Western-Japanese dealings probably causes more misunderstandings and grief than any other factor. In the Western sense fairness is an abstract principle that is thought of as something universal; that can and should apply to all relationships.

In fact, it often seems that fairness is the only ethical standard Westerners have, and particularly so in the case of Americans. We tend to construct our whole world on this principle. The theme of virtually every American presentation, whether a proposal or a protest, is fairness—whether or not we live up to the ideal.

That is all very well and good if you are dealing with people who are also fair-minded. But fairness in the Western sense is a new and still unnatural concept in Japan, and Americans have not yet learned how to adjust to this situation.

From the beginning of Japanese history down to recent decades, the Japanese world was based on superior/inferior relationships in which the concept of fairness in the Western sense simply did not exist. The nature and quality of the relationships between people were based on the status of the individuals concerned.

There was right and wrong in the Japanese system, but that too was conditional and was based on serving, protecting and maintaining the political establishment—not on any inherent rights of the people.

With the abolition of the old feudal laws and the introduction of human rights into Japan in 1945/6, the Japanese became free for the first time in their history to base their lives on the concepts of equality and fairness. But so far they have been able to do so only in their personal and private affairs.

JAPAN'S PREDATORY BUSINESS SYSTEM

The overall political and economic systems in Japan still function on the basis of conditional ethics and expedient policies, and both give priority to maximum benefits for an elite few. The present economic system in particular disregards the concepts of equality and fairness. It is predatory in nature and has no natural limitations.

Americans, it seems, are, the least able to deal effectively with the Japanese business system because we are bound by conditioning and by law to play the 'game' of business fairly, with all of our cards on the table and the game open to any one.

It is fair to say that we have made, or collaborated in the making, of most of our economic problems with Japan. It is also fair to say that on a government level our

attempts to mitigate these problems over the past several decades have ranged from naive to stupid.

The linear approach to the trade issue—segmenting the problem into relatively small product lines and the distribution system—and concentrating on limited goals, again, is taking the easy way out and limits the results.

Attempts to persuade the Japanese government and business establishment to change their natures by appealing to a sense of fair play is, for the most part, a non sequitur. Such appeals have meaning and importance to many Japanese on an individual basis, both in government and in business, but they are not powerful enough to bring about rapid, fundamental changes in either arena.

There is, in fact, no way the playing field in Japan is ever going to be level—even for Japanese companies. The best that foreign businessmen can aim for is better odds, and they will not achieve that until they learn how to work in concert with other companies in their industries and their governments to achieve a balance of power that will allow them to deal with Japan on an even footing.



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