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**IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS AND
COMMUNICATION IN INTERNATIONAL
BUSINESS:**

JAPAN AND MEXICO

Patti Keener
May 12, 2000

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PURPOSE & CONTENT

The purpose of this paper is to provide American businesspeople with the fundamental cultural information on Japan and Mexico that is necessary to conduct smooth business deals, as well as to promote better intercultural understanding and more profitable business relationships. This work is not intended to pigeonhole or stereotype Mexicans or Japanese into fixed categories, but rather to break down those stereotypes and describe general tendencies, cultural values, and communication and behavior styles. The treatment of women or non-Caucasian ethnic groups will not be covered in any depth because both of those topics are large enough to be separate dissertations in themselves.

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

In today's business world, there are innumerable opportunities for doing business with Mexicans and Japanese. American businesses have Mexican employees abroad as well as Mexican business partners. As of 1999, there were 3,800 maquiladora assembly plants, the majority of which were U. S.-owned, employing over 1 million Mexican workers on the U. S.-Mexico border (Lindsley, "A Layered"). Since NAFTA has made it lucrative to do business with Mexico, American companies are looking more and more to Mexican firms as suppliers and customers. As far as Japan goes, there are hundreds of Japanese-owned automotive manufacturing plants in the U. S., as well as electronics and other types of businesses. American companies are also creating joint ventures with Japanese companies abroad. Americans that work in Japanese companies in the U. S. as well as those who do business with Japanese abroad need to know the business environment and cultural aspects of doing business in order to be most effective. Whether you have a Mexican or Japanese boss, employee, or business partner, knowing the culture will prove to be an invaluable asset.

Cultural misunderstandings have long been a stumbling block for businesses involved in dealings overseas. Many American businesspeople spend considerable time studying the merits of doing business with an overseas firm and preparing detailed presentations about their own services and products, but neglect to find out about the culture of the prospective business partner. Poor foreign language and intercultural communication skills, ethnocentrism, and cultural arrogance have cost American companies huge sums of money in failed transactions and have damaged corporate images in key markets. According to Lindsley, “Financial losses...average \$250,000 per expatriate failure as well as personal losses from demotion, conflict, and frustration” (“A Layered”). In order to avoid expensive mistakes such as these and maximize profits in dealings abroad, it is crucial that businesspeople take the time to learn the basic cultural makeup of the people with whom they do business.

Learning about another culture is not simply about learning whether they bow, kiss, or shake hands when they meet. The first step to understanding how people of other cultures think is realizing that they do not have the same root assumptions as Americans. For example, a common cultural assumption that Americans have is that communication should be quick and to the point, giving the maximum information in a minimum length of time. Another assumption is that business and pleasure should be separated. However, neither of these is necessarily the case in other cultures. There are often other factors that are more important than concise information, and many cultures of the world believe that getting to know someone as a friend is a prerequisite to business. Doing business based on one's own cultural assumptions often results in unmet expectations on both sides. Another important step in learning about other cultures is understanding that nothing is right or wrong—only different. Culture is shaped by history, geography, and circumstances, which are different for every country and have created different

situations in each one. Try to have an open mind and accept the fact that Mexican and Japanese cultures are both equally as valid as American culture.

MEXICO

MEXICO FACT SHEET

Population:	100,294,036
Annual Population Increase:	2.0%
Ethnic Groups:	Mestizo (Mixed Caucasian and Amerindian) 60% Amerindian 30% Caucasian 9%
Languages:	Spanish (official), Mayan dialects
Religions:	Roman Catholic 89% Protestant 6%
Area:	761,600 sq. mi. (Roughly three times the size of Texas)
Capital:	Mexico City
Populations of Major Cities:	Mexico City—8,489,007 Guadalajara—1,633,216 Puebla—1,222,569
Chief Ports:	Coatzacoalcos, Mazatlán, Tampico, Veracruz
Labor Force:	28.8% services 21.8% agriculture, forestry, hunting, fishing 17.1% commerce 16.1% manufacturing
Monetary Unit:	New Peso
Total GDP:	\$694.3 billion
Per Capita GDP:	\$7,700 annually
Import Partners:	U. S. 75%
Export Partners:	U. S. 85%
Literacy:	90%

(World Almanac 2000).

SUPERIORITY COMPLEXES & MUTUAL STEREOTYPES

When two cultures interact, it is exceedingly easy for both sides to group one another into boxes based on perceived characteristics, whether these observations are valid or not. With two countries like the United States and Mexico, who have a long history together and share a border that is several thousand miles long, it becomes even more likely. Typical American stereotypes of Mexicans are that Mexicans are not as smart, competent, hard working, or educated as people in the U. S. It is unfortunate that many American businessmen who do business in Mexico, especially those who have little knowledge about or prior experience with Mexico, also carry with them a sense of superiority over Mexicans, whom they perceive as citizens of a third-world country. Marsha Willis, a businesswoman with many years of experience in Mexico, stated that some of her “U. S. clients talk to each other in front of Mexican businesspeople as if they were deaf or small children” (Kemper, “Misperceptions”). It also can be difficult for American businessmen to accept it when a Mexican company has more expertise or technology in a certain field than their companies have (Greer & Stephens, 1995). Mexicans are quick to catch on to superior attitudes, and are very sensitive to it. They are very proud of their culture, country, and heritage, and do not take any slights to any of the above lightly (“Management Practices,” Journal of Modern Business). In any case, it is best to treat Mexicans as equals. You will definitely get better results.

People in Mexico have quite a different idea of the United States than you may think. Many Mexicans see the United States as “a people who took what wasn’t theirs” (Kemper, “Misperceptions”). This idea is rooted in the fact that the United States took Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and other states from Mexico over a century ago (Condon 10). Although this annexation of land was justified in American textbooks as manifest destiny, it was

simply theft from the Mexican viewpoint. In many cases, Mexican families suddenly found themselves living in another country and were robbed of landholdings that had been in their families for more than a hundred years (Kikoski & Kikoski 140). This is seen as “arrogance” and “opportunism,” neither of which are appreciated in Mexican culture (Kemper, “Misperceptions”). Contrary to what some Americans may believe, Mexico is not eager to imitate the United States. It is interested in growing technologically and economically through alliances and dealings with the U. S., but any attempt to replace Mexican cultural values with American ones would be met with rejection (“Management Practices,” Journal of Modern Business).

Mexicans often see the United States as wealthy, industrialized, urban, and congested. A common stereotype some Mexicans have of Americans is that they are culturally barren, morally bankrupt, and don’t care about other people (Condon 9-10). Educated Mexicans frequently see themselves as having a better education, “cultural sophistication, and social skills” than Americans (Kemper, “Misperceptions”). In fact, many Mexicans are better versed in geography, world events, and the arts than people in the U. S. The most important thing in dealings with Mexicans, and people of any culture, for that matter, is to accept that they have a right to their own culture and ways of doing things, respect them as people, and be open-minded enough to reject stereotypes in favor of the truth.

BODY LANGUAGE

The first observable differences that can be observed between American and Mexican culture are physical behaviors. One of the first things that Americans notice when doing business with Mexicans is the difference in personal space. While Americans usually stand at a distance of 18 inches to several feet away from the people to whom they are talking, Mexicans

are comfortable with standing as close as 10-12 inches away (Hodgetts & Luthans 212; Kikoski & Kikoski 149). In American-Mexican interactions, this space difference usually causes the American to feel uncomfortable, back away, and feel that his personal space has been invaded. In contrast, the Mexican may feel that the American is cold or even racially prejudiced against him (Kikoski & Kikoski 151). Thus, in relations with Mexicans, it is important to be aware of this difference and not to back away.

Another difference is eye contact. While Americans tend to look each other in the eye during a conversation, Mexicans view such behavior as confrontational and discourteous toward higher-ranking people. Staring directly in the eyes can even be interpreted as a sexual overture if done by a woman, or “aggression” if by a man (Frazee, 1999). Similarly, the downward looks that Americans might perceive as disinterest are actually intended as signs of respect (Kikoski & Kikoski 150).

In addition, Americans may notice that Mexicans touch each other and use their bodies to communicate considerably more than Americans do. While Americans may greet each other with a handshake and a verbal salutation, Mexicans shake hands, hug, and/or kiss each other on the cheek even in business situations (México Connect). A difference in gesturing while talking is that Americans use the neck and head to stress important points, while Mexicans typically use the torso and many other parts of the body as well (Kikoski & Kikoski 152). Americans may think that Mexicans overuse their hands and bodies to communicate and view it as “intense” or “pushy,” but this type of communication is only natural to Mexican culture (Condon 60).

TIME

As you may suspect, the concept of time differs considerably in the United States and Mexico. The American concept of time can be expressed best through proverbs such as “Time is

money” and “The early bird gets the worm.” In the United States, punctuality is of the utmost importance, and is used as a standard by which others can begin to judge the responsibility and efficiency of a person (Doyle, Fryer & Cere 150). Schedules, appointments, and deadlines are strictly kept, and Americans see time as something tangible to be controlled, managed, and used to optimum benefit. This is illustrated in the very word “time-management.” Time is seen as a linear process in which one event follows another (Tebeaux, 1999). This linear concept of time and orientation toward the future stems from American history, in which there has been a marked push toward progress, new frontiers, and new inventions (Kemper, “Differences”).

The Mexican experience has been almost the opposite. Mexicans are more oriented toward the present than to the future, and are “more likely to look to the past for guidance and direction...and as a source of ideas” (Kemper, “Differences”). Mexico evolved as a primarily agricultural society in which time was centered around the rhythms of the harvest (Doyle, Fryer & Cere 150), characterized by recurring cycles of profound peaks and lows (Tebeaux, 1999). As a result of this historical background, time in Mexico is seen not as something linear that humans can control, but as a pulse or current in the background that runs through human lives.

Business in Mexico is not driven by schedules and deadlines. Deadlines are seen as goals to work toward, but not as the end-all, be-all of business life. To Mexicans, it is more important that the end is reached, and the method taken to get there is of little value (Hodgetts & Luthans 130). If deadlines cannot be met, a Mexican business associate will presume that you are aware that he’s doing his best to get the job done as soon as he can (Kemper, “Differences”). In Mexico, punctuality is not emphasized, and meetings and social functions rarely start on time. It would not be at all uncommon for a business meeting to start forty-five minutes late (Griffin & Pustay 345) and be interrupted several times after it actually started (Condon 65). Americans

visiting Mexico should arrive at least thirty minutes late for social functions, because arriving any earlier can surprise and inconvenience a host who may not be ready to receive guests. When extended an invitation, be sure to ask if the function will begin on “North American time” or “Mexican time” to avoid cultural *faux pas* (Frazee, 1999).

In general, the Mexican pace of life is slower and more relaxed than in the United States. According to John Condon, “Delays are expected...and human activities are not expected to proceed like clockwork” (65). In 1999, a study of the pace of life was performed in thirty-one countries. The study measured the walking speed of pedestrians in downtown areas, the time it took for a postal clerk to produce a stamp, and the exactness of clocks in public areas. Out of all thirty-one countries, including nations from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas, Japan was fourth, the U. S. came in sixteenth place, and Mexico came in dead last (Levine, 1999). Rather than criticizing Mexican business partners about punctuality and deadlines, it would be more productive for all concerned to just try to “go with the flow” of time in Mexico and include in contracts ways to deal with things like missed delivery dates (Wederspahn, 1995).

FATALISM

Fatalism, the idea that all events are predetermined and inevitable, is closely related to how Mexicans view time. The way they see it, time and events are beyond human control, and fate and divine intervention play parts in everyone’s lives. This fatalistic outlook can be attributed to Mexican history, which has quite a different nature than that of the U. S. While the United States was conquering and exploring new frontiers, Mexico was torn apart by wars involving dozens, if not hundreds, of distinct ethnic groups (Kemper, “Differences”). Mexico had no new land to acquire, and the scarcity of fertile land did not make life easy for the farmers

trying to eke out a living from it. In contrast, in the U. S., large numbers of immigrants came every year to take advantage of the plentiful resources (Condon 3). Rigid class lines reinforced by the Spanish conquest made impossible the American ideal of the poorest man ascending to heights of great wealth through hard work. Even now, there are many factors largely out of the control of Mexican citizens: many public school teachers only have a high school education, one third of homes don't have electricity, and forty percent of the population has no access to clean drinking water (Tebeaux, 1999).

This environmental uncertainty can also be extended to the business arena. The Mexican government's attitude toward business constantly changes, and investors have to conclude investments quickly in order to get good returns before the interest rates change (Barnstone, 1993). This unpredictability also translates to a Mexican tendency to try to make high profits in as short a time as possible, even when more profits could have been made with more thorough long-range planning (Condon 64).

Due to the uncertainties and uncontrollable events that Mexicans are constantly faced with, they live for the present rather than for the future, because they do not know what the future will bring. Rather than plan for an uncertain future, Mexicans accept today at face value and do what is best for them at the present time. They use expressions such as *Ni modo*, or "It couldn't be helped," in responses to unforeseen obstacles (Tayeb 134). The famous proverb, *Qué será será*, or "Whatever will be will be," also demonstrates the Mexican belief in the whims of fate. This fatalistic viewpoint is found throughout Mexico, in the arts, bullfighting, and social and commercial venues (Tebeaux, 1999).

FAMILY

The institution of the family is the core of Mexican culture. Without understanding the importance of the family to Mexicans, it would be impossible to understand their cultural identity. Mexican families are considerably larger than families in the U. S., consisting of not only parents and children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, godparents, and sometimes even loyal employees (Tebeaux, 1999; Condon 27). These people do not necessarily all live together in the same house, but may live near each other or visit each other frequently. In the Mexican family, the father is dominant and makes all major decisions publicly, although many times it is the mother that actually makes them first in private (Sosa 131). The mother is expected to defer to the authority of her husband, devote her energies to him and her children, and overlook extramarital affairs and alcohol abuse. She is honored, put up on a pedestal by the males in the family, and taken care of in her old age. Similarly, sisters are protected by brothers, almost to the extent of being chaperoned (Kikoski & Kikoski 142). Children are expected to obey their father completely and refrain from asking questions, and they usually try to get what they want by getting their mother to step in on their behalf (143). Unlike in the U. S., Mexican children do not leave home until their mid to late twenties or even until marriage, and are not encouraged to be independent. In fact, independence like what is seen in the U. S. would usually signify some sort of family conflict (Condon 25).

In Mexico, family is synonymous with commitment. Family comes first, above work and all other considerations, and Mexican businesspeople are usually not required to travel or relocate if doing so would interfere with family life (Kras 28). It is also customary and acceptable to miss some work due to family obligations. In Mexico, family is not just a group of related individuals; it is also a way of getting things done. The family is a support group for hard

times, a source of stability, and a network for cutting through red tape and getting favors. Since many things in Mexico can only be accomplished through the use of influence, people use family connections to expedite things like loan applications (Condon 27). Because the family is so important in Mexico, nepotism is common, especially since people often feel obligated to get jobs for other family members. This can also result in having more employees than are actually needed because of the necessity of maintaining relationships and family connections. Who a person is related to often has more weight than resumés or personal achievements (28), and ability alone will generally not enable a person to rise to the executive level (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). This is just another way of saying that in Mexico, *who* you know is often more important than *what* you know, and this “who” often includes family.

INDIVIDUALISM & COLLECTIVISM

According to Griffin & Pustay, individualism is a cultural belief in which the good of the individual is emphasized over the good of the group. Members of individualist cultures put personal needs above those of others, have a good deal of self-confidence, and are very independent (347). They *choose* members of the groups to which they belong, for example, religion, social class, beliefs, and political party (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). Individualist cultures are more interested in the “what” than the “who,” and place less emphasis on building relationships in business, because they are comfortable with jumping right into business deals without knowing much personal information about their business partners. There is a conscious separation of personal relationships and business ones. Ongoing education is valued at all ages, and individualist cultures “learn how to learn.” In business, people are valued for what they can potentially contribute to the task at hand (Griffin & Pustay 349). The United

States is the most individualist nation in the world (Tebeaux, 1999), so it strongly shows all of these characteristics.

However, Mexico is a collectivist nation that has attributes that are the exact opposite of the U. S. In collectivist societies, the good of the group, which can be a family, company, or work team, is emphasized over that of the individual. Group failures are taken personally by group members, who feel ashamed of the failure (Griffin & Pustay 347). Collectivist cultures do not choose their in-groups, because *tradition* decides to what groups they belong (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). They “learn how to do,” and believe that learning is for the young only. Relationship building is necessary before doing business, because people feel that they cannot do business until they know each other personally. People value others as members of a group (Griffin & Pustay 349). Hiring is often based more on “perceived trustworthiness” than technical competence (Strong & Weber, 1998).

One specific example of the differences between individualist and collectivist cultures took place in an elementary school classroom in the United States with primarily Mexican-American students:

A kindergarten teacher was showing her class an actual chicken egg that would be hatching soon. She was explaining the physical properties of the egg, and she asked the children to describe eggs by thinking about the times they had cooked and eaten eggs. One of the [Mexican-American] children tried three times to talk about how she cooked eggs with her grandmother, but the teacher disregarded these comments in favor of a child who explained how eggs look white and yellow when they are cracked. (Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Trumbull, 1999)

This example illustrates the task orientation of individualist cultures versus the emphasis on social context that is prevalent in collectivist societies. Neither of the children’s answers were wrong, but different viewpoints produced completely different answers to the same question. The Mexican-American child’s answer was not irrelevant, as many Americans might think, but completely justified in light of her culture’s social orientation. In a different classroom, another

teacher who understood the cultural differences used the people-oriented answers of her Mexican-American students to generate the desired task-oriented answers in other ways, rather than rejecting them wholesale (Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Trumbull, 1999).

CONFORMITY, HARMONY, & CRITICISM

Within collectivist cultures, such as Mexico, there is a tendency toward conformity and harmony within the group. Collectivist cultures generally value and protect the dignities and feelings of other members of the group, and try hard not to hurt or insult anyone. In order to accomplish this, a great deal of emphasizing the positive and downplaying the negative occurs. In many cases, decisions are made on the basis of saving someone's face or not embarrassing someone instead of on pure data, something which is unheard of in the United States. Mexicans also avoid confronting others directly, because they believe that confrontation can only make a situation worse (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). Disapproval can be expressed through jokes and downplayed statements, such as "Maybe we should do X next time" (implying that what the person did this time wasn't appropriate). People in collectivist cultures try to conform to the group in order to avoid being ridiculed by other members. Criticism is not voiced in public, and it is often a good idea to ask individuals in private if you are not sure exactly what is going on, because Mexican public persona does not often equal private (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). Criticizing a Mexican in public is something to be avoided at all costs, because he will take it as a personal insult to his pride and dignity (Condon 18).

UNIVERSALISM & PARTICULARISM

Universalism is a category used to describe cultures that are characterized by the belief that people are inherently equal and should be treated as equals, obedience to and reverence for rules, and adherence to abstract social and philosophical principles as guidelines for living. The United States is a strong universalist culture. Particularism, on the other hand, is characterized by the emphasis of social relationships over rules, and making exceptions based on obligations of friendship. As you may have guessed, Mexico is a particularist culture (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999).

Mexican particularism comes from Roman law, which was used as a basis for most current law systems in Latin America. Roman law is more open to interpretation and influence than common law, the law form that is used in the United States and other former British colonies. Particularism also comes from Spanish legal pluralism, which heavily favors certain groups over others, and is open to exceptions (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). Americans and Mexicans often come into conflict in business over trusting individuals or abstract principles.

In one example of universalism and particularism, members of different cultures were given a survey involving a hypothetical situation. The situation was as follows: You are riding in a car with a friend, and he is driving. He is going at least 35 miles per hour in a 20 m. p. h. zone and hits a pedestrian. There are no witnesses. Your friend's lawyer says that if you testify under oath that your friend was driving 20 m. p. h., it may save him from serious consequences. Does your friend have a right to expect you to protect him? (Hodgetts & Luthans 125). In the U. S., the answer to this question was "no," but in Mexico, it was "yes." Most Americans would have a hard time reconciling morally the idea of lying under oath in a courtroom to protect a friend who had injured another person. Mexicans would protect the friend, because to them, the

social relationship they have with the friend obligates them to help that person, and also because their friend is more important to them than a stranger.

Another example of universalism and particularism is stopping at red lights in the middle of the night when no one is around. Americans stop, but Mexicans wouldn't. Mexicans are often shocked at such universalist behavior, and may even think that Americans are like robots or slaves to machines. One Mexican noted, "No Mexican would ever stop like that—not a real Mexican!" (Condon 20).

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

When doing business in Mexico, relationship building is absolutely crucial. As I have explained in earlier sections, Mexicans value social relationships and personal relationships with business partners over the actual tasks of business. Relationships must be established in order to have any kind of success at all, as can be seen in the Mexican saying, *Sin confianza no hay negocio*, or "Without trust there can be no business" (Lindsley, "Communication"). This also applies to initial market entry and joint ventures in Mexico. Before going, it is a good idea to get at least fifteen names of possible contacts through banks, lawyers, the Department of Commerce, or businesspeople you know who have extensive experience in Mexico. The next step is to narrow them down by phone and arrange meetings with them so you can get other contacts by using their connections to your favor. Then, when you finally meet your Mexican contact, mention your common acquaintances and use your connections to your best advantage (Frazee, 1999). Contacts and connections are the stepping-stones to successful business in Mexico. "Cold-calling" or just showing up at a Mexican's door and expecting him to do business with you because you have a superior product at a low price will not work (Tebeaux, 1999).

Mexicans need to know potential business partners personally before any business deals can get underway, and are not swayed by technical competence or product quality alone. This is because Mexicans do business with someone they “know, like, or are related to” (Frazee, 1999).

Mexican business letters give us some examples of how Mexicans use their connections and emphasize relationships over the actual task at hand. For example, the first paragraph of a business letter usually inquires about and mentions mutual acquaintances and family, reminding the reader of the relationship to the writer. It also may refer to the “honored ancestors” of the reader, or describe personal philosophies and beliefs (Tebeaux, 1999). The actual purpose of the letter may only be mentioned briefly in the second or third paragraph. Then, the last paragraph of the letter goes back to the relationship again. It is considered bad taste to emphasize business over social relationships.

Mexicans are especially sensitive to being treated as things to be used to get to a business objective, and it is essential to make them feel valued and respected. When doing business in Mexico, it is better to just relax and forget about the task at hand. Chit-chat with the person and get to know him, and when he feels he has established enough of a relationship with you, he will mention business. It is normal for this process to continue through the first few business meetings or the first few days of your stay. You may be asked to go to museums, look at architecture, or attend Mexican cultural events (Frazee, 1999). Embrace all these things with open arms, because it will show that you care about your Mexican business associate as a person and are willing to learn about his culture and country, which will be a sign to him that you are a suitable business partner. Impatience will only bring failure.

The inner workings of companies in Mexico are also different due to the necessity of maintaining relationships. Job descriptions are often not enough to ensure that an employee will

do his job. When an employer has established a relationship with an employee, the employee will be remarkably loyal. This is because Mexicans tend to be loyal to one person, one superior, rather than to the company as a whole. Thus, it is important to show your Mexican employees that you value them as people. They do not want to be treated as machines, and will not cooperate with you if they feel they are being exploited as such (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). A good way to show employees that you care about them and are interested in their welfare is to take time out of every day to greet employees around the plant or office and ask about their families and wellbeing.

One example of how relationships and particularism work in Mexico happened in a maquiladora on the U. S.-Mexico border. A newly arrived American executive followed the procedure described in the company handbook and turned in an urgent work request to the appropriate department. He was shocked when a week or more passed with no answer or results. The reason for this was that the department head who received the work request had already agreed to process other requests for lower-ranking people who came to see him face to face. The department head had already established relationships with them, and therefore could not refuse their requests in favor of a much higher-ranking executive with no previous relationship (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999).

Meeting with people face to face is a very powerful tool for cutting through bureaucratic red tape and the complex web of relationships in Mexico. Mexicans find it much harder to refuse requests when someone meets directly with them. And if they attempt to refuse your request anyway, use your influence or relationships to get what you want. If that doesn't work, try to make the person empathize with your situation (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). These are all very good tactics for getting things done. When Americans don't get results in

Mexico, it doesn't mean that the Mexicans they are working with are lazy or incompetent; it simply means that things work differently there and that they should try to learn about and adapt to the Mexican system.

Another aspect of relationships in Mexico is reciprocal favors. If someone does you a favor, you are expected to pay it back. Once you have established a relationship, your Mexican business partner will not let you down and expects you to treat him the same way. If asked a favor in return that you believe would be difficult to grant, at least say that you will "see what you can do" to show that you care about your partner's difficulties (Hendon, Hendon, & Herbig 39). One disadvantage to this is that relationships with employees can often be misleading. Mexican employees may believe that a good relationship with the boss means that it is alright to waste time on the job or shirk work. It is important to make it clear that "personal relationships will not affect personnel decisions and then act accordingly" in order to avoid problems of this nature (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999).

STATUS, CLASS, & AUTOCRATIC MANAGEMENT

Power orientation is usually categorized into "power tolerant" cultures and "power-respecting" cultures (Griffin & Pustay 350). Power tolerant cultures, such as the United States, attach status and rank to a superior when they believe that that person merits respect, instead of just because of the title or position that the person has. Employees "will follow a leader when they perceive that the leader is right, but not because of the leader's intangible right to give orders" (350-351). They are also more likely to question a superior's decision or provide suggestions on how it could be improved. Power tolerant cultures see hierarchy as something necessary in order to establish work tasks and responsibilities, rather than as an end in itself, and

it can be bypassed in order to make work relationships more efficient. Employees don't expect superiors to have the answers to all their questions; it is acceptable for superiors to refer employees to a more knowledgeable person (Griffin & Pustay 351). In general, less significance is attached to hierarchy in power tolerant cultures like the U. S. than in power-respecting ones.

In contrast, power-respecting cultures, like Mexico, attach great importance to rank and status. Titles and positions often carry more weight than how much money a person has, and management tends to be autocratic rather than participatory (Kras 72). The right of superiors to give orders is not questioned, and they are accorded power based on their titles and positions in the hierarchy. Subordinates expect to receive and obey orders, and want a boss who is wields a strong hand, yet is kind to his employees (Griffin & Pustay 350). Hierarchy exists so that everyone knows his relationship in relation to everyone else, and who has power over whom. Bypassing hierarchy would be considered insubordination of the worst kind. In power-respecting cultures, managers are expected to know all the answers to subordinates' questions, and lack of knowledge would make others think he was incapable of doing his job. When members of power-respecting cultures organize a project, they first decide who would lead the project, then whether the project is "feasible" under that person's leadership, rather than first deciding what the objectives are (350-351).

Members of power-respecting cultures also want to deal with members of the same rank when doing business. For example, U. S. companies tend to send the people who have the most technical expertise in the field in question, often young executives, to do business internationally. However, Mexican managers would take it as an insult to have to deal with people younger than them and therefore with less status (351). This need to define status often results in low job qualifications at the lower rung of the company ladder. Lower-status workers are often seen as

people whose job is to carry out orders from superiors, not generate original ideas (Hodgetts & Luthans 117). One example of this can be seen from the Mexican employee's testimony in the following paragraph:

My boss...told me that when he gave an order...I should follow it without question. The day after being hired, the boss told me that he wanted me to drive him to the Senate building. We got in the car and I was at the wheel. I tried to go down the street, but it was a stick-shift and the car kept stalling. The boss said, "What are you doing? What's the matter?" And I replied, "I never drove before." The boss said, "Why didn't you tell me?" I said, "Because you told me to just do as I was told and never question, so I did." After that, the boss and I got along great because I had followed his orders.
(Lindsley, "Communication")

Obviously, this employee would be reprimanded if this situation had taken place in the United States. A U. S. boss would be horrified that the employee hadn't mentioned that he didn't know how to drive. But in Mexico, this type of obedience is not unusual (Lindsley, "Communication"). For this reason, attempts at participatory management often fail in Mexico. If the manager does not take a strong lead, subordinates may see the situation not as an opportunity to provide input, but as a "power vacuum." Attempts to grab power for themselves result in squabbling and general disunity (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). As you can see, differences in the way status is perceived can create difficulties in Mexican-American cultural relations.

Status and class differences are so pronounced in Mexico because of its historical experience. Mexico has a long history of rigid class lines that began with the subordination of the native Indians by the Spanish hundreds of years ago. The entire original population, mostly indigenous, was forced to labor for the rich Spaniard landowners for little or no pay and no chance for bettering their positions in life (Tebeaux, 1999). Poor Caucasian and mestizo Mexicans also labored for the rich, and even today the middle class makes up a very small portion of the population. Although in the universalist United States, all men were supposed to

be created equal, in Mexico no one was ever seen as equal. This persists today and is an important factor in business relationships with Mexico.

These status perceptions create very different levels of formality in the U. S. and Mexico. For example, in the U. S., many coworkers call each other and their bosses by their first names. However, in Mexico, one is always expected to use a title of some kind. Most often, people call each other by a title and the first surname (people in Spanish-speaking countries have two surnames—the first is the father's last name and the second is the mother's). For example, an engineer named José Rodríguez Castillo would be called Ingeniero Rodríguez (Engineer Rodríguez) or Señor Rodríguez (Skabelund 182). Other important titles include Licenciado, Doctor, and Director. Calling a Mexican by his first name unless explicitly given permission is a definite no-no, because titles are “taken very seriously and expected to be used” (Doyle, Fryer, & Cere 44; Condon 63). The formality level can also be seen in the Mexican use of the word “you.” The Spanish language has two forms of the word “you,” *tú* and *usted*. *Tú* is used between friends and people of the same rank. *Usted* is used toward higher-ranking people, and conveys distance and respect. Misuse of these two words can create serious conflict (Garcia 146-147). Americans should always be careful to show proper respect to Mexican business partners, because they are generally more formal than we are and take rank and hierarchy more seriously.

PATERNALISTIC MANAGEMENT

In comparison with U. S. management styles, Mexican management is considerably paternalistic. Mexican paternalism has origins in the Spanish monarchy, the Catholic Church, and the *patrón* system that was in place for several hundred years (Osland, De Franco, & Osland,

1999). In the *patrón* system, large landowners called *patrones* hired poor Mexicans (*peones*) to work on their land for a pittance. The two groups were irrevocably interdependent, because in exchange for the *peones*' labor, the *patrón* provided food, housing, medical care, familial support, and often even served as the godfather of their children. This system continues today because many factory workers are frequently the descendants of *peones*, and members of managerial staff are the descendants of *patrones* (Lindsley, "Communication").

Even today, Mexican workers expect *patrón*-like service from their employers. They want their employers to care about them as people, and be interested in their private lives in a way that would not be welcomed in the U. S. Employers attend subordinates' baptisms or weddings, and send flowers when someone in the family dies (Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999). Employers motivate employees by organizing non-work related activities, such as company sports teams, training classes for different vocations, and social functions that employees and their families can attend together. If the employees are treated well by the employer, they will be extremely loyal to him and work hard. Reciprocity, obligation, trust, and stability are all key factors in this system (Lindsley, "Communication"). Therefore, Americans should avoid thinking of Mexican employees as expendable or just as numbers, because such treatment will get considerably worse results than trying to treat them the way they expect to be treated according to Mexican culture.

EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS

Americans tend to be taken aback at how openly Mexicans show their emotions. In U. S. business dealings, emotions are usually held in check because a person who gets emotional is perceived as illogical, irrational, or as having lost control of the situation. However, in Mexico,

showing emotions is considered a natural part of human existence, and Mexicans show emotions among the most openly of any culture in the world (Hodgetts & Luthans 126). They are very enthusiastic, animated, and may talk louder than would be considered acceptable in the U. S. They show real affection toward co-workers and friends. During negotiations, they are expressive, dramatic, emotional, and use strong facial expressions, and these qualities are all valued in Mexican public speakers (393). On the other hand, Mexicans may view the comparatively detached demeanor of Americans as “devoid of feelings, without life, or stuffy” (Condon 56). When doing business in Mexico, try to be more animated and respond warmly, and don’t let yourself be intimidated by emotional speeches or behavior (Hodgetts & Luthans 128).

COMMUNICATION STYLE

Due to the vast cultural differences between Americans and Mexicans, the communication styles of the two groups are also very distinct. The first major difference is that of high and low-context. Low-context cultures like the United States generally mean exactly what they say, in varying degrees. Communication is direct and mostly based on words alone. High-context cultures, like Mexico, communicate also through body language, and are attuned to it in addition to words for clues to the real meaning of what a person is saying (Tebeaux, 1999; Kemper, “Differences”). High-context cultures communicate indirectly, and people do not always mean exactly what they say, usually for reasons of saving face (Tebeaux, 1999). This means that so-called white lies are culturally acceptable to avoid calling attention to someone else’s mistake or hurt another person’s feelings (Condon 43-44). This indirect communication also leads to Mexicans saying “yes” even when they don’t mean it, in order to keep

unpleasantness aside. In order to overcome difficulties that arise from this, Americans in Mexico must learn how to tell when a “yes” is real and when it is only used to be polite. It is also better to ask open-ended questions rather than yes-no ones that might put someone in a position of having to say “yes” even when he doesn’t mean it (México Connect).

The following are examples of Mexican indirect communication, what Mexicans actually mean, and how Americans would interpret them.

Literal Statement	Mexican Meaning	American Interpretation
<i>No sé de esas cosas</i> (I don’t know about such things)	It’s not my place to have an opinion	Not a very smart person
<i>Así lo quiere Dios</i> (That’s the way God wants it)	It’s not so bad; what could I expect?	This person has no initiative
<i>Nos vemos a las seis para cenar</i> (See you at six for dinner)	6:15-6:30, maybe 7:00	He’s late, but then he’s always late
<i>Mañana paso a recoger el paquete</i> (I’ll pick up the package tomorrow)	I’ll pick up the package the first chance I get	He didn’t pick it up--how undependable

(Sosa 107)

As you can see, these statements create considerable confusion between what was actually meant and how the statements were interpreted. These statements exemplify many of the topics I have mentioned up until now, namely power respect, fatalism, time differences, high-low context, and indirect communication.

Another facet of Mexican indirect communication is the desire for clarification in non-verbal form. In Mexico, people “have a cultural prescription against conveying nervousness or lack of understanding, either of which would harm one’s self-identity and detract from positive working relationships” (Lindsley, “Communication”). Rather than admitting he doesn’t understand in person, a Mexican would rather get clarification through non-personal channels, such as faxes, charts, or written communications, because this would preserve the honor and dignity of all concerned.

Other communication differences can be seen in the actual style of communication of the two cultures. The American communication style, in keeping with individualism, strong task orientation, and the desire to separate business from social interactions, is concise, clear, and to the point. Americans don't waste time (in their minds) on social pleasantries, and fill their conversation with the necessary points that need to be covered. A typical American business letter would usually start out something like, "Dear Joe: How are you? I hope you're coming along well with the project. I wanted to ask you about..." and jump directly into the topic of the letter. To Mexicans, this style of communication can seem "clumsy, ill at ease...impatient, or cold" (Condon 48-50). They may also perceive the American as money-hungry or snubbing him by ignoring him as a person.

Mexicans prefer a more articulate, elegant style of communication that focuses on relationships between people. This is because their emphasis is not on the business deal, but on expressing "respect, honor, affection, and emotion" for the reader (Tebeaux, 1999). Due to the difference in time perceptions, Mexicans often discuss several things that happened in different time periods in the same paragraphs. This is because they are usually emphasizing a relationship, and from their point of view, the time element is secondary. As a result, Mexican communications can seem rambling, incoherent, off-topic, and lacking in professionalism to American readers (Tebeaux, 1999; Condon 49-50).

JAPAN

JAPAN FACT SHEET

Population: 126,182,077

Annual Population
Increase: 0.2%

Ethnic Groups: Japanese 99.4%

Language: Japanese

Religions: Mixed Buddhism and Shintoism 84%

Area: 145, 882 sq. mi. (About the size of California)

Capital: Tokyo

Populations of
Major Cities: Tokyo—7,967,614
Osaka—2,599,642
Nagoya—2,151,084
Sapporo—1,774,344
Kyoto—1,463,822

Chief Ports: Tokyo, Kobe, Osaka, Nagoya, Chiba, Kawasaki, Hakodate

Labor Force: 50% services and trade
33% manufacturing, mining, and construction
7% agriculture, forestry, and fishing

Monetary Unit: Yen (¥)

Total GDP: \$3.08 trillion

Per Capita GDP: \$24,500 annually

Import Partners: U. S. 22%
Southeast Asia 15%
European Union 14%
China 12%

Export Partners: Southeast Asia 37%
U. S. 27%

Literacy Rate: 100% (World Almanac 2000)

BODY LANGUAGE

As with Mexico, body language and space differences between the United States and Japan are quite pronounced. While Mexicans may come across to Americans as pushy or intense because of seemingly excessive touching and gesturing, the Japanese fall on the exact opposite end of the spectrum. They almost never touch each other, especially not in business. In fact, Americans touch each other at least twice as much as the Japanese do (Gudykunst & Nishida 67). In a survey, some Japanese could not remember having been touched, even by their parents, past the early age of fourteen (Kikoski & Kikoski 174). Because of this lack of physical contact, the handshake that is such a common greeting in Europe and the Americas is not a part of Japanese culture. A Japanese friend of mine who studied in the United States once told me, “I just can’t get used to having to touch other people’s hands when I meet them for the first time. I don’t know that person well enough to trust if his hands are clean or not.” Although the Japanese will shake the hands of Americans in business situations, the traditional Japanese greeting is the bow. People bow from the waist with a straight back and their hands at their sides, and the depth of the bow depends on the status of the other person (Dunung 24). The Japanese do not expect non-Japanese to bow, so handshakes are acceptable. Bows are used in greeting, in apology, to give thanks, when requests are granted, and simply to show respect (Rowland 33-34).

In addition to touching and physical greetings, space differences and eye contact are important topics to be discussed. While Americans stand at usually 18 inches apart from each other, Japanese stand further away, at 24-36 inches (Dunung 24). As mentioned in the Mexico section, in intercultural interactions, the person with the larger space requirement usually backs away from the other person, causing him/her to close in further. In this case, it would be the

Japanese who back away from the Americans. Rules for eye contact are similar in Mexico and Japan; people generally do not look each other in the eye very much. Looking directly into a Japanese person's eyes is likely to cause discomfort.

TIME

The intercultural difficulties that arise between Americans and Japanese as a result of differences in time concepts are minimal. Both cultures are punctual, with the Japanese being the more punctual of the two (Kato & Kato 34). However, the problems that do occur stem from the fact that the Japanese view things from a long-term perspective, and that Americans tend to focus comparatively more on the short-term. Japanese managers tend to view potential projects based not only on the short-term profits they will bring to the company, but also on the effects that the projects will have on the company for the next several years. Americans working for Japanese companies in the United States often complain that their Japanese managers expect them to think in future terms like a manager, and Japanese managers say that their American employees focus too much on the details and tasks of the present time (Kim & Paulk 131-132).

COLLECTIVISM

Japan, like Mexico, is a collectivist culture, just the opposite of the United States. It is a stronger collectivist nation than Mexico, and group tendencies are more deeply entrenched in the society. Although both nations are categorized as collectivist, they manifest collectivism in different ways. One way that group cohesion is encouraged in Japan is the lack of privacy (Gudykunst & Nishida 72). There is no indigenous word for "privacy" in the Japanese language; the word *puraibashii* is used, which is a Japanized version of the English word. In Japanese

companies, office and salaried employees have desks in one large room, with no walls or partitions to separate them. Many times neither the president nor the vice president of the company have their own offices (Griffin & Pustay 340). If the employees are not in one large room, departments may be in separate rooms, with all the members of the department having desks in one open space. This also applies to Japanese companies located in the United States. The absence of walls creates a good atmosphere for communication between employees and helps foster group goals. This open space is quite a large contrast to the spacious personal offices with views of the whole city that are normally attributed to high-salary executives in United States corporations.

Another Japanese manifestation of collectivism is the inclination of employees to identify themselves strongly with the company and to work toward company goals. For example, when Japanese call someone on the telephone, they begin the conversation by saying something like, *Sony no Aoki desu ga...*, which translates literally to, "This is Sony's Aoki." This seems to show that Mr. Aoki is identifying himself as a possession or member of the company, rather as an individual who works at a company. Another similar example is when someone asks a Japanese, "What do you do for a living?" a Japanese would be likely to reply, "I work for Sony," whereas an American might say, "I am an engineer" (Maynard 30). Another way that group identification with a company is shown in Japanese companies is uniforms. Frequently all members of a company wear a uniform, including the high-level executives. This is to reinforce the idea that employees are not individuals working toward personal career goals (as in the U. S.), but a group working toward common company goals. Job descriptions in Japanese companies are also vague, because management wants employees to be ready to do whatever the company needs, instead of saying, "That's not part of my job description" (Yamada 56). These

ideas run exactly opposite to American culture, where employees have clearly-defined job descriptions and autonomy. In American culture, “anything that violates the rights of individuals to think, judge, and live their lives as they see fit is considered not only morally wrong, but sacreligious” (Maynard 42). Americans working on a career path in Japanese companies are often frustrated by this propensity toward group goals, because they often will not be at a company long enough to profit from it (Kim & Paulk 128-129).

LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM & JOB-SWITCHING

Americans’ comparatively short stints at companies fall in large contrast to the Japanese lifetime employment system, which is still practiced in a large majority of Japanese firms. In the lifetime employment system, Japanese corporations hire people in their early twenties that have just graduated from college and spend a lot of money training them to do their specific jobs as well as understand company goals (Fernandez 42-43). New hires normally rotate around to different departments in order to get a better understanding of the company’s structure as a whole. New employees are only hired in April, so all new hires for a given year enter the company at the same time. As a result of this, compensation is based on group seniority, rather than on individual achievements and contributions. Rewards and bonuses are also given to teams and not individuals. For example, all employees who entered a company in 1995 receive the same salary. The 1995 employees receive a higher salary than the 1996 employees, and the 1996 employees receive more than those who joined the company in 1997 (Griffin & Pustay 348-349). Thus, older employees, who have naturally been with the company longer, automatically receive the highest salaries, regardless of the quality of their work and contributions to the company.

Employees are retained by the company until the mandatory retirement age, which can be age 55, 60, or 65, depending on the company. Because of this, the usually middle-aged employees who have seemingly outlived their use to the company or have poor productivity or work quality are given seats by the window, outside of the group sphere. They are called the *mado-giwa zoku*, which literally means, “By-the-Window Tribe” (Fernandez 46). Fewer and fewer projects pass their way, and the company doesn’t fire them because of lifetime employment policies. They are a financial pitfall for the companies, because they are being paid high salaries to basically sit at the window and not work. Because the lifetime employment system is becoming increasingly inefficient, some companies have switched to a merit-based compensation system.

Because of the lifetime employment system, job-switching has traditionally been seen in a negative light in Japan. Employees are expected to work at the same company their entire lives, and anyone who switched jobs was seen as a traitor who was trying to sell company secrets to another firm (Miyano 2/00). In the past, the stigma attached to job-switching made it difficult for those who quit their old jobs to find another one. However, because of dissatisfaction with seniority-based compensation and the desire for more career opportunities, more Japanese are switching jobs (Fernandez 44). Those who are not able to find jobs in Japanese companies often get jobs with American or other foreign firms located in Japan. Women especially tend to work in foreign firms in order to avoid sexual harassment and be able to do the same work and get paid the same salary as male employees who graduated from similarly prestigious universities. The rate of job mobility in Japan is still extremely low compared to the U. S., but things are changing slowly.

IN-GROUPS & OUT-GROUPS

One interesting aspect of Japanese collectivism is in-groups and out-groups, or *uchi* and *soto* in Japanese. This phenomenon arose from Japan's geography and history. Japan is made up of a group of islands, and was totally isolated from the rest of the world and outside influences until the 1850's (Griffin & Pustay, 328). Japan has not been successfully invaded or settled by any other nations, and therefore has one of the most ethnically, religiously, and culturally homogenous populations in the world. This has created a tendency to see the world in terms of "us" and "them." Japanese who have not spent significant time abroad tend to group Americans and Europeans into the same category (*oubeijin*), although there are dozens of distinct cultural, ethnic, and language groups involved. Japanese also do not see themselves or China as part of the "Asian" category, although the first thing that would come into an American's mind when he heard the word "Asian" would be a Chinese or Japanese person (Miyano 2/23/00). All people living outside Japan are also grouped together in the ubiquitous "foreigner" or *gaijin* category. Needless to say, especially outside of Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, where foreigners are few and far between, people from other countries, especially those of non-Asian racial backgrounds, get stared at frequently. Once when I was in a grocery store, a little boy stood there, stared at me with wide eyes, and pointed his finger and said, "GAIJIN!!" in a loud voice. Everyone within earshot, at least thirty people, turned around and stared at me. It can be a very odd experience. There are so many people from other countries and people of different races in the United States that no one would ever behave in such a fashion. These examples just go to show how homogeneity and lack of exposure to other cultures has created the in-groups and out-groups that are so central to Japanese society.

In-groups and out-groups are relative to the situation. The chart below gives a summary of the ways in which these in-groups and out-groups occur.

When dealing with...	In-group is...
Employee of another company	Own company
People inside own company	Own section or department
Foreigners	Japanese
Japanese from another region	People of own region

(Yoshimura & Anderson 58)

The Japanese are not collective as a society; they are collective within smaller groups against out-groups. For example, Japanese will unite together as a company against a competitor but have fierce internal squabbles between departments (61). People are loyal to in-groups first, and information is shared within them. The key to understanding what goes on in Japanese companies is knowing how the in-groups and out-groups work with each other and who belongs to what group (60). Americans and other foreigners doing deals with Japan are often the last to know about decisions because they don't know the process, the inner workings of the company, and who the ultimate decision maker is.

CONFORMITY

Strong collectivist cultures like Japan usually have tendencies toward conformity. Conformity means behaving according to socially accepted norms. Especially in a homogenous society like Japan, standing out from the crowd and behaving in ways that are different from the norm are frowned upon, and people who do this are often deemed poorly educated or lacking in common sense. This is best seen in the Japanese proverb, *Deru kugi wa utareru*, or "The nail that sticks out gets hammered in." Japanese know what the social rules are given a context and group (Yoshimura & Anderson 46). People are not simply disciplined to act in the socially

correct way; they are motivated by the fear of embarrassing themselves and/or suffering isolation from the group, both of which can have serious consequences in Japanese society.

There are various examples of conformity within the Japanese company. One frequently encountered example of conformity is the attendance of Japanese employees at supposedly “voluntary” company functions. Japanese companies frequently have outings and events planned for employees outside of work time, such as company picnics and sports events. Technically, employees are not required by the company to attend these functions, but failure to attend would be socially unsuitable. Studies show that most Japanese employees attend these affairs hesitantly at best (Yoshimura & Anderson 48).

Another common example of conformity is the large amount of overtime that Japanese employees regularly work. Fifty-five percent of employees in Japanese companies ordinarily work many hours of overtime that goes uncompensated and undocumented (Fernandez 41).

Working twelve-hour days on a regular basis is not at all unusual. The reason for this is that no one leaves for the day until his boss does. Leaving earlier than the rest of the group would be unacceptable. One Japanese bank employee said, “My boss doesn’t want to go home, because his boss doesn’t want to go home. And I can’t go home until my boss goes home. It’s not written down—it’s psychological” (41). This is seen in many other areas of Japanese society as well, especially in high schools. In Japanese high schools, members of sports teams and after-school clubs regularly stay at school doing these activities from 3:00 to 7:00, because no one can leave until the group does. In my calligraphy club in Japan, people did that every day of the week, and students regularly biked home after dark. This culturally-induced workaholism is currently the cause of at least 25,000 deaths of otherwise healthy people in Japan each year (42).

Group opinion is an important part of conformity. When making decisions and voting on proposals within companies, people do not necessarily vote based on their individual desires and ideas. For example, if Mr. Takatsuka makes a proposal that Mr. Omura doesn't agree with, Mr. Takatsuka will first find out what other people's opinions are, and if most people agree with Mr. Omura, he will then try to delay the process or make changes to the proposal if he can. If Mr. Omura is backed by high-ranking executives or gets a deadline approved, Mr. Takatsuka will probably vote in favor of the proposal although he is personally opposed to it (Yoshimura & Anderson 48). Personal opinions are also sometimes handled in this fashion. Once, with a group of friends, I was asked my opinion on a certain subject. I stated my opinion openly, even though it was different from the others' opinions. I was answered by a sharp intake of breath, which usually signifies discomfort. In such a situation most Americans would probably think, as I did, "If you didn't want to hear my honest opinion, why did you ask?" But in Japan, the sameness of opinions is valued as a part of group harmony, which one dissenting opinion frankly expressed in public can damage. If a Japanese had a different opinion, he or she would probably have kept silent, agreed with the group, or made a vague, noncommittal statement.

The need to conform is based on meeting the expectations of a certain in-group, with neglecting to meet others' expectations being equated with social failure. One example of this is when Japanese apologize to the audience before giving a speech. This behavior bewilders Americans, because they see it as lacking in self-confidence and generally weak. However, Japanese apologize to the audience beforehand, in case they somehow fail to meet the group's expectations (Yoshimura & Anderson 47). Another example of this is when Toshihiko Koga cried when he won the silver medal for Judo in the 1988 Olympic Games. He cried because he was ashamed for not winning the gold, and therefore letting down his countrymen (52).

A third example of normative expectations is a situation encountered by a friend working in a Japanese company in the United States as an engineering co-op. Tomotaka (Tom) is a Japanese who has lived in the United States for three years, and is planning to become an American citizen in the future. He at first experienced awkwardness with the other Japanese employees because they were not sure to what group he belonged. They were at first unsure if he was a “real” Japanese, because he spoke very good English and preferred to socialize with the American employees rather than the Japanese. At that point, they treated him as part of the American group because they thought that maybe he was a Japanese who had moved to the U. S. when he was very young, or that maybe he was half American and half Japanese. His boss, Mr. Shinkoda, treated him with respect and as a professional, because the Japanese rules of conduct did not apply. However, when Mr. Shinkoda discovered that Tom was a “real” Japanese who was not planning to return to Japan to work, his attitude changed. After discovering what in-group Tom was supposed to belong to, he began to treat Tom as a young Japanese subordinate who was behaving contrary to social expectations, and assumed a disdainful attitude toward him. These examples just go to show the strong influence conformity and the need for group harmony have on Japanese society.

STATUS

Many of the topics discussed in the Mexico status section also apply to Japan, because Japan is also a power-respecting country, where hierarchy and rank hold great weight. In general, status is determined by the following:

Determinant	Higher-Status	Lower-Status
Sex	Male	Female
Age	Older	Younger
Business relationship	Customer	Seller/Vendor
University attended	More prestigious	Less prestigious
Rank in organization	Higher	Lower
Favors	Person doing favor	Person receiving favor
Company	More prestigious (ex.- headquarters)	Less prestigious (ex.- subsidiary)

(Maynard 58, Griffin & Pustay 346)

The first thing Japanese do when they meet a person for the first time is ascertain each other's status. This is accomplished by exchanging business cards (*meishi*). There is a specific protocol to be followed when exchanging business cards, and failure to do it the right way can give the potential Japanese business partner a bad impression from the start. First of all, cards should be carried, given, and received with both hands. This gives status to the other person (Rowland 25). When receiving another person's card, stop to read over it, note the rank of the other person, and comment about some of the information before putting it away. If the person has higher status than you (ways to determine this are explained in the next paragraph), wait to put the card away until the other person puts your card away. Never write anything on the card, and never put the card in a pocket. When dealing with the Japanese, it is best to carry a case specifically designed to hold business cards (29). When done correctly, the exchange of business cards can have a positive effect on future business deals.

As in Mexico, titles are very important. Most Japanese organizations have the same titles with basically the same positions in the organizations. Since titles are more standardized in Japan, it is easier to tell what rank a person has solely based on the title than in the U. S. Some common titles for high-level executives are Chairman (*Kaichoo*), President (*Shachoo*), Vice-President (*Fuku-shachoo*), Senior Managing Director (*Senmu Torishimariyaku*), and Managing Director (*Joomu Torishimariyaku*). Other titles within the organization, in rank order, are

Department Manager (*Buchoo*), Section Chief (*Kachoo*), Deputy Section Chief (*Kakarichoo*), and General Staff (*Shain*) (Dunung 27). Another thing to keep in mind is that the word Director (*Yakuin* or *Torishimariyaku*) does not always mean the same thing in a Japanese company as it does in an American one. In Japan, “Director” almost always means a member of the board of directors, whereas in the U. S., it often means the same thing as a coordinator or manager (Otsubo 226). When calling Japanese by name, use Mr./Ms. plus the surname (Hideo Kato would be Mr. Kato), or the surname plus the title (Kato Buchoo). Never call someone by his/her first name (227). The Japanese expect titles to be used at all times, both in the company and outside the company at social gatherings. Unlike in the U. S., levels of politeness cannot be discarded after a few meetings. This means that even after going out to bars or karaoke with Mr. Kato a few times, it is not acceptable to call him Hideo. It is nearly impossible to be too polite, but unwarranted informality can easily be insulting.

Since rank is so important in Japan, oftentimes things in business are ordered according to rank. For example, seating at banquets is usually according to rank. In some meetings, higher-ranking people have the right to speak first, and people usually speak in order of rank, instead of the give-and-take style of American meetings (Dunung 172). Subordinates often walk behind their superiors to show deference. According to Rowland, “Body language conveys a message that is...much louder than words” (16). When writing business letters to Japanese firms, it is very important to list the recipients’ names in order of rank. Failure to do so could be taken as a personal affront.

POLITE SPEECH

Japanese polite speech is an extension of the importance given to status. Similar to the *tú* and *usted* forms in the Spanish language, the Japanese language has a complicated system of expressing politeness that is based on in-groups, out-groups, and relative rank. There are basically four types of language used: plain/informal (*datai*), neutral (*desu-masu*), language used to humble oneself (*kenjoogo*), and language used to elevate another person (*sonkeigo*). Two friends of the same age would use informal language, two people who were unsure of each other's status would use the neutral form, and a subordinate talking to his boss would use both humbling and elevating language to humble himself and recognize the higher status of his superior. The levels used depend on in-groups and out-groups, as well. For example, a receptionist talking to another employee about the department manager would use elevating language, because the manager has higher status and is in the out-group. However, when talking to someone from another company, the receptionist and manager would be in the same in-group (the company) vs. the out-group (other company). In that case, the receptionist would use humbling language when talking about the manager.

This elaborate system of polite speech may seem excessive to Americans, but it also exists in English, to a certain extent. For example, when sitting at the dinner table with some friends, an American might say, "John, pass me the salt." In a slightly more formal situation, an American would say, "Do you mind passing me the salt?" or "Would you please pass the salt?" At a formal banquet where an American has just met the person sitting next to him, he would probably say, "I hate to bother you,, but would you mind passing me the salt?" (Niyekawa 13). In English as in Japanese, using an informal level of politeness in a formal situation would seem

unsophisticated or rude, and using a very formal style in an informal situation would often be interpreted as a joke.

SOCIAL HARMONY & THE CONCEPT OF “FACE”

The collectivist nature of the Japanese leads them to try to create social harmony and protect the egos of all involved, especially in front of the group. Direct confrontations and open differences of opinion are frowned upon, and the Japanese usually laugh these off when they occur (Maynard 157). Laughing and smiling are ways that Japanese show uneasiness or discomfort without coming directly out and saying it. This can be very disconcerting to Americans, who cannot understand why the Japanese laugh at situations that are anything but amusing. In one example, two American businessmen went to Japan to do business with a Japanese firm. One of the men said, “I was O. K., but Gary was going nuts with all those smiles and laughs. We just knew they were going to say ‘no’, but they kept smiling the whole time. When we got back to the hotel, I thought Gary was going to lose it, and he said, ‘I hope you figured out what was so funny, ‘cause I sure as hell didn’t’” (Yamada 101). Americans would probably misinterpret the laughter as intended to make fun of them, which is really not the case.

The Japanese behave in such a manner in order to save the “face” of all involved. The way face is manifested in Japanese and American culture is quite different. The Japanese definition of face is “honor, pride, claimed self-image, trustworthiness, individual rank or standing, politeness, respect extended by others, [and] dignity” (Gudykunst & Nishida 79). In contrast, the American concept of face is “credibility, individual reputation, self-respect, ego, claimed position in interaction, appearance of strength, recognized positive worth, pride, status...[and] self-defense” (79). As you can see, the Japanese idea of face is group-centered,

and the American idea is centered around the individual. In the Japanese view, injuring the pride of another person or failing to keep social harmony would be a loss of face, while in the American view, an affront to personal credibility would be a loss of face (Gudykunst & Nishida 79). In some situations, Japanese “give face” to others in order to preserve harmony, although they may not actually agree with what is being said. One example of giving face is below:

An American named Phil was in negotiations with the new chairman of a Japanese company. They agreed on certain issues. Next, the former chairman, who happened to be the new chairman’s grandfather, came in and started denouncing what the new chairman and Phil had just agreed upon. The new chairman said nothing and just nodded and agreed. Phil got mad and began to protest, and things got tense. A week later, the Japanese withdrew from the deal.
(99)

In this situation, the new chairman was giving face to his grandfather in deference to his superior status and age by seeming to agree with what he was saying on the surface. However, nothing between the new chairman and Phil had changed. The agreement still stood. If Phil had stayed quiet, all would have been well, but by protesting he destroyed the harmony of the situation and ended up without a business deal (99).

Carefully expressing criticism is an important part of keeping social harmony. Just as in Mexico, the Japanese are very sensitive to personal criticism, especially when expressed in front of the group (Rowland 53). Since direct confrontations are to be avoided at all costs, criticism must be expressed indirectly and gently. Rowland gives some effective and acceptable ways to do this:

1. Use a third party to convey it gently.
 2. Show dissatisfaction in a non-verbal way (silence).
 3. Be grateful and complimentary first, then show some reservation by ending the sentence with “but,” and let the person slowly pull it out of you.
 4. Go out drinking and bring the matter up in the second or third hour of filling each other’s sake cups.
 5. Be ambiguous. Criticize in general, not specific terms. Stress the desired result.
- (54).

HONNE & TATEMAE

In Japan, there are always two sides to an issue, *honne* and *tatemae*. *Honne* is the actuality of an issue, or how a person really feels about an issue, and *tatemae* is the official stance on the issue, the public face that a person presents, what someone thinks another person would like to hear, or how someone would like things to be (Dunung 28, Rowland 49). The *tatemae* position exists to preserve harmony and save face. The example with Phil, the new chairman, and the chairman's grandfather on the previous page is also an example of *honne* and *tatemae*. The new chairman was proceeding with *honne* with Phil (his true intentions), but using *tatemae* when he dealt with his grandfather. Another example of *honne* and *tatemae* occurred in a Japanese company where I worked. The parent company in Japan had ordered a significant staffing reduction in the American subsidiary. The subsidiary had not been able to reduce staff by very much (*honne*), but reorganized some of the offices so that there was a lot of empty space in the large office area. Thus, it looked like staffing had been reduced when people from the parent company came to visit (*tatemae*).

This can be a very difficult concept for Americans to comprehend, because in American society, such behavior would probably be considered duplicitous, dishonest, and as circuiting the real issue. However, if understood within a cultural context, it can be a powerful tool for dealing with the Japanese. In order to have successful dealings with the Japanese, it is important to find out the *honne* position and work toward it without destroying the *tatemae* image (Rowland 50). Asking individuals in private and asking indirect, open-ended questions (not yes-no questions) that circle the issue to get a broader picture of it are both effective ways of finding out the *honne* position (Dunung 28). In Japan, truth is always relative and depends on the situation and group involved.

EMPHASIS ON FORM AND PROCESS

A phenomenon in Japanese culture that is related to *honne* and *tatemae* is the emphasis of form and process over substance and results. Americans who do business in Japan are often confused and frustrated by the fact that facts and logic aren't always the deciding factors in making decisions. In Japan, tradition, prestige, and correct process can be more important than profit or end results, and this usually involves a person's motivations for doing things and personal values. If someone follows the culturally correct process in doing something and then fails, the failure is downplayed because the person followed the correct path, even though he did not reach the finish line. In Japan people are not admired or trusted simply because they succeed or win, but because they follow the correct procedure to get there (Yoshimura & Anderson 51).

Historical examples are helpful in understanding this concept. In World War II, the Japanese military eventually experienced major losses because of this emphasis on process. This was because promotions were based on the "spirit" of the officers, instead of on a clear understanding of the situation or technical competence, and the same mistakes occurred over and over on the battlefield (53). Another example of emphasis on correct process is the nature of Japanese heroes. The majority of people who are considered to be heroes in Japan are historical figures who lost in the end. The general idea is that "glorious defeat is preferable to victory achieved without the proper spirit and attitude" (51). One example of this is the saga of the two twelfth century brothers, Yoshitsune and Yoritomo.

Yoritomo became lord of all Japan, but Yoshitsune is more popular because he overcame a difficult childhood and separation from his family to exemplify traditional Japanese virtues. The fact that he was killed by his brother only heightens his achievements.
(Yoshimura & Anderson 52)

This is in direct contrast to American culture as evidenced in modern popular films, in which the rebel who breaks all the rules and wins in the end is the most admired.

RELATIONSHIPS & SOCIAL DRINKING

Much emphasis is placed on building relationships in the Japanese business sphere, both between companies and among co-workers in the same company. Building relationships with Japanese companies can even take years. Many American companies are frustrated when they discover that they will have to spend substantial time establishing trust with a Japanese company before business deals will go through. The best advice concerning this is to be patient, because once a relationship is established, it will be ongoing and fruitful. The initial meetings are a “feeling-out” period, in which the Japanese determine the trustworthiness of the potential partner. This is not the time to try to bombard them with facts and use sales pitches; it is more important to show them that you are trustworthy as a person. Provide them with the information that they ask for, and hold back from trying to sell yourself too much, because that will come across as pushy and will easily turn them off of doing business.

Once a Japanese firm has deemed a partner consistent and stable, the relationship will be very solid. Because previously established relationships often take precedence over profit, a Japanese firm may continue to buy from a certain vendor even if that means an increase in costs (Yoshimura & Anderson 54). The Japanese also tend to expect a lot of favors and exceptional service from their business partners, and the relationship is a system of give-and-take that lasts for many years as long as both partners are satisfied with the arrangements. In Japanese society, the relationships are based on mutual debts and obligations that must be repaid. The system of long-term relationships is an important factor to consider when researching a potential Japanese business partner. A Japanese firm may choose to stay with a vendor with whom it already has an

established relationship and prior obligations rather than form a new one, even though the new company may have better or cheaper products and services to offer.

A common way that the Japanese establish relationships is through after-hours socializing. This usually takes the form of drinking at bars and/or karaoke singing. When invited on these excursions, it is very important to accept because a lot of business gets done at these events. Failing to socialize after work will exclude you from much important information. You will be trusted more if you socialize than if you come across as someone who is only interested in doing business (Hodgetts & Luthans 111). By all means, participate fully in whatever activities are going on, because being at your most vulnerable builds camaraderie and trust, as well as shows the Japanese that you're a "good sport" (Rowland 129). Some general drinking etiquette and information is below:

1. Don't pour your own drink.
 2. Refill others' drinks.
 3. Bottles are ordered for the table rather than for individuals.
 4. While another person is pouring for you, lift your glass.
 5. Women should use both hands when lifting and pouring, and men use only one.
 6. If you don't want to drink much, just take sips or claim a physical ailment--"No alcohol, doctor's orders" (*dokutaa sutoppu*).
 7. If you are a woman, don't drink too much because being drunk isn't considered ladylike and could offend your hosts.
- (127-128)

Drinking in Japan is actually used as a business tool. Many times businesspeople cannot express their true feelings (*honne*) to their bosses because of complicated corporate politics and the need to preserve the status and face of all involved. However, it is acceptable to reveal one's true feelings after a few rounds of sake or beer at a bar, because drunkenness is used as the excuse for behavior that would be unacceptable otherwise. This smoothes over relationships between people and is used as an outlet for communication. For example, a man can complain to his boss after having a few drinks without fear of consequences, but would be ridiculed for doing

the same thing when sober (126). A lot of ordinarily improper behavior is frequently excused by intoxication.

CONSENSUS-STYLE DECISION-MAKING

In sharp contrast to the autocratic management style found in Mexico, the Japanese prefer to use a consensus-style management system to involve salaried employees at all levels of an organization. The most important thing about this system, also called the *ringi-seido*, is that it includes everyone in the process in order to avoid causing loss of face. Much of Japanese decision-making occurs at an informal level. This first step is called *nemawashi*, which literally means, “circling around the roots” (my translation). The employees at the lower levels of an organization come up with ideas for improvements or projects, and first informally sound-out their ideas to the others around them in order to get a feel for what everyone thinks. This may take a lot of time, and is mostly done orally. After the lower-level employees are fairly sure that their ideas are supported, they write up preliminary proposal reports, known as *ringisho*, and circulate them to members of management and other higher-ranking employees (Dunung 29-30). The lower-level employees then make any changes that management requests and continue passing the *ringisho* around to get informal approval for their ideas from various members of management. After everyone has agreed informally, the employees draft a formal proposal that only requires a signature from a high-ranking manager or executive. The process up until the final proposal takes considerable time, but once everyone has agreed, the final signature is obtained very quickly. In general, the Japanese make decisions involving everyone in order to avoid individual blame and responsibility (Sumihara 141).

This careful system of sounding out ideas is very different from American-style management. In American companies, managers tend to have control over a small sphere of the company's operations, and are empowered to make decisions within that sphere without having to consult a dozen or more other people. Sumihara summarizes the American attitude as follows: "I have this area of responsibility, and I have the authority of the area. I can make any decisions within this framework and nobody has the right to complain, change it, or disagree with me" (141). In Japanese companies located in the United States, Americans often upset the Japanese *nemawashi* equilibrium by failing to consult with everyone who should be consulted. One Japanese manager in one such company was shocked when an American manager created a new department without consulting the parent company in Japan or other departments until after the department had already been created. Some of the Japanese employees were secretly glad, because the creation of the department improved efficiency considerably, and the department was created promptly without the *nemawashi* time lag because of the American's "ignorance" of Japanese methods (143).

Although *nemawashi* works well in purely Japanese settings, it can create serious difficulties when both Americans and Japanese are involved. The main source of conflict over *nemawashi* occurs because of the completely opposite ideas that Americans and Japanese have regarding the purpose and implementation of in-house meetings. Because the Japanese do so much informal, oral decision-making during the business day, meetings are not used to make decisions. The purpose of meetings in their eyes is to confirm what has already been decided informally and cement the consensus of the group so that they can go on to the next step. In contrast, Americans use meetings as a decision-making arena. The purpose of meetings in the eyes of Americans is to bring up ideas, openly reject or approve them, and finally vote to decide

which one is the best (Kim & Paulk 132). Because of these stark differences in viewpoints, Americans working for Japanese companies often see meetings as pointless, because the Japanese only discuss what everyone knows has already been agreed upon, or because the Americans have been kept out of the *nemawashi* loop and are not privy to all the information. Americans see these meetings as a waste of their time and find themselves wondering, “Why am I here?” (Byham 75). As you can see, understanding Japanese culture is a powerful tool in understanding the reasons behind actions, preventing frustration, and communicating at an optimal level.

EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS

A key factor in understanding Japanese culture and communication is knowing how emotions are expressed. The Japanese show their emotions the least of any culture in the world, the Mexicans show emotions more than any other culture, and Americans are somewhere in the middle (Hodgetts & Luthans 126). The Japanese generally tend to keep neutral expressions on their faces, do not show what they are thinking, and admire “cool and self-possessed conduct” (393). However, this does not mean that the Japanese do not feel the same emotions as other cultures, or that they never show any emotions at all.

On the contrary, the Japanese have a complicated system of showing and controlling their emotions. According to Matsumoto, the Japanese follow certain emotional display rules. They may:

1. Show less emotion than they actually feel
2. Show nothing although they feel something
3. Show more than what they actually feel
4. Show something other than what they actually feel
5. Show two or more emotions simultaneously
6. Show the same emotions as the rest of the in-group toward an out-group entity (43, 51).

The emotions Japanese show or do not show depend on the cultural context. They adapt the emotions they show to defer to people of higher rank, to protect *tatemae*, or to keep social harmony. In one study, Japanese and American participants watched videos containing “intense, stress-inducing stimuli” both alone and with a higher-status researcher present (Matsumoto 45). The Japanese and Americans displayed the same emotions when viewing the tape alone. The Americans showed the same emotions when the researcher was present as when alone, but the Japanese showed considerably different results. In the second viewing, the Japanese participants showed different emotions from the Americans and different emotions than they showed when watching the videos alone. When the researcher was present, “in every instance when the Americans showed negative emotions, the Japanese showed none or smiled” (45). Thus, the Japanese modify their facial expressions to be socially appropriate, but actually experience the same emotions as people of other cultures. When dealing with the Japanese, be careful not to seem overly emotional, as it could be offensive to them and damage business relationships.

COMMUNICATION STYLE

“Yes” and “No”

Knowing and understanding the way the Japanese communicate is a very important step in improving business dealings with them. One of the first things Americans may notice about the Japanese communication style is the differences in the meanings and uses of the words “yes” and “no.” Most of these differences arise from the fact that the Japanese do not answer questions with “yes” and “no” in the Japanese language, but rather with a negative or positive form of the verb. For example, if someone asks, “Did you go there?” The response would be “I went” or “I didn’t go,” rather than “yes” or “no.” Thus, *hai*, the Japanese word for “yes”, is not an

affirmative response to a question, but simply a statement that the person has heard and processed what was said. Americans need to be careful about this, because they often assume that when a Japanese continually nods and says “yes” during a meeting, he is agreeing to what is being said or is stating his support of it. On the contrary, the person is not expressing any opinion about what has been said, but is simply acknowledging the information, stating that he understands it, and encouraging the person to continue (Griffin & Pustay 337). It is comparable to when Americans say “uh-huh” repeatedly when talking to someone on the phone.

The word “no” also has different connotations and uses in Japanese. Similarly to the word “yes,” the word *iie* or “no” is not a negative response to a question, and cannot be used alone as such in the Japanese language. Because the Japanese generally prefer to communicate indirectly, they avoid saying no in a direct manner by using certain euphemisms that actually mean “no.” For example, any of the following responses usually mean “no”: “It would be difficult,” “This requires further study,” “I’ll think about it,” “Why are you asking this?”, “We would like to, but...”, “I’m not sure,” “I’ll try, but...”, “It’s an interesting idea, but...”, “We are seriously considering it” (Griffin & Pustay 337, Ueda 156-158, Dunung 31, Goldman 169). You may be wondering, “What if they really are seriously considering it? How will I know if they mean ‘no’?” If they actually are seriously considering a proposal, they will give you a date to meet again or will state specifically when they plan to get in touch with you (Goldman 169). Other responses that can be interpreted as “no” are saying that the question is not worth answering, refusing to answer, walking away without saying anything else, keeping silent, giving excuses why it cannot be done, changing the subject in response to a direct yes-no question, apologizing, or making ambiguous statements (Ueda 156-158, Gudykunst & Nishida 43, Rowland 51). A long “sahh” sound, a hand on the back of the neck, or a sharp, quick intake of

air can also be negative answers (Rowland 51). The Japanese also use the statement, *Sore wa chotto...*, which means literally, “That’s a little...” as a negative answer (Yamada 38). As mentioned earlier, laughter and smiles at unsuitable times are also signs of discomfort (Dunung 31). One helpful way to avoid problems resulting from the Japanese reluctance to answer direct yes-no questions is not to ask them. Try to ask questions that require information as answers rather than ones that require a yes-no answer. This will help the Japanese feel more comfortable by not being confronted with the problem of causing someone to lose face. Obviously, knowing how to interpret things the Japanese say is crucial to knowing what is really going on in business deals.

Silence & Economy of Words

In Japan, silences and things left unsaid are often just as important as what is actually said. Confucian and Buddhist traditions have created in the Japanese a distrust of and distaste for explicit and excessive language and eloquent speeches (Goldman 138). People who do not speak very much are regarded as “thoughtful, trustworthy, and respectable” (Jandt 152). As a result, the Japanese often speak little and use pauses and silence to communicate (Hodgetts & Luthans 199). In the United States, silence usually signifies an “inability to communicate or empathize” or a breakdown in the relationship of the speakers, but it means something quite different in Japan (Griffin & Pustay 339). As mentioned in the earlier section, silence can be a negative answer, but can also simply mean that the person is considering what has been said, or that “additional conversation would be disharmonious” (339). In general, the Japanese are more likely to stay silent during meetings and negotiations than Americans, and the silence can last for as long as five minutes (McCreary 46). It should not necessarily be interpreted as something

negative. Americans in negotiations with the Japanese often hastily rush in to make concessions to fill the silence, when in reality none are needed (Griffin & Pustay 339). Because of these differences in communication styles, the Japanese often find that their silences are continually interrupted by the interjections of Americans, and feel as if they are fighting to finish what they are saying. This results in the Japanese viewing Americans as “overly combative and competing for the floor” (Goldman 173-4). The Japanese have reasons for using silence, and it is better to let them break the silence rather than try to talk to fill it. Some of the reasons for silence include avoiding confrontation, viewing talk as unnecessary, the presence of out-group members, or respecting the right of a higher-ranking individual to speak first (Gudykunst & Nishida 51).

Emphasis on Listening Rather Than Speaking

In Japan, communication is based on listening carefully and correctly interpreting what someone is trying to say, rather than on getting one’s personal ideas across. In the U. S., the responsibility for communication lies with the speaker, and in Japan it is with the listener (Yamada 38). For example, in the U. S., if the audience does not understand a speech, the speaker is considered to be at fault for writing an unclear, difficult-to-understand speech. However, in Japan, if the audience does not understand, *it* is at fault for not being able to correctly discern the meaning of the speaker (Miyano 2/00). In American-Japanese intercultural encounters, “Americans blame the Japanese speaker for being unable to articulate his point of view, and Japanese blame the American audience for being unable to interpret what the speaker meant” (Yamada 40).

This listener-focused communication style has its roots in the nature of the Japanese language. Japanese scholars estimate that only 10% of all communication in the Japanese

language is actually stated clearly, and that the rest is interpreted based on the context (Kikoski 175). This occurs because subjects, objects, and other seemingly essential parts of speech are frequently omitted when understood within context. Sentences tend to be left unfinished, or ended with the word “but...”, leaving the audience to interpret the rest of the meaning. The use of indirect language also lends itself to listener interpretation. People are expected to infer other information from the limited information given. This is best expressed by the Japanese proverb, “Say one, understand ten” (Rowland 47). The Japanese are able to interpret what is left unsaid because of the extreme cultural, racial, and religious homogeneity that has been the product of being isolated from the rest of the world for thousands of years. They “are able to a great degree to anticipate the intentions and thoughts of one another” (48).

Anticipating and interpreting the thoughts and meanings of others, also called *sasshi*, is a key element in the Japanese communication style. One example of *sasshi* is when someone is cold, and wants the other person to shut the window. Instead of saying, “Would you shut the window?” like an American probably would, a Japanese might just say, “It’s cold in here, isn’t it?” Then the other person would likely say, “Oh, that’s right, the window’s open,” and shut the window (Gudykunst & Nishida 42). A *sasshi* example from a business context follows below:

With an American, the Japanese manager feels he must say, for example, “I have a meeting with my boss Wednesday at 10 o’clock. Could you prepare A, B, C, and D for me by then?” With a Japanese subordinate, the boss need only say, “I have a meeting with my boss on Wednesday. Could you prepare information for me by then?” The boss is implying he needs A, B, C, and D plus anything else the ...[subordinate] can think of. ...The employee is supposed to know what A, B, C, and D are. ...[If he] is capable enough, he prepares A, B, C, D, and also E, F, G, and H. The time ...[he] invested in preparing E through H may not pay off directly, but the fact that he readied these extra items stamps him as a reliable person.
(Yoshimura & Anderson 166)

This communication difference presents problems for both Americans and Japanese. The Japanese are frustrated by having to spell everything out in minute detail in order for Americans

to understand, and Americans are frustrated because in their eyes, the Japanese never say what they really mean (Kim & Paulk 126).

The Language Barrier

Because very few Americans can speak Japanese to the extent necessary to do business, almost all business done between Americans and Japanese, in both the U. S. and Japan, is carried out in English. This puts the Japanese at a distinct disadvantage, because they are forced to do business in a foreign language at all times. Language difficulties complicate the communication process even further, because each side has a difficult time understanding the other and getting its point across. Japanese businesspeople vary in their English proficiency, but it is safe to say that those who have not spent significant time actively learning and practicing the language in an English-speaking country do not speak it very well. Even Japanese businessmen who have been working in Japanese-owned subsidiaries in the U. S. for as long as five years often do not speak English very well, or can only speak enough English to get by on the job. They do not speak English very well because of the way the Japanese school system teaches English. Reading and grammar are strongly emphasized, but listening and speaking are rarely, if ever, practiced.

It is often difficult for Americans to exactly how much English Japanese businessmen can understand. This is because the ability to speak English is a status symbol in Japan, and anyone who admits poor English ability in front of others is likely to lose face. Superiors also lose face if their younger subordinates can speak significantly better English than they can (March 96). Japanese businessmen may pretend to understand, even when they don't. "Hal" Kawasaki and an American manager are involved in the example below:

A manager who promised to finish a certain project by a specific date doesn't meet the deadline. Hal has promised to turn it in to his president—and now he has been let down. "Why wasn't the project finished on time?" Hal asks. The local manager launches into a long explanation, and soon Hal

loses his grasp of what is being said. The manager's speech is too quick and too colloquial. But Hal keeps nodding as though he understands. When Hal finally ends the meeting, the local manager still doesn't know that Hal hasn't understood.

(March 93)

Japanese managers' poor English can also cause them to mistrust Americans, because they do not understand all the information that they are being given. Instead of giving a project to an American employee, Japanese managers may prefer to give the project to a Japanese subordinate (Miyano 2/00). Americans can improve the degree of understanding the Japanese have by speaking more slowly and avoiding slang words and idiomatic expressions such as "That was a home run" or "Up the creek without a paddle." Above all, try to be sympathetic to their situation—don't just criticize them because they cannot speak English very well. Most Americans have even less of an ability to carry on business in a foreign language than the Japanese do.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

The following chart summarizes the main topics covered in this paper.

Cultural Category	Mexico	United States	Japan
Body Language	Small personal space, frequent gesturing and touching	Medium personal space, medium gesturing and touching	Large personal space, very little gesturing and touching
Greetings	Kissing, hugging, handshakes	Handshakes	Bowing
Time Orientation	Punctuality not valued, short-term focus	Punctuality highly valued, medium focus	Punctuality highly valued, long-term focus
Group Orientation	Mild collectivist	Strong individualist	Strong collectivist
Conformity	Medium conformist	Non-conformist	Strong conformist
Universalism/Particularism	Strong particularist	Strong universalist	Mild particularist
Business Relationships	Very necessary	Optional	Very necessary
Rank	Very important	Medium importance	Very important
Management Style	Autocratic, Paternalistic	Participatory	Consensus, Paternalistic
<i>Honne and Tatemae</i>	Both exist	<i>Honne</i> only	Both exist
Expression of Emotions	Emotions shown openly	Emotions moderately suppressed	Emotions hidden or changed outwardly to fit situation
Communication Style	Eloquent, emotional, dramatic	Concise, factual, direct	Indirect, based on listener interpretation

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