

**Competitive and Collaborative Communicative Style:
American Men and Women,
American Men and Japanese Men**

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What would cause a leading Japanese management consultant to say that executives most successful in Europe and America are likely to be least successful in Japan? Masaaki Imai notes that a long term outlook motivates Japanese executives to behave and communicate in a strikingly different style from their Western counterparts. Although American executives do have to contend with short-term factors such as frequent performance appraisal based on short-term financing and profits, there is an additional possibility for their discomfort in communicating with Japanese executives.

The socialization of American boys has led many of today's most able executives to unconsciously regard certain Japanese business behavior and communicative style as feminine and therefore unbusinesslike. Attachment to cultural norms of male and female can be a liability in cross-cultural communication.

The sense of self or identity stands in great contrast in Japan and America, and particularly between Japanese males and American males. Behavior that is valued and rewarded differs extremely. Some of the behaviors valued in Japan as collectivist have parallels in American female communicative style.

An American male, socialized to devalue so-called female style, may find it extremely difficult to involve himself in a collaborative style abroad. Feelings, and development of rapport based on gut feelings are central to Japanese male communicative style. Relationships seen as long-term and continuing, which may involve status differences as well, call for an indirect style and a de-emphasis on the individual.

American male style emphasizes directness, question and answer, confrontational style and argument. The use of "we" is seen as weak. From childhood, American boys are encouraged to speak up and state their opinions clearly, using "I." Boys' play has involved friendship through fighting -- girls' play, friendship through talking. Where boys will argue over rules and procedures, girls will adjust the rules to the situation, make exceptions, or end the game.

It's difficult for girls to retain trust and remain friends after a serious argument. Boys can fight, argue, and become friends. Where boys avoid talking about feelings for fear of showing weakness, girls discuss feelings and events in detail, seeking sympathy and support from close friends.

In Japan, sympathy and support can be called upon from a mother or a boss. One of the most valued traits of an executive is his ability to develop rapport with employees and customers. In America, men's talk, or "report talk," is distinguished from women's talk, or "rapport talk" (Tannen, 1990). Men use a direct, confrontational style and women, a more indirect, collaborative style. Women suggest and men demand. For American men, the Japanese style of indirect, allusive suggestion seems confusing or evasive when it comes from a man.

The American boy has grown up practising rules and rulemaking in competitive games and sports. While Japanese boys play some of the same games, such as baseball, the way the game is played is quite different, and it is the coach who instructs how to play. Competition is between teams, not among individuals. Responsibility is collective, not individual. American boys will argue endlessly about whose fault something is. They need an umpire to settle their arguments and avoid fistfights. Work groups in Japanese business also assume collective responsibility, but the supervisor, who acts as a facilitator, has much less authority than the baseball coach.

Rules and laws are not as important in Japan as knowing the way things are done, according to the situation and the context. Since relationships are more important than rules, exceptions can be made. Knowing how to maintain relationships within networks of status and influence is learned by observation and practice, and by being corrected by coach or boss as appropriate. There are many traditional models for specific situations, taught by teachers, coaches, parents and supervisors. American girls have been observed to be less rule-oriented than boys, while at the same time having more "people skills." Girls are more context-oriented, more interested in the people than the principles of the problem. Given a dilemma, they will reframe the issues and suggest talking it out (Kohlberg's Dilemma discussed in Gilligan, 1982). While American males have

characterized females as undependable and unprincipled, they have reacted in a similar way to Japanese males, seeing them as unprincipled and situational.

The comparative use of contracts in the two cultures is illustrative. A Japanese contract is an agreement to do business over time, to adjust periodically to changing circumstances by consultation in good faith. The worth of the contract is not its enforceability by courts, but as a symbol of a reliable, enduring relationship. Many services and favors not mentioned in the contract will be exchanged during the years of the relationship, sometimes favoring one side, sometimes the other.

The American version of contract relies on enforceability for breach and attempts to anticipate circumstances which may arise. A contractual way of doing business implies a series of short term relationships which can be ended at any time by either party without regard for possible effects on others. The Japanese business relationship is enforced through a complex web of relationships and influence, of favors given and received. (Wagatsuma, 1984, Haley, 1991).

Girls are socialized in America into a web or network of relationships. Where the boys fear closeness as threatening their autonomy, girls fear isolation from the group. They work at maintaining loyalty, coalitions and alliances. A few close, deep friendships are favored by girls. Boys, on the contrary, prefer a large number of acquaintances and fear being obligated to anyone. Girls will do a favor for a popular girl in hopes of getting something in return.

Reciprocal obligation in status relationships is a cornerstone of the system of social sanctions that govern Japanese society. Without a sense of indebtedness, one cannot participate in relationships. A salary is not a measure of a man's worth; his membership in a powerful and influential company or ministry is. Giving and receiving help and favors is a measure of status and influence.

Contrast the reluctance of an American male to ask directions or to ask for help at work. He is supposed to be man enough to take the initiative, make his own mistakes and learn from them. His status is tied to appearing confident, giving orders and making demands, not asking for help. The willingness of women to ask for help and instruction, or even to work together on a project, is seen as weakness by American men.

In Japan, an employee does not have to fear that his virility is in question if he asks for help or instruction with a new task (Imai, 1981), and taking the initiative may be seen as egotistical. Neither is appearing confident important to one's manhood in Japan. Leaders function more often

as coordinators and facilitators than as givers of orders. Strangely enough to Americans, the frequent but appropriate use of apology is a hallmark of a respected and powerful man. Where status and seniority are well known and often group-related, conversation as a competition to establish position and influence is unnecessary. In fact, Japanese conversation contains status-markers which affirm status relationship (Lebra, 1976).

Japan, apologizing for one's inadequacy upon taking up a new post or beginning a presentation, invites the listener or co-worker to join in a collective enterprise (Wagatsuma and Rosett, 1986). In America, beginning a speech with a joke or a dramatic story engages the audience's attention to the speaker's attempt to entertain and persuade them to take some action, often as individuals. It's a different case, though, with American women. Even the most aggressive saleswoman will tend to preface her remarks with self-deprecation, apology or disclaimer if she is addressing other women, so as not to be thought pushy. When addressing men or a mixed audience, however, she will adopt the male individualist style. Men tend to see apology as an admission of fault, consistent with our American legal tradition. Women use apology as an expression of sympathy. While men generally prefer excuses to apology, women may, like the Japanese, apologize for something they have not done, as a means of alleviating discomfort. Their "I'm sorry" is not an expression of defeat but an expression of sympathy: collaborative, not competitive in meaning.

American men don't like to talk about how they feel about something. They prefer giving reasons for what they want. They feel safer sounding impersonal. Feelings tend to be dropped out of the American male vocabulary as not gender-appropriate for them. American men favor action over talking; they like to do things together, such as sports, where women will spend hours "just talking." Japanese males will spend hours in the evenings "just talking" over drinks with their co-workers. Information is exchanged in bits and pieces in a comfortable, informal atmosphere. Careful "feeling someone out" on a topic precedes any disclosure.

American girls are more careful of each other's feelings than boys. They are more likely to keep up an appearance of sympathetic agreement than to openly disagree. Sharing secrets with a trusted friend is vital to girls. American women usually have a best friend, while American men usually mention their wife as a best friend, or no one. Women use rapport talk; they develop empathy by trading sympathetic experiences. They overlap their utterances with interjections such as: mmmm, yes, I see, then what happened? They will relate similar incidents to show support.

Men don't overlap; they interrupt. There is a large difference. An interruption changes the subject and attempts to dominate the floor. without sympathy and support, without a sense of being heard, women may gradually stop talking in a mixed sex group, sitting back while a few of the men enjoy arguing and debating in front of an audience.

Ambiguity and hesitation, like apology, play a role in collectivism, whether among Japanese men or American women. In America, hesitation is downgraded as feminine, weak, showing unsureness. In Japan, hesitation is contextual. In a highcontext society such as Japan, one is expected to read between the lines (Hall and Hall, 1987, Imai, 1981). Hesitation and failure to take action may mean refusal. It may mean thinking it over and waiting for additional information or events. Japanese decision-making has been characterized as reactive (Imai, 1981). Letting the other make the first move is a favored strategy in both the game of GO and in business. Preserving future options and an ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances are valued.

In America, spoken and written language expresses the male preference for reality as controllable and measurable. Past time is carefully sequenced, not vague, as it often is in Japan. The American insistence on specific cause, blame and fault finding focuses on the individual, and on the ongoing status competition among males.

In the more conservative and traditional, collectivist culture of Japan, status is related to group membership more than to individual behavior or style of language. A Japanese executive and an American executive may well misunderstand each other's status cues. The American male will not find the type of display behavior he is accustomed to, in Japan. He may meet a number of cues, such as hesitation or the use of apology, to which he is unable to respond appropriately, since he is unconsciously programmed from infancy to discount cues to cooperative behavior as feminine. He thinks men don't cooperate; they compete. What he may miss altogether are the cultural cues as to status and power in Japan. The trading of favors, often through an influential intermediary, go-between or guarantor, may be invisible to him.

Deliberate vagueness is employed in Japanese language, not to show weakness and subordination, but to leave room for arrangements and planning to be conducted or negotiated among many members of a collectivist group, or a network of those concerned. Reciprocal obligation is the social glue that holds networks together. There is no room for the individualist, and every word, action or decision has to be carefully considered with regard to how it will affect the other members of a network.

Language reflects social process. American English reflects individualist and contract-oriented male competition in America; words for the collaborative female style are lacking. American men are expected to use the male language of sports and war in business and hence have neither concept nor vocabulary to express cooperation and feelings of rapport or empathy. Female reality in America is multi-dimensional, allowing for multiple causes and results. Allocation of blame or fault is much less important to women than working things out.

Although there is an overlap in communicative style and behavior between Japanese men and American women, it is not at all the same. American women are not as individualist as American men, but not as collectivist as Japanese men, and they are not members of a strict vertical power structure. In many ways they are much more egalitarian than American men.

Both American and Japanese men are concerned with power and status; however, they express it differently. American women are extremely task or result-oriented and use positive relationships to facilitate a task. In a hospital operating room, male surgeons are known to display competitive behavior and an extreme need to dominate and control others, while a female surgeon quietly builds an effective work team and concentrates, not on who gets the glory, but on facilitating a successful outcome for the patient. Women are skilled at interdependent behavior in America, and it doesn't threaten their identity.

Individualists believe they can survive on their own; collectivists know they cannot survive without group membership, whether in the workplace, family or community (Triandis, Brislin and Hui, 1988). This is where American women's behavior is more collectivist than that of American men. Women have been taught that they are dependent on others, and that others depend on them. If responsibility for a man is taking the blame, or the glory, as an individual, for a woman, it is caring and providing for others.

In a situation of stress or conflict, American men use a direct, controlling, confrontational style, while women use indirect speech and an obliging style or conflict-avoidance. American women share with collectivist cultures the preference for maintaining the good-will and approval of others (Ting-Toomey and Cole, 1990). They avoid criticizing others to their face, but a man will engage in direct criticism in order to protect his own pride and sense of self. Women, like collectivists, are more concerned with not embarrassing others.

American men, socialized to find status in competition and identity in independence, find it difficult to communicate with American women, who

are socialized to find status in community and identity in interdependence. The direct, confrontational style of American men contrasts with the indirect, collaborative style of American women.

American men lack experience and may have difficulties in relating to contextual thinking which is personal and situational, whether they encounter it in their own country or abroad, in Japan. As individualists they rely on rules and principles rather than on persons, and may lack skills at networking and relationship-building. Without a network of reliable, dependable relationships, they need to assert their independence and attempt to control situations as they arise. The communicative styles of both individualists and collectivists are strategies of survival, deeply ingrained and learned in childhood: survival as an individualist American male, as an egalitarian but collectivist American female, collectivist and hierarchical Japanese male.

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