

Evaluating Communication Style Differences Between UK and Japanese Teams: The AstraZeneca–Daiichi Sankyo Collaboration

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1. Introduction and Business Context

Globalisation has increased the use of international partnerships to share expertise, enter markets and accelerate innovation. Such arrangements also create communication risks because employees may interpret hierarchy, silence, disagreement and decision-making differently (Thomas and Peterson, 2018). These risks are especially important when geographically dispersed teams coordinate technically complex work.

This essay evaluates communication between UK and Japanese employees through the collaboration between AstraZeneca, headquartered in Cambridge, and Daiichi Sankyo, headquartered in Tokyo. In March 2019 the companies agreed to co-develop and commercialise trastuzumab deruxtecan, now marketed as Enhertu. In July 2020 they formed a second global collaboration for DS-1062, now datopotamab deruxtecan; Daiichi Sankyo retained exclusive Japanese rights and responsibility for manufacture and supply (AstraZeneca, 2019; Daiichi Sankyo, 2020). These arrangements require sustained coordination among research, clinical, regulatory, manufacturing and commercial specialists.

The central argument is that comparatively explicit and individual-oriented British practices may conflict with more context-sensitive, hierarchical and consensus-oriented tendencies associated with Japanese business communication. Hall's (1976) high- and low-context framework and Hofstede's cultural dimensions help identify possible sources of misunderstanding. However, neither model should be used to predict individual behaviour: organisational culture, profession, language ability and international experience also matter (McSweeney, 2002; Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon, 2011).

2. Cultural Context of the United Kingdom and Japan

The UK and Japan are advanced economies with mature pharmaceutical industries, yet their workplace conventions may create different expectations. British business communication is often more explicit than Japanese communication, professional relationships can be relatively informal, and individual responsibility is commonly emphasised (Hofstede, 2001; Meyer, 2014). Nevertheless, British English also uses understatement, humour and indirect criticism; describing it as wholly direct would therefore be inaccurate.

Japanese workplace communication has traditionally placed stronger emphasis on group relationships, status sensitivity and avoidance of open confrontation (Lewis, 2006). The idea of *wa*, or harmony, helps explain why disagreement may be expressed cautiously, particularly when a direct challenge could embarrass a

colleague or contradict a senior person publicly. In a pharmaceutical partnership, however, excessive ambiguity about evidence, deadlines or responsibility can create operational and patient-safety risks. Effective communication must therefore combine clarity with relationship sensitivity (Thomas and Peterson, 2018).

National culture is only one influence. Corporate procedures, scientific training, generation, personality and experience of multinational work may be more relevant in a particular interaction. Cultural frameworks are most useful as prompts for inquiry: managers can anticipate alternative interpretations without assuming that every British or Japanese employee conforms to a national profile.

3. High- and Low-Context Communication

Hall (1976) distinguishes relatively low-context communication, in which more meaning is made explicit in words, from high-context communication, in which relationships, shared knowledge, status and non-verbal cues carry more meaning. Japan is commonly described as comparatively high-context and the UK as lower-context (Hall, 1976; Meyer, 2014). The distinction is a continuum rather than a precise national ranking, and its later use has sometimes lacked conceptual consistency (Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon, 2011).

The framework nevertheless illuminates practical risks. A British manager may hear ‘this could be difficult’ as a warning that a task remains achievable, whereas a Japanese colleague may intend a much stronger reservation. Similarly, silence may indicate reflection or respect to one participant but uncertainty or disengagement to another. A colleague accustomed to rapid turn-taking may fill the pause and unintentionally prevent a considered contribution.

Written communication can reproduce the same problem. British employees may expect concise emails naming actions, owners and deadlines. Japanese colleagues may prefer greater context and softer wording for sensitive information. The former can appear abrupt; the latter can appear vague. Teams should therefore confirm the intended meaning of reservations and record decisions explicitly. Hall’s model shows that shared vocabulary does not guarantee shared pragmatic interpretation, while its critics remind managers to test interpretations against the actual relationship and situation.

4. Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions and UK–Japanese Communication

Hofstede’s framework offers a second comparative lens (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010). Four dimensions are relevant: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. They describe country-level tendencies and should not be treated as individual personality measures.

Individualism may affect how opinions are voiced. British employees may regard independent contributions and open debate as evidence of engagement, whereas Japanese participants may consider the group’s position before expressing disagreement. If a project leader asks, ‘Does anyone disagree with this deadline?’, silence cannot safely be recorded as consent; some participants may prefer internal consultation before giving a coordinated response.

Power distance concerns expectations about unequal authority. British workplaces can be comparatively informal across levels, while rank and seniority may be more visible in Japanese organisational interaction. Merely inviting everybody to speak may not remove the perceived cost of contradicting a senior colleague. Managers should not equate speaking frequency with commitment and should offer pre-meeting consultation, private discussion and written follow-up.

Hofstede also describes Japan as substantially higher in uncertainty avoidance than the UK. A British team may start a workstream with some details unresolved and adapt later; Japanese colleagues may seek more

analysis, consultation and procedural clarity before commitment. The first approach may appear under-prepared and the second unnecessarily slow. In pharmaceuticals, careful risk assessment protects patients and regulatory compliance, but delay can impede innovation. Leaders must define which uncertainties require resolution and which can be managed iteratively.

Japan's high score on Hofstede's masculinity dimension is associated with achievement and performance orientation. The term is contested and should not be interpreted literally as gender behaviour. Its limited managerial value lies in prompting attention to how public criticism may affect professional reputation. Evidence-based feedback, delivered through an appropriate channel and framed around collective improvement, is safer than culturally assumed rules about directness.

Hofstede remains influential but controversial. McSweeney (2002) challenges the treatment of nations as internally uniform cultures and questions causal claims drawn from country averages. The dimensions should therefore guide questions, not provide fixed answers. A specific employee's profession, corporate identity and team relationships may outweigh nationality.

The dimensions also interact rather than operating independently. Reluctance to question a senior colleague, for example, may reflect hierarchy, concern for group relationships, professional caution or simply incomplete evidence. Attributing it immediately to power distance would conceal these alternatives. Managers should triangulate: ask privately what prevented contribution, compare behaviour across settings and examine whether the same pattern appears among colleagues of different rank. This converts a broad cultural hypothesis into a testable explanation of the particular team.

5. Key Areas of Miscommunication in Cross-Cultural Teams

The theories identify four overlapping risks. First, indirect reservations may be mistaken for agreement. Second, verbal activity may be misread as engagement while reflective listening is undervalued. Third, decision processes may conflict: Japanese *nemawashi* develops support through informal consultation before formal approval, whereas British teams may expect visible debate and faster decisions in the meeting itself (Matsushita, 1992). Each side may consequently label the other as slow or premature.

Fourth, feedback and virtual communication can intensify misunderstanding. Task-focused criticism may carry unexpected social consequences, while indirect criticism may not register with its recipient. Email and videoconferencing remove informal context and some non-verbal information; second-language users may also need more processing time. Managers should investigate these mechanisms without making national culture the automatic explanation. Meyer (2014) usefully distinguishes communication style from negative-feedback style, because a culture's position on one does not determine its position on the other.

A further risk is the meaning of commitment. Formal approval may be interpreted as permission to proceed by one group but as the beginning of further alignment by another. Conversely, requests for more data may be read as resistance even when they reflect scientific diligence. In the AstraZeneca–Daiichi Sankyo setting, unclear commitment can affect hand-offs between clinical, regulatory and manufacturing workstreams. Decision records should therefore distinguish endorsement, conditional agreement, consultation still required and final authorisation.

6. Managing Cross-Cultural Communication

A Country Director should build processes that accommodate both approaches rather than require one group to imitate the other. First, important decisions should be documented in plain language, specifying the decision, owner, deadline, assumptions and unresolved issues. Participants should be invited to correct the

record. This creates a shared project memory and reduces reliance on culturally specific readings of speech or silence.

Second, agendas and evidence should be circulated early enough for preparation and internal consultation. Meetings can then combine structured discussion with pauses and explicit checks for concerns. Instead of asking only 'Does everyone agree?', a chair might ask, 'What scientific, regulatory or delivery concerns must be resolved before confirmation?' A defined response window after the meeting allows considered objections without making the formal meeting the only legitimate channel.

Third, teams should establish a communication charter covering urgency labels, decision authority, escalation, response times and the language used to distinguish a question, reservation and veto. Sensitive feedback should be evidence-based and, where appropriate, given privately. Regular one-to-one meetings, small-group sessions and written feedback provide alternatives to public challenge.

The charter should be reinforced through meeting design. The chair can circulate a decision paper that separates facts, assumptions, options and recommendations; invite written comments before the meeting; and close by reading back decisions and conditions. A responsibility matrix can make ownership visible, but it should not replace dialogue about dependencies. For high-risk scientific or regulatory matters, a named dissent route should allow concerns to be escalated without treating disagreement as disloyalty.

Fourth, practical cross-cultural learning should develop interpretation rather than stereotypes. British colleagues may learn to notice contextual reservations and the value of relationship-building; Japanese colleagues may recognise that requests for explicit clarification can reflect a need for transparency rather than distrust. The objective is a third, shared team culture with predictable rules.

Managers should also evaluate whether these practices work. Useful indicators include the number of decisions reopened because consent was misunderstood, overdue actions caused by unclear ownership, late escalations and participation across channels. Short retrospectives can ask which messages were ambiguous and which meeting formats enabled contribution. Such evidence prevents cultural training from becoming symbolic and supports continuous adjustment as personnel and project phases change.

Finally, leaders need cultural intelligence: the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings through knowledge, motivation and behavioural adaptation (Earley and Ang, 2003). A culturally intelligent manager observes responses, checks assumptions and changes approach when evidence contradicts a national model. Diversity can then become a resource. Japanese strengths in preparation and consensus, combined with British tendencies towards explicit discussion and adaptability, may improve decisions if the team openly maps its differences (Meyer, 2015).

7. Conclusion

The AstraZeneca–Daiichi Sankyo collaborations provide a credible context for examining UK–Japanese communication because they require continuing coordination across specialist functions and national boundaries. Hall helps explain differences in how explicit words, relationships, silence and context convey meaning. Hofstede highlights possible contrasts involving individual contribution, hierarchy, uncertainty and achievement. Together, the models clarify why silence may be mistaken for consent, indirect objections overlooked, direct messages perceived as confrontational and consultation interpreted as delay.

Their value is conditional. McSweeney (2002) and Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon (2011) show why national categories and high-/low-context labels cannot predict every individual or situation. Effective management therefore combines cultural awareness with evidence from the actual team. Clear documentation, advance

preparation, multiple feedback channels, agreed escalation rules and culturally intelligent leadership can turn different communication preferences into complementary capabilities. In this partnership, cross-cultural communication is not merely interpersonal etiquette; it is an organisational capability supporting knowledge exchange, safe decisions, innovation and durable collaboration.

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