

# **Intercultural Communication between UK and Japanese Teams: The Case of DP World and ITOCHU Corporation**

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# 1. Introduction

International partnerships can fail even when their commercial objectives are aligned, because participants interpret silence, disagreement, hierarchy and commitment through different cultural expectations. This essay evaluates communication between British employees in DP World's UK operations and Japanese employees at ITOCHU Corporation. It uses Hall's context framework, Hofstede's cultural dimensions and negotiation research to analyse likely points of friction. It argues that the partnership will benefit from shared practices that combine explicit documentation with time for consultation, while treating national-culture models as provisional guides rather than fixed descriptions of individuals.

## 2. Business and Cultural Context

DP World operates major UK container terminals at London Gateway and Southampton. Its £1 billion London Gateway expansion, announced for construction in 2025, includes two additional all-electric berths and a second rail terminal (DP World, 2025a). ITOCHU is a diversified Japanese trading company. On 21 August 2025, the firms signed a memorandum of understanding to explore logistics, supply-chain infrastructure and distribution opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa (DP World, 2025b). The agreement creates a credible context for UK–Japanese project teams, although it does not itself prove that any specific communication problem has occurred.

Communication differences are best understood as tendencies shaped by national, organisational and professional settings. British workplaces often value individual initiative, relatively informal access to managers and timely verbal debate. Japanese business practice may give greater weight to hierarchy, relational trust, group harmony and internal consultation. These contrasts can affect how employees signal concern, prepare decisions and evaluate participation. They should not be converted into stereotypes: age, role, language proficiency, personality and international experience may be more influential than nationality in a particular interaction.

The partnership is prospective rather than a documented case of intercultural failure. The memorandum commits the companies to explore logistics, supply-chain infrastructure and distribution opportunities, but it does not report established joint operating routines or communication disputes (DP World, 2025b). The analysis below therefore identifies plausible risks and governance responses. This distinction strengthens the argument: cultural theory is used to anticipate coordination problems, not to attribute unverified behaviour to either organisation.

### 3. Context, Directness and Silence

Hall's (1976) distinction between high- and low-context communication offers a useful starting point. In lower-context interaction, important meaning is expected to be stated in the message; in higher-context interaction, meaning relies more heavily on relationships, status, shared knowledge and non-verbal cues. Japan is commonly treated as relatively high-context, while the UK is lower-context by comparison. The distinction is relative: British speakers also use understatement and indirect politeness, so neither culture is simply 'direct' or 'indirect'.

In a joint project meeting, a Japanese participant might say that a proposed deadline 'may be difficult' to signal serious concern. A British manager could interpret the phrase literally as a manageable obstacle. Conversely, a British suggestion such as 'perhaps we should revisit this' may conceal stronger criticism than a Japanese colleague initially recognises. Ambiguity therefore arises not only from language competence but from different conventions for encoding and decoding disagreement.

Silence is similarly unstable. Japanese participants may use it to reflect, respect seniority or avoid premature commitment; British participants may read the same pause as uncertainty or disengagement and fill it by speaking. Fast turn-taking can then give British employees disproportionate influence in virtual meetings. Managers should not equate frequency of speech with expertise or consent. They should allow pauses, invite considered responses and confirm the intended meaning of qualified statements without demanding public confrontation.

Hall's framework remains useful because it directs attention beyond literal wording, but it should not be treated as a universal national ranking. Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon (2011) find that later research has applied high- and low-context categories inconsistently and sometimes detached them from Hall's original argument. For managers, the implication is practical: interpret a qualified phrase as a signal to clarify, not as proof of a speaker's national style. Meaning should be checked against role, relationship, medium and the immediate decision.

## 4. Hierarchy, Individualism and Decision-Making

Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) help explain why the teams may approach voice and authority differently. The UK is characterised as more individualistic, supporting personal responsibility and the expression of individual views. Japanese organisational behaviour is often more group-oriented, encouraging employees to consider collective alignment before stating a position. If a DP World manager requests immediate personal opinions, ITOCHU participants may prefer internal discussion and a coordinated response. Delay in answering should not automatically be labelled indecision.

Hierarchy can intensify the problem. A junior British specialist may openly challenge a senior manager's proposal and regard this as responsible professional conduct. A Japanese specialist may raise the same risk privately or through a senior colleague to avoid public loss of face. A chair who asks only 'Does everyone agree?' may therefore receive silence while important concerns remain unresolved. Anonymous written input, team-level risk reviews and private follow-up conversations can separate the quality of an idea from the status of its author.

Uncertainty avoidance is also relevant. Japanese teams may seek detailed information, risk analysis and procedural clarity before approval, whereas British teams may be more willing to begin a pilot and adapt it as evidence develops. In logistics, one side may perceive consultation as bureaucracy while the other perceives experimentation as inadequate preparation. A staged decision process can reconcile these preferences: agree early on the objective and decision criteria,

circulate evidence, consult internally, then authorise a limited pilot with explicit review points and stop conditions.

Consensus-building is not simply delay. Informal consultation before a formal meeting—often discussed through the Japanese concept of *nemawashi*—can identify resistance early and make implementation smoother. Negotiation research likewise shows that behavioural sequences vary across cultural contexts and stages of a negotiation (Adair and Brett, 2005). For DP World and ITOCHU, meetings should therefore distinguish exploration, consultation and formal approval; expecting every meeting to end in an immediate decision may create false agreement.

## 5. Negotiation and Digital Collaboration

The same differences shape negotiation. British negotiators may move comparatively quickly from relationship-building to issue-based debate, exchange proposals directly and expect concessions to be explained in commercial terms. Japanese negotiators may invest more time in establishing trust, clarifying the wider relationship and aligning internally before altering a position. If one side treats speed as efficiency while the other treats preparation as evidence of commitment, each can misread the other's conduct. A useful negotiation plan should therefore identify which issues may be explored by the working team, which require headquarters approval and when a proposal becomes an authorised commitment.

Digital collaboration can magnify these problems. Video calls reduce access to contextual cues, while email removes tone and may encourage literal readings of carefully qualified language. Time-zone pressure can also favour whichever team controls the meeting schedule. Project leaders should rotate inconvenient meeting times, avoid final decisions when key participants are absent and use a shared decision log. Messages should separate information, requested action and deadline, and should state explicitly whether a response indicates receipt, preliminary support or final approval.

Translation deserves similar care even when English is the working language. Technical fluency does not guarantee pragmatic fluency: participants may

understand every word yet miss the force of a refusal, warning or conditional promise. Summaries should use plain language, minimise idiom and ask recipients to restate material obligations in their own words. This is verification, not a test of linguistic competence.

Research on global virtual teams supports this emphasis on adaptation. Presbitero (2021), using paired data from 262 members and colleagues, found that cultural intelligence was positively related to interpersonal process effectiveness and that communication accommodation helped explain this relationship. Applied to DP World and ITOCHU, effective digital collaboration requires more than accurate English: participants must adjust pace, explicitness and confirmation practices while preserving equal access to discussion.

## 6. Critical Use of Cultural Frameworks

Hall and Hofstede make hidden expectations discussable, but their explanatory power is limited. National averages cannot predict an individual employee, and a country cannot be treated as a single, stable culture. McSweeney (2002) criticises the assumptions used to infer national culture from organisational survey data. The frameworks may also understate power, profession, corporate systems and situational pressure. A culturally experienced ITOCHU manager may communicate more explicitly than a British colleague, while DP World's own global procedures may reduce national differences.

Accordingly, managers should treat the models as hypotheses to test through observation and dialogue. Instead of asserting that 'Japanese employees avoid disagreement', a project leader should ask which channels enable this team to raise risks safely. Cultural intelligence—an individual's capability to function effectively across cultural settings—supports this adaptive approach (Earley and Ang, 2003). It replaces certainty about groups with attention, inquiry and behavioural flexibility.

Critical use also requires separating levels of analysis. Hofstede's country scores describe aggregate tendencies; they are not measures of a particular person or organisation. Hall's categories address communication context, while negotiation

research examines behaviour unfolding over time. Combining these frameworks can improve diagnosis only if their concepts are not treated as interchangeable.

Managers should compare the cultural explanation with alternatives such as unclear authority, commercial incentives, professional risk standards, time-zone inequality or weak project design before deciding on an intervention.

## 7. Recommendations for the DP World–ITOCHU Team

First, establish a written communication charter. It should define decision rights, escalation routes, response times and the meaning of provisional versus final agreement. After each meeting, circulate a concise record of decisions, owners, deadlines, assumptions and unresolved risks. Participants should be invited to correct the record within an agreed period.

Second, design meetings for both rapid discussion and considered consultation. Circulate agendas and evidence in advance; collect written questions; provide quiet thinking time; and invite each team to identify risks before approval. Complex proposals should follow a two-stage rhythm: discussion first, confirmation after internal consultation. This supports consensus without allowing responsibilities to remain vague.

Third, diversify feedback channels. Combine open discussion with private one-to-ones, written comments and anonymous risk reporting. Give criticism privately when status or face may be affected but record the operational issue transparently. Leaders should paraphrase ambiguous statements—‘Am I right that this deadline is not currently acceptable?’—rather than assuming silence or polite language means consent.

Finally, review the system rather than blaming culture when problems arise. A short monthly retrospective can compare intended and understood decisions, missed signals and response times. Cross-cultural training should use actual project scenarios and include reciprocal adaptation: British staff practise listening for qualified disagreement and allowing consultation; Japanese staff practise making material risks explicit in the agreed project channels. The aim is a shared team

culture that combines clarity, preparation, relationship awareness and accountable action.

The review should use observable indicators: decisions reopened because approval was misunderstood, actions delayed by unclear ownership, risks raised only after formal meetings, and participation across spoken and written channels. Trends are more informative than national comparisons. If written follow-up produces earlier risk identification, the practice should be retained for the whole team rather than labelled an accommodation for Japanese colleagues. This reinforces a common operating model and avoids making one group appear exceptional.

## 8. Conclusion

The DP World–ITOCHU partnership makes UK–Japanese communication a practical and strategically consequential management issue. Differences in contextual meaning, silence, hierarchy, individual voice, uncertainty and consensus can distort decisions even when participants share commercial goals. Yet national frameworks are useful only when applied critically and checked against individual and organisational evidence. The strongest response is not to privilege a British or Japanese style, but to create shared rules: advance preparation, explicit written confirmation, multiple routes for dissent and staged decisions. These practices can turn cultural difference from a source of false agreement into a resource for more careful analysis, stronger trust and more reliable implementation across complex international logistics projects.

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