

**International Business Communication Between UK and Japanese Teams:
A Cross-Cultural Evaluation of Communication Styles in Unilever and Kao
Corporation**

Module code: LCBB6023

Module Name: International Business Communications

Assignment Title: Component 2: Coursework: Essay

Lecturer: Abdi Rahman

Student Name: Charmaine Vickers – Silby

Student Number: 2321095

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1. Introduction and Business Context

Communicating across borders is essential for multinational companies that need to collaborate and work together in diverse cultural environments. Just look at the UK and Japan; their economic connections have been growing stronger over the past few years. Trade, investment, and industrial cooperation between the two countries are all part of this growth. As the UK government data shows, the UK-Japan bond contributes around £27 billion per year to the economy, and Japanese investments in the UK are estimated at about £86 billion (GOV.UK, 2025a). And here's a major point: there's a brand new investment of £7.5 billion from Japan into UK infrastructure and clean energy (GOV.UK, 2025b). This clearly highlights how significant both nations find this relationship.

This essay will concentrate on two well-known companies, Unilever and Kao Corporation, both of which are in the same business, but are in different cultures. Unilever is an example of a UK-based multinational company that communicates directly, with low context, and where consensus-based decision making and hierarchy are important. Kao Corporation demonstrates Japanese business culture, which is more indirect, high-context and where consensus-based decision making and hierarchy are important. These choices of companies are suitable, both are involved in the global business of consumer goods, but they also understandably vary in the way they communicate because of the cultural differences.

The purpose of this essay is to assess the differences in communication between the UK team and the Japanese team, to analyse why these differences could lead to misunderstandings in a business scenario, and to apply the theories of intercultural communication to actual contexts of organisations to gain a better understanding of how cultural and communication barriers might affect international business.

2. Main Body

2.1 Cultural and Business Communication Context

Cultural values have significant impacts on communication in international business, affecting not only the ways in which messages are communicated, but also how they are understood and responded to (Iddrisu, 2025). This is most clearly seen in UK–Japan business relations, where post-pandemic restructuring and growing global supply chain integration have further complicated cross-cultural interaction challenges.

In Unilever, communication is in a typical UK format which is direct and explicit. Staff are urged to talk clearly, share thoughts openly, and keep focused on tasks. During COVID, Unilever pushed agile working, speeding decisions and boosting project success with global teams (Ferrazzi, 2020). Yet, this direct approach causes issues in international collaborations. Messages often mean different things abroad, so clear communication is key.

The culture focuses on individualism, emphasizing personal accountability and performance-driven talk. This low power distance approach boosts employee resistance to authority and encourages more open communication with top management. This leads to faster paces and more innovation, yet it might make people less sensitive to cross-cultural differences (Toufighi et al., 2024).

Kao, on the other hand, has an indirect and context-dependent communication culture. As Japanese society emphasizes collectivism, hierarchy, and seniority, the emphasis on communication is carefully crafted to maintain harmony and avoid conflict (Koda, 2025). Business communication is usually formal, and aims for consistency of information across regional subsidiaries and globally as a brand. Kao's five-year communication campaign in nine Asian countries, for instance, was able to standardise the messaging under a common theme, Comfort, Made Together, showing a structured but coordinated approach to cross-border communication (Carmona, 2026). This is a trend toward increasingly world-oriented communication strategies, without compromising on any culturally sensitive messaging.

The nature of decision making is largely consensus; often needs to take place within the organisation across several stakeholders before execution, delaying responsiveness but improving organisational coherence and minimising reputational risk in varied markets (Blokland and Reniers, 2021). Cultural differences shape people's expectations of business communication, influencing meeting formats, report writing, and feedback delivery. This understanding is vital for international teamwork. Miscommunication can cause misunderstandings, decrease efficiency, and hinder productivity.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's model is a helpful tool for examining communication differences between the UK and Japan (Wale, 2025). Individualism is highly rated in the UK with preference for independent decision making; Japan is more collectivist, emphasizing group harmony and collective responsibility (Ozeki and Travaglino, 2022). There are also variations in terms of power distance, with Japan showing more respect for hierarchy than the UK. Further, Japan has a higher uncertainty avoidance score, making them more likely to prefer structured processes and risk reduction, and also have a long-term orientation, which is conducive to strategic planning and the nurturing of long-term relationships with others (Landis, 2018).

2.2.2 Hall's High-Context vs Low-Context Communication Theory

The theory of Hall also accounts for differences in communication (Lamino and Diaz, 2024). In the UK, messages are explicit and to the point. Contrastingly, in Japan, meaning is often inferred through context and non-verbal cues. This difference leads to misunderstandings; for example, UK teams see Japanese communication as vague, while Japanese teams find UK communication too direct. So, in cross-border meetings, these cultural contrasts can be tricky (Tabata and Vrij, 2023).

2.2.3 Trompenaars' Cultural Dimensions

These differences can also be understood through Trompenaars' model (Mazur et al., 2025). The UK is oriented towards universalism (apply rules in the same way), while Japan could be oriented towards particularism (rules depend on relationships) (Ozeki and Travaglino, 2022). Furthermore, Japanese communication tends to be more diffuse than UK communication, which is more specific and task-oriented (Tabata and Vrij, 2023). These theories work well to account for cultural differences, but they could be simplistic in the context of today's business. Strict cultural boundaries are sometimes broken due to globalisation, digital communication, multicultural teams, and behaviour may also be shaped by the context of the organisation rather than the nationality.

2.3. Evaluation of Communication Style Differences

Communication is a key difference between the two companies Unilever and Kao Corporation, and is important for clarity and interpretation of the workplace. Unilever opts for direct communication, clearly laying out expectations and issues to prevent misunderstandings and boost efficiency (Ferrazzi, 2020). This aligns with research showing that low-context cultures, such as the UK, value straightforward and efficient talks (Lamino and Diaz, 2024). On the other hand, Kao Corporation prefers indirect communication to keep peace and avoid conflicts (Koda, 2025). This is a reflection of the general cultural practice in Japan to not explicitly express one's thoughts, feelings or emotions, and thus may leave gaps in interpretation in international collaboration.

Further, cultural differences between the two organisations are revealed in their decision making processes. Unilever has agile working practices that focus on quick decisions, quick response and accountability at the managerial and cross functional team level (Andguladze, 2025). The strategy is consistent with government-backed economic cooperation and innovation programmes between the United Kingdom and Japan to enhance their ability to innovate and respond to international markets (GOV.UK, 2025a). Kao, on the other hand, has a consensus-based decision making mechanism, frequently associated with *ringi*, which involves a series of approvals in the hierarchy of decision making prior to implementation (Koda, 2025). Although this helps ensure alignment and minimise organisational risk, it can also cause delays and friction in situations where they wish to be responsive and their UK partners have come from a different brand culture which is expecting faster results.

The structure of the organisation has a significant impact on the communication process in each of the organisations. Unilever has relatively level management structures where employees are encouraged to communicate openly and take part in decision-making processes (Kang et al., 2023). This is key to innovation and quicker evolution of ideas, especially during times of change in the global supply chain management sector. In comparison, Kao Corporation has a more hierarchical structure, with communication occurring through formally established channels and respecting senior authority (Kao, 2024). This fosters discipline and organisational order but it can hinder the flow of spontaneous ideas and slow down the cross-level communication flow in international projects.

There is a major difference between the two organisations in terms of feedback and conflict management. Feedback in Unilever is direct, focused on performance and is openly shared to enhance efficiency and accountability (Ahmed, 2024). Conversely, Kao Corporation employs indirect methods of feedback, frequently articulated or communicated in formalized ways to maintain harmony and prevent conflict (WIPO, 2023).

Likewise, there are diverse types of team collaboration and trust-building processes. To achieve tasks, speed and short-term results are paramount in communication culture at Unilever (Gregory, 2024). Unlike individualist values, Kao Corporation follows the principle of establishing a long-term relationship and trust before execution (Ozeki and Travaglino, 2022). This may cause mismatching in joint projects in which the Japanese teams emphasize stability while the UK teams emphasize speed.

2.4 Implications for International Business Communication

Failure to successfully communicate between Unilever and Kao Corporation will have a big impact on the success of multinational projects. Miscommunication is one of the significant impacts that can cause delays in project schedules when instructions or decisions are misunderstood between teams (Eyiah et al., 2025). There may also be a loss of efficiency when teams from different countries communicate, with UK teams expecting immediate actions to be taken, whereas Japanese teams may need a longer consultation period. In addition, cultural differences can cause additional delays and hinder the development of joint products because of the extended time required for decisions and clarifications.

To boost cross-cultural communication, several strategies really help. Minimizing misunderstandings starts with useful cross-cultural training programs for staffers. These sessions aid folks in grasping key cultural differences. Beyond that, having high cultural intelligence, or CQ, matters a lot too.

Adjusting the communication style when working abroad is super crucial for success in today's globe-trotting business world, so mastering it makes a big difference (Mammadov and Wald, 2025). Organisations should further establish communication plans, such as the following: documenting the organisation's expectations and decisions using structured documentation to ensure clarity. Language-related misunderstandings can also be minimized by using bilingual communication support or neutral business English, and enhance coordination among teams.

Organizations in the UK and Japan are encouraged to use a blend of direct and respectful communication. Plus, running cultural awareness workshops can boost understanding between teams. Ongoing relationship-building also helps in building trust. All these strategies make collaboration easier and improve project success in international businesses, according to Dinu et al., 2025.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, there are huge differences in communication between Unilever and Kao Corporation because of their different cultures. UK communications are likely to be more straightforward, focused on the task, efficient while the Japanese style is more indirect, relationship oriented and consensus building. These differences can cause misunderstandings, like in the way decisions are made, given feedback, and working on a team.

The cultural dimension theories, especially Hofstede's cultural dimension and Hall's high-context and low-context communication theory, is a great tool to help explain these communication gap. They draw attention to the differences in workplace interaction, hierarchy and expectations in both countries related to individualism.

Overall, the main thing is for organizations to tweak their approach when working internationally. Gaining cultural insight, staying flexible, and having solid communication plans really cut down on misunderstandings and amp up effectiveness. At the end of the day, nailing that cross-cultural chat is what keeps UK-Japan business bonds strong over the long haul.

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