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Introduction

Good communication is very important when people from different countries work together. This is because different cultures have different ways of talking and working. If people do not understand these differences, they may face problems and make mistakes. This essay talks about the differences in communication between teams from the UK and Japan.

The UK and Japan are very different in culture. The UK is more direct, while Japan uses a more polite and indirect way of speaking. These differences can cause confusion when people from both countries try to work together on a project. (Hayward, C. 2025)

In this essay, I will look at how people in the UK and Japan communicate. I will also use some popular culture theories to help explain these differences. These include Hofstede's cultural dimensions, high- and low-context communication and Trompenaars' 7 dimensions of culture.

To help explain the topic clearly, I will use two real companies. One is Unilever, a large company from the UK. The other is Shiseido, a large company from Japan. These two companies are both in the beauty and personal care market. I will explain how their workers may face problems in communication and how they can work better together.

Background of the Companies

Unilever (UK)

Unilever is one of the biggest companies in the world. It is based in London, UK. The company makes many different products like soap, shampoo, food and cleaning products. Some of its known brands are Dove, Lifebuoy and Lipton. Unilever works in more than 190 countries and has a strong team of workers from different cultures. (Unilever 2025)

Unilever is known for being modern and open in its way of working. It has a clear structure, and people are encouraged to speak openly and give their ideas. In the UK, Unilever workers often use direct language. They like to go straight to the point when talking or making decisions. This helps in quick decision-making but may sometimes seem rude to people from other cultures.

Unilever also values teamwork, but people are used to working more independently. They are encouraged to think for themselves and take responsibility. This is part of the UK's working culture.

Shiseido (Japan)

Shiseido is one of the oldest beauty companies in the world. It started in Tokyo, Japan, in 1872. It makes beauty products like skincare, makeup, and hair care. Some of its brands include Shiseido, Clé de Peau Beauté and Elixir. Shiseido has now expanded to many countries, but it still follows many traditional Japanese values. (Ltd, S.C. 2023)

The company culture in Shiseido is more formal. Workers use polite language and follow a clear chain of command. Respect for seniors is very important. Decisions take more time, because people talk quietly in groups and avoid saying “no” directly. This is because Japanese culture does not like open disagreement.

Teamwork is very important at Shiseido. People work closely in groups and often wait for group agreement before making decisions. This helps build harmony, but can slow down projects, especially when working with teams from other countries like the UK. The UK and Japan have very different cultures. These differences affect how people talk, work, and make decisions in business.

In the UK, people value independence and personal ideas. British workers like to speak clearly and share their thoughts. It is normal to ask questions and even disagree with the manager in a polite way. The culture is individualist, which means people are responsible for their own work. Time is also very important in the UK. People try to be on time and finish tasks quickly.

On the other hand, Japanese culture is more group focused. (Taguchi, R. 2021). People care a lot about what the group thinks. It is not common to disagree in public or to speak very directly. Being polite and respectful is very important in Japan. In meetings, people do not always say what they really feel, especially if they think it might upset someone. This makes it hard for others to understand what they truly mean.

Japanese workers also follow a strict order in the workplace. Seniors are respected and their opinions are followed. Time is also important in Japan, but people spend more time discussing and making sure everyone agrees before moving ahead.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the communication problems between the UK and Japan, we can use some important cultural theories. This help explain why people from different countries act and speak in different ways.

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede created a model that shows how cultures are different. Two of his dimensions are useful here: individualism vs collectivism and power distance.

The UK is high in individualism. This means British people value personal freedom and speaking openly. (Morris, A. 2024) They are used to making their own choices and sharing their ideas. Japan is more collectivist. This means people care more about the group than about themselves. They try to keep harmony in the group and avoid conflict.

The UK also has a low power distance. This means workers feel more equal to their managers and can speak openly. Japan has higher power distance. Workers do not usually question the boss and prefer to follow orders quietly. These differences can cause problems. A UK worker might speak too directly. A Japanese worker might not speak at all, even when there is a problem.

High-Context and Low-Context Communication

This theory was developed by Edward Hall. It talks about how much information is shared directly in communication.

The UK uses low-context communication. This means people say what they mean. They use clear words and give direct answers. There is little reading between the lines.

Japan uses high-context communication. (Merhazion, A. (2020) People do not always say what they mean out loud. A lot is shared through tone of voice, body language, or silence. People are expected to understand the meaning without everything being said clearly. This can cause misunderstandings. A British person may think a Japanese person is being unclear or hiding something. A Japanese person may think a British person is being rude or too forward.

Trompenaars' 7 Dimensions of Culture

Fons Trompenaars also made a model to explain cultural differences. One useful part is universalism vs particularism. (Turner & Trompenaars. n.d.)

The UK is more universalist. This means rules and laws are the same for everyone. Business is based on what is written in the contract. Japan is more particularist. People focus more on relationships and the situation. A Japanese worker may break a rule if it helps keep harmony in the group.

Another useful dimension is neutral vs emotional. The UK is more neutral. People control their feelings and speak in a calm way. Japan is also neutral, but for different reasons. Japanese people hide their feelings to keep peace. These cultural rules shape how people act and speak at work. Understanding these theories helps explain why British and Japanese teams sometimes misunderstand each other.

Communication Style Differences

UK Communication Style

In the UK, people like to use clear and direct language. They usually say exactly what they mean. This helps avoid confusion and saves time. In meetings, workers are expected to speak up, share their opinions, and even ask questions to the manager. It is not seen as rude. In fact, it shows interest and confidence.

British people also use polite language, but they do not usually hide the truth. They try to be honest while still being respectful. For example, if there is a problem, they will say so directly. They may say, "I don't agree," or "I think this is not the best idea."

The tone is usually calm and friendly. Even when someone disagrees, they try not to sound angry. Humor is also common in the UK workplace, and people sometimes joke to reduce stress.

Emails and written messages in the UK are also simple and to the point. (GCS. n.d.). People do not use many long words or emotional language. The goal is to be clear and fast.

Japanese Communication Style

In Japan, communication is very different. People are more indirect and careful with their words. They do not like to say “no” openly, because this might hurt the other person’s feelings or cause embarrassment. Instead, they use soft language or silence to show they do not agree.

In meetings, Japanese workers often stay quiet, especially if they are junior staff. They will listen more than talk. Speaking too much or asking too many questions can be seen as disrespectful or rude, especially in front of a manager. Respect and harmony are more important than personal opinions.

Body language and facial expressions are also important. A small smile or nod can mean agreement. Silence can mean many things such as respect, thinking or disagreement. People from other cultures may find this confusing.

Emails in Japan are usually very polite and formal. (Suikataalk.com. 2019). Even a simple message may include many greetings and respectful words.

Problems from Communication Differences

When UK and Japanese teams work together, communication problems can happen because their styles are so different.

One common problem is direct vs indirect speaking. British workers say what they think directly. If they do not like an idea, they will say it clearly. But Japanese workers may feel this is too rude or too strong. They may become quiet or feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, when Japanese workers speak in a soft or indirect way, British workers may not understand the true message. They may think the Japanese team agrees, when actually, they do not.

Another issue is silence. In the UK, silence in a meeting can feel awkward. People may think something is wrong. But in Japan, silence is normal. It can mean thinking or being polite. British workers may try to fill the silence, while Japanese workers may feel this is too much.

Emails can also be a problem. British emails are short and direct. Japanese emails are longer and more formal. A short UK email may seem cold or unfriendly to Japanese staff. A long Japanese email may seem too slow or confusing to British staff.

Decision-making is another issue. UK teams make fast decisions and like quick answers. Japanese teams take more time and discuss in groups. British teams may feel the Japanese team is too slow. Japanese teams may feel the British team is rushing and not being careful.

Hierarchy can also create confusion. In Japan, workers do not question the boss. In the UK, junior staff often share their ideas. A UK team may ask the Japanese team for feedback and not get any clear answer. This is not because the Japanese team has no ideas, but because they are waiting for their manager to speak. (Linkedin.com. 2025).

All these differences can cause stress, mistakes, and delays in the project. People may feel confused or even upset. But the problem is not about bad intentions. It is about not understanding each other's culture and way of speaking.

How to Improve Communication Between the Teams

To make teamwork better between UK and Japanese teams, both sides need to learn and respect each other's communication styles. Here are some simple ways to improve communication:

1. Cultural training:

Both teams should get basic training about each other's culture. This can help them understand why people speak or act in a certain way. For example, British staff will learn why Japanese workers speak softly or stay silent. Japanese staff will learn why British workers speak directly.

2. Clear communication rules:

The teams can agree on some shared rules. For example, how to run meetings, how long to wait for replies, and how to share feedback. This will help avoid confusion.

3. Use simple language:

When speaking or writing in English, both sides should use simple and clear words. This is helpful because English is not the first language for everyone.

4. Allow more time:

Japanese teams may need more time to discuss ideas with their group or manager. UK teams should be patient and understand this is part of Japanese culture. At the same time, Japanese teams can try to give updates, so the UK team knows what is happening.

5. Mix communication styles:

Sometimes use emails and sometimes use video calls or face-to-face meetings. Emails are good for clear records, but video calls help show tone and body language, which is important in Japanese communication.

6. Build relationships:

Spending time together, even just chatting informally, can help build trust. When people feel more comfortable, they will speak more freely.

7. Use a cultural "bridge" person:

If possible, have someone who understands both cultures well. This person can help explain messages and avoid misunderstandings.

Conclusion

Working with people from different cultures can be difficult, but also very rewarding. In this essay, we looked at how teams from the UK and Japan communicate differently. The UK uses a more direct and open style. Japan uses a more polite and indirect style. These differences can lead to misunderstandings, such as silence being taken the wrong way or emails sounding rude.

Using cultural theories like Hofstede, Hall, and Trompenaars helps us understand why these differences happen. Real problems can occur if teams do not understand each other's culture.

But there are also good ways to fix this. By learning about each other, using simple language, and giving enough time and respect, teams can work together well. With better understanding and good teamwork, the UK and Japanese companies can build strong partnerships and reach their shared goals.

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