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**Understanding Miscommunication: A Reflection on Cultural Assumptions in
a UK-Japan Business Meeting**



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In a cross-border project meeting with Japanese partners, my British team hoped to confirm the key schedule of the upcoming marketing project as soon as possible, so it was clear in the discussion that it hoped to reach a decision on the spot to advance the project. However, the Japanese team did not respond directly to the request but politely said that "further consideration is needed" and "internal consultation is needed", followed by a silence. For us, this indirect response and lack of immediate feedback create a sense of uncertainty and even some embarrassment, which makes the British team more worried about the progress of cooperation. At that time, I interpreted their silence as hesitation and unwillingness to promise and even suspected that they disagree with the proposal.

When I have a meeting with my team, I firmly believe that the project will progress smoothly. I never questioned my assumptions that effective business discussions should come up with clear answers and make decisions quickly. This expectation is deeply rooted in the communication norms I am familiar with in the UK, so when the Japanese team does not respond immediately, I think "something went wrong". The long silence made me feel uncomfortable. I instinctively interpreted it as uncertainty, reluctance, and may even deliberately reject our proposal or reconsider cooperation. Looking back now, I realised that I understood the situation according to my own

cultural reference book. I look forward to receiving directly feedback, because in my experience, silence in a meeting usually means dissatisfied. I also assume that efficiency is a generally recognised professional value. These assumptions allowed me to interpret the behaviour of Japanese teams almost entirely according to the British communication model, without considering that their reactions may reflect different cultural logic. I thought I was just reacting to observable clues at that time, now I realise that my interpretation is influenced by the usual perspective, rather than trying to understand these interactions from a cultural perspective.

Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context communication shows that different cultures differ in the degree of explicit expression of meaning through language or implicit transmission of meaning through situational suggestion (Broeder, 2021). This framework helped me identify the communication problems in the meeting and re-examine the moments that made me feel uneasy. I come from the low-context environment in Britain, and I am used to conveying information clearly and making decisions clearly. This has formed my expectation, that is, direct response, because it represents an effective discussion. In contrast, Japanese communication relies more on situational signalling and collective understanding. The long silence in the meeting may indicate that the Japanese team is carefully weighing the decision, rather than showing distrust or unwillingness to cooperate. From this point of view, I initially thought it was a hesitant pause and indirect expression, which reflected the

Japanese team's thoughtfulness and serious consideration of the proposal. Silence is not a sign of disagreement, but a way of communication based on culture. Realising this prompted me to question my assumptions that the problem could only be clarified through a clear verbal response.

After learning more about the dependence of different countries on situational communication, I began to re-examine the silence phenomenon in the meeting. In the communication norms I am familiar with, silence is often uncomfortable, and it is usually acquiesced to non-participation or disagreement. However, in many high-context cultures, including Japan, silence is meaningful and can be deliberately used as part of the communication process. It can reflect respect for the discussion and leave room for more prudent decision-making. With this understanding, the continuous silence in our meeting may not be what I originally thought, but a manifestation of the Japanese team processing information and trying to adjust internal views. Realising this prompts me to reflect on my habitual response to silence and makes me realise that my cultural background not only affects what I notice in the interaction but also affects my emotional response to it.

Hofstede's theory of cultural dimension emphasises the uncertainty of different ethnic cultures, the differences in hierarchy and personal responsibility preferences (Huang *et al.*, 2024), and also provides a useful perspective for understanding why it is unlikely to make immediate decisions in this situation. Japan has a particularly high score in

avoiding uncertainty, which means that decision-making often requires careful assessment to mitigate potential risks. From this perspective, on-site confirmation of key project nodes cannot meet the expectations of the Japanese team to reduce uncertainty. I previously understood it as hesitation, but in fact it may be a cautious practice to ensure that any commitment is fully considered before being expressed externally. In addition, Japan's power distance is relatively high, which means that important decisions usually need to be communicated after consultation with senior members of the organisation. During the meeting, I did not consider that the participants present might not have the power to approve the proposal immediately, even if they in their hearts agreed to move on. After reflection, I realised that my previous assumption that rapid decision-making reflected efficiency and professionalism was influenced by my own work environment norms. This expectation of immediate response has led me to ignore the internal process that guides different cultural decisions. After realising this, I reconceptualised the response of the Japanese team, no longer treating it as reluctant, but as a reasonable way to manage responsibility and deal with uncertainty in the context of the organisation.

At this point, I suddenly recalled a detail from the meeting. When we proposed to make a clear schedule for the project, the Japanese representative nodded politely with a smile and responded gently, "We will think about it again." I was very confused at that time, because nods and smiles seemed to me to be positive signals, which seemed to contradict their unwillingness to give a clear answer. Now I realise that I

interpreted the behaviour of the British according to the idea that consent must be clearly expressed. Trompenaars' insight gave me a different understanding of this interaction. In a culture that values harmony and strives to avoid direct conflict, indirect expression is not an escape, but a way to intentionally maintain relationships and avoid losing face. The kind of hesitation that I understood before may be just their efforts to create a discussion atmosphere that makes all participants feel comfortable and respectful. I initially interpreted their calm and reserved attitude as a lack of enthusiasm, but this may also be a common self-restraint in professional situations. Once I realised this, I realised that I had not considered that different ways of communication might be equally sincere and constructive.

Through the above thinking, I found that the misunderstanding in the meeting did not stem from personal behaviour, but from the different cultural logic behind the communication between the two sides. Hall's view on high-context communication explains why it is important to convey meaning through silence and subtle hints, while Hofstede's cultural dimension explains why it is important to conduct internal consultation and reduce risk before responding. The framework of Trompenaars' further reveals how interpersonal harmony affects the tone and wording of the Japanese team's response. Based on these views, I realised that the hesitation or lack of enthusiasm I understood was actually a coherent and culturally characteristic way of decision-making and relationship management. At this point, I have to abandon the assumption that clear, quick response and direct norms advocated by the British have

universal applicability and realise that different cultural frameworks can also provide equally reasonable ways of communication and cooperation.

Whilst these theoretical frameworks have helped me to reconceptualise the behaviours that took place in this meeting, I have also come to realise that relying on cultural theories alone has the potential to glamorise the communication context. This is because no model can fully explain the subtle hesitations, changes in tone, or interpersonal dynamics that take place in a conference room. For example, Hall's concept of 'high-context communication' explains silence in a broad cultural sense, but it cannot tell me whether the silence of the Japanese delegates was motivated by cultural habits, personal preferences, or simply because they were tired after a long day. Similarly, Hofstede's dimension describes national tendencies in general, but it cannot explain the difference between junior employees bound by hierarchy who may prefer direct communication but senior managers who choose restraint for the sake of group harmony. Even Trompenaars' emphasis on maintaining face cannot fully reflect the internal pressure or organisational limitations that the Japanese team may encounter in the negotiations, and these factors were incomprehensible to me at that time.

After reviewing this meeting repeatedly, I became more cautious about treating theory as a fixed or comprehensive interpretation. Although they provide valuable perspectives, they may also be a shortcut to simplifying the complex reality of human

interaction into a single category. In my opinion, these theories are not perfect, but they do provide useful insights with cultural orientation. They encourage increased understanding and tolerance in a cross-cultural environment, but still need to be balanced with sensitivity, curiosity, and awareness of situational nuances.

Through reflection, I realised that what I need to change most is to learn to deal with uncertainty more effectively in a cross-cultural environment. This includes not only finding reasonable explanations for the communication methods of partners, but also adjusting their own communication methods. In the past, if the other party's communication was not clear enough, I often interpreted it as hesitation or disagreement according to my own cultural expectations, and this interpretation was often based on silence or indirect expression. Now, I need to change my thinking, learn to accept ambiguity more calmly, and think more critically about how different cultural backgrounds affect business communication. At the same time, I also need to understand how my emotional reactions, such as impatience and eagerness, affect the interpretation of communication. Considering that cultural differences will affect the interpretation of emotional signals, my reaction may have inadvertently conveyed dissatisfaction to the Japanese team. For future transnational cooperation and exchange, I hope to think about it before drawing conclusions, and remind myself that unfamiliar communication methods may be just normal behaviour in the cultural context. Cultivating this awareness is crucial for a more open and respectful attitude towards future cross-cultural communication.

I now realise that when working with Japanese partners and teams from other high-context cultures, it is necessary to consciously prepare and communicate. A practical step is to email the agenda, recommendations and key issues a few days in advance, and briefly explain what information is needed later. This will leave enough time for internal consultation to avoid putting the team in a situation where it needs to respond immediately. I can also adjust the way of asking questions in the meeting. For example, use "What factors does your team need to review before confirming?" Such a question instead of "Can you confirm it today?" This way of asking questions allows the other party to clarify the problem without being forced to make a promise too early. Similarly, it also leaves room for Japanese partners to indirectly express their concerns and then give further suggestions and guidance. Ultimately, the purpose of the meeting is to effectively advance the process.

The control of rhythm is equally important. There is no need to rush to break the silence. I can deliberately pause and count silently in my heart. By waiting for this behaviour, I can show that I welcome their opinions. Pay attention to some subtle hints, such as nods, smiling faces, or brief communication between Japanese team members, which can also help me better understand whether they are agreeing or having doubts. In addition, I can also adjust the presentation of the information. Attaching a brief written description next to the key proposal, using a visualised timeline, or outlining the reasons for the proposal can help enhance mutual

understanding and reduce ambiguity.

In the last meeting, we only expressed our desire to determine the project schedule as soon as possible, but did not explain the reason and why we should do so. We could have explained the importance of the schedule more clearly. In the European and American markets, Christmas is a critical period for product launch. If we can determine the schedule early, we can catch up with this seasonal window period. If this business logic could be explained more clearly at that time, it might reduce the uncertainty of the Japanese team and help them understand this urgency from our perspective. Finally, making it clear from the beginning whether the meeting is exploratory, feedback-oriented or decision-oriented, helps to unify expectations and avoid misunderstandings in terms of schedules or commitments. In a word, these strategic adjustments in cross-cultural communication not only reflect practical skills, but also show a more patient and adaptive attitude towards cultural differences, which will help make cross-cultural cooperation smoother in the future.

This experience made me realise how easy it is to misunderstand when I interpret other people's behaviour with my own cultural expectations as a framework. At first, I thought the hesitation and silence of the Japanese team was a negative resistance to the implementation of the project. Now it seems that this interpretation stems from my inherent assumption about how to make decisions "should", which leads to a misreading. Through reflection, I learned to recognise the limitations of my usual

interpretation and the importance of stopping and thinking before reaching a conclusion. I also realise that effective cross-cultural communication requires not only theoretical knowledge, but also emotional regulation, curiosity and willingness to adjust one's own behaviour. This experience not only made me understand the problem, but also helped me develop a more open and respectful attitude, which I hope to apply in future international cooperation.

Reference list:

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