

EVALUATING UK–JAPAN COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

in the AstraZeneca–Daiichi Sankyo
Partnership

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Introduction and Business Background

Communication in multinational collaborations is influenced not only by language but also by cultural norms regarding hierarchy, trust, dispute, and decision-making. This essay compares communication styles between UK and Japanese teams in the context of AstraZeneca's relationship with Daiichi Sankyo. The emphasis is on how these variations might lead to misunderstandings during joint project implementation, especially when teams need to share information, debate risks, confirm choices, and retain confidence across organisational borders.

AstraZeneca is a global pharmaceutical business headquartered in the United Kingdom. It identifies itself as "a global, science-led, patient-focused pharmaceutical business" that is dedicated to the research, development, and marketing of prescription medications (AstraZeneca, 2026). Daiichi Sankyo is a Japanese pharmaceutical corporation with global headquarters in Tokyo and operations in over 20 countries (Daiichi Sankyo UK, 2025). The selected business environment is AstraZeneca and Daiichi Sankyo's 2020 global development and commercialisation agreement for DS-1062, a TROP2-directed antibody drug conjugate and possible cancer treatment (AstraZeneca, 2020). Under the terms of the agreement, the businesses would collaborate to develop and commercialise DS-1062 globally, with the exception of Japan, where Daiichi Sankyo would retain exclusive rights (AstraZeneca, 2020).

This alliance is appropriate because pharmaceutical collaboration requires accuracy, risk awareness, regulatory coordination, and long-term relationship management. However, it would be too simplistic to assume that cultural differences always cause issues. They can also improve collaboration if well managed: UK-style openness may help speed and challenge, but Japanese consensus-building may assist risk control and commitment. The primary issue is not whether communication style is superior, but how both teams can comprehend and adjust to each other's expectations in order to decrease miscommunication and promote successful project implementation.

Theoretical Framework

This work uses Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high-context and low-context communication theories to assess communication between UK and Japanese teams. Hofstede's approach is valuable for demonstrating how national cultures differ in their attitudes about hierarchy, individual expression, uncertainty, and achievement. Hall's theory is useful because it focuses more directly on how meaning is communicated, whether explicitly or through context, tone, relationship, and nonverbal cues.

According to the Culture Factor Group (2026), the UK has a Power Distance score of 35, indicating a weaker acceptance of hierarchy, whilst Japan has a score of 54, indicating that people are aware of their hierarchical position. This distinction is significant because UK employees may be more prepared to criticise choices openly, whereas Japanese employees may be more cautious about rank, seniority, and official communication channels. The UK also scores 76 on Individualism, compared to Japan's 62, implying that British employees are more used to individual thought and personal initiative. However, these ratings should be viewed as indicators rather than rigid laws, as company culture, professional experience, and individual personality can all influence behaviour.

Hall's idea helps to explain the communication process itself. Carté and Fox (2008, p. 19) argue that "Low context communicators tend to express themselves in explicit, concrete, unequivocal terms," but "High context communicators, on the other hand, tend to communicate more implicitly." This distinction can pose a risk in UK-Japan collaboration since one side expects meaning to be conveyed explicitly while the other expects meaning to be grasped through context. Deresky (2017, p. 151) argues that when a message reaches the recipient, "it undergoes a transformation in which the influence of the decoder's culture becomes part of the meaning." As a result, communication is not neutral: the same message might be perceived differently based on cultural assumptions.

These theories provide a useful lens for assessing potential communication risks, but they should not be interpreted as stereotypes. Deresky (2017, p. 186) urges managers to be open to the potential that "specific people may not fit the assumed cultural prototype." As a result, this essay employs cultural theory critically: as a tool for recognising potential misconceptions, not as a fixed definition of every British or Japanese employee.

UK and Japanese Communication Style Differences

One significant distinction is the degree of directness. UK teams may expect communication to be clear, explicit, and task-oriented, particularly when deadlines, responsibilities, or dangers must be addressed. This is consistent with the UK's smaller Power Distance and higher Individualism, where employees may feel more comfortable expressing their own opinions. Japanese communication may be more indirect since maintaining unity and avoiding public embarrassment are crucial. Deresky (2017, p. 191) writes that "the Japanese are likely to be evasive or even leave the room rather than give a direct negative answer." This does not imply that Japanese communication is weaker; rather, disagreements might be stated through softer signals that demand more attention.

The second distinction concerns meetings and participation. According to Carté and Fox (2008, p. 42), "some cultures (the United Kingdom and the United States, for example) expect conversation to be fairly interactive." In a UK team, questions, debates, and interruptions may be viewed as participation. However, Carté and Fox (2008, p. 42) emphasise that Japanese communicators are more accustomed to waiting their turn to speak. As a result, British colleagues may take quiet as a lack of interest or agreement, whereas Japanese colleagues may perceive disruption as rude or superficial. This demonstrates how the same behaviour can have opposing interpretations in various cultural situations.

A third distinction is hierarchy and decision-making. Carté and Fox (2008, p. 84) write that in the United Kingdom, "bosses tend to consult widely, and subordinates generally feel free to express their own views and challenge their boss's decisions." This can encourage innovation and speedy problem resolution, but it may appear overly informal in a more hierarchical setting. In Japan, strategic or policy decisions may necessitate a lengthy consultation process called *nemawashi* (Carté and Fox, 2008, p. 24). This method may appear long to UK colleagues, but it can also foster greater commitment because concerns are addressed before a decision is made.

Uncertainty is equally significant. The Culture Factor Group (2026) characterises the UK as having minimal uncertainty. Avoidance suggests that British teams may be more willing to change their strategies once new information becomes available. In contrast, Japanese business communication may place a greater emphasis on planning, risk assessment, and internal alignment. This can be useful in a pharmaceutical project when accuracy and risk management are critical. However, it can cause stress if the UK team wants quick action while the Japanese team expects more confirmation before proceeding.

Overall, these disparities demonstrate that communication challenges are not just the result of inadequate language skills. They are shaped by diverse ideas about what constitutes respectful, efficient, and professional communication.

Potential Misunderstandings in the AstraZeneca–Daiichi Sankyo Partnership

One possible misunderstanding in the AstraZeneca–Daiichi Sankyo relationship is the speed with which decisions are made. The firms agreed to jointly develop and commercialise DS-1062 worldwide, with the exception of Japan, where Daiichi Sankyo would retain exclusive rights (AstraZeneca, 2020). This type of collaboration necessitates shared decisions regarding development activities, commercial strategy, and project responsibilities. If AstraZeneca's UK team expects speedy confirmation but Daiichi Sankyo's Japanese team requires more internal consultation, the delay could be misinterpreted as uncertainty or a lack of commitment. However, from the Japanese perspective, careful consultation may be a strategy to limit risk and achieve broader consensus before action is implemented.

A second risk is misinterpreting disagreement. A UK manager may request open feedback during a meeting and presume that silence indicates approval. This could be problematic if Japanese coworkers express worries, but avoid direct negative answers to safeguard harmony or hierarchy. In the pharmaceutical industry, this is significant since silent concerns may include scientific uncertainty, regulatory risk, market assumptions, or operational feasibility. As a result, misunderstanding may cause not only interpersonal conflict, but also repeated labour, delayed escalation, or decisions that are reviewed later.

A third issue is the format and delivery of information. Bocij, Hickie, and Greasley (2019, p. 13) suggest that information should be given in a way that is acceptable for the intended receiver. A brief and direct email may appear efficient to a UK employee, but it may not provide sufficient context for a Japanese colleague who needs additional context before affirming a position. However, a comprehensive Japanese response may appear delayed or unnecessarily cautious to the UK side if the rationale for the detail is not stated.

Finally, technology tools can help the relationship, but cannot replace cultural interpretation. Bocij, Hickie, and Greasley (2019, p. 220) define groupware as software that allows people to share information while collaborating on issue-solving. However, internet communication may limit tone, interpersonal indications, and opportunities to detect hesitancy. As a result, digital updates should be accompanied by formal meetings, written activity records, and private explanation channels.

Recommendations for Effective Cross-Cultural Communication

To prevent misunderstandings, AstraZeneca and Daiichi Sankyo should implement communication protocols that combine clarity and cultural sensitivity. First, project meetings should conclude with brief written summaries that affirm decisions, ownership, dates, risks, and next steps. According to Carté and Fox (2008, p. 79), summaries serve to ensure that there has been no misunderstanding and that everyone understands what action should be taken and by whom. This would help to maintain UK-style transparency while also providing Japanese colleagues with a clear record of internal alignment.

Second, sensitive matters should not be addressed solely through open group discussions. Risks, concerns, and disagreements should be addressed through one-on-one follow-up or smaller pre-meeting discussions. This would alleviate the pressure of public disagreement and allow Japanese colleagues to express concerns without losing face.

Third, both sides should agree on a common communication protocol. This could indicate when choices require written confirmation, which issues require escalation, and when further consultation time is required. Regular feedback loops should also be used, since MTD Training and Ventus Publishing ApS (2010, p. 16) emphasise that feedback helps decide how effective communication is.

Finally, executives should consider cultural understanding as part of project management. The goal is not to eliminate cultural differences, but to combine their strengths: UK speed and openness with Japanese preparation, harmony, and devotion.

Conclusion

The cooperation between AstraZeneca and Daiichi Sankyo indicates that UK-Japan collaboration is based on more than just similar scientific knowledge and economic goals. Communication may become difficult when UK teams seek direct, participatory, and flexible debate, whereas Japanese teams may place a higher value on hierarchy, harmony, consultation, and indirect meaning.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high-context and low-context theories serve to explain these distinctions, but they should be used critically rather than as set national stereotypes. The analysis reveals that both techniques have advantages: UK communication can promote speed and open challenge, whereas Japanese communication can enable cautious alignment and risk management. Problems emerge when either party believes that their own style is universal.

As a result, efficient project execution necessitates culturally sensitive leadership, established information processes, and trust-building. Written summaries, feedback loops, private clarification, and agreed-upon communication norms can all help to decrease misunderstandings and improve collaboration amongst teams.

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