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Voices from the
Meyler Campbell Community

A Perspective from Japan

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As I sat on the train from Kamakura to Tokyo I reflected on the day's upcoming coaching session. My coaching engagement was relatively new – I had had a chemistry session with the coachee the previous week and today would be the first coaching session proper. My coachee was Reo Sato¹, a Japanese manager in his mid-40s who had recently joined a US multinational's Japanese subsidiary and reported to the American managing director in charge of the Japanese operations; while his English language was fluent he had only spent a year overseas and had previously worked for a Japanese company.

In our chemistry session Sato-san² had been somewhat reserved, revealing little about himself, and very formal in his bearing and style of language, referring to me as “Kilner-sensei” (“sensei” being the honorific added to names of teachers, doctors and lawyers in Japan); I had the impression that he was looking to me to provide the answers to his issues.

Sato-san was finding some difficulties in his new role, principally with his boss (these had taken some time to tease out of him, and he had phrased the issues very indirectly). Specific examples included:

1. Sato-san and the other (Japanese) members of the management team were having problems communicating effectively with their new boss
2. Sato-san felt that his boss takes decisions without considering the broader circumstances involved.

Sato-san was looking for coaching on how to deal with his boss and how to adapt to working in an international company. It seemed to me that there were probably some cultural aspects that Sato-san and I needed to explore in addressing these issues – and also some cultural aspects that would probably have an impact on our coaching relationship.

While there are various models that can be used when looking at cultural differences³, the one that I find most useful is that developed by a professor at INSEAD, Erin Meyer, and explained in her book *The Culture Map*⁴. Professor Meyer has developed a model which shows how cultures vary in a number of key areas along a spectrum from one extreme to another. The scales include:

- *Communicating*: low-context vs. high-context
- *Leading*: egalitarian vs. hierarchical
- *Deciding*: consensual vs. top-down
- *Trusting*: task-based vs. relationship-based

¹ The name is fictitious, naturally.

² I will use the convention for non-Japanese in Japan of referring to Japanese people by their family name with the honorific “san”.

³ See for example Moral Foundations Theory; Culture dimension according to Edward T. Hall; Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory; The GLOBE Project: Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research; Trompenaars' model of national culture differences; and Rosinski's Cultural Orientations Framework, as usefully summarised in the International Coach Academy's Research Paper; Coaching in Japan by Lionel Bikart (<https://coachcampus.com/coach-portfolios/research-papers/lionel-bikart-coaching-in-japan/>)

⁴ Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map: Decoding How People Think, Lead, and Get Things Done Across Cultures* (PublicAffairs™, International Edition 2015). This builds on work by Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede and others.

- *Disagreeing*: confrontational vs. avoids confrontation⁵

One of the useful things about the model and the research behind it is the culture maps that can be generated comparing where different cultures are on the map. Most helpful for Sato-san and our coaching is the Japan-USA map (see Figure 1) and the Japan-UK map (see Figure 2); the former as it relates to the relationship between Sato-san and his boss, and the latter as it may give some insight into the coaching relationship between Sato-san and me.

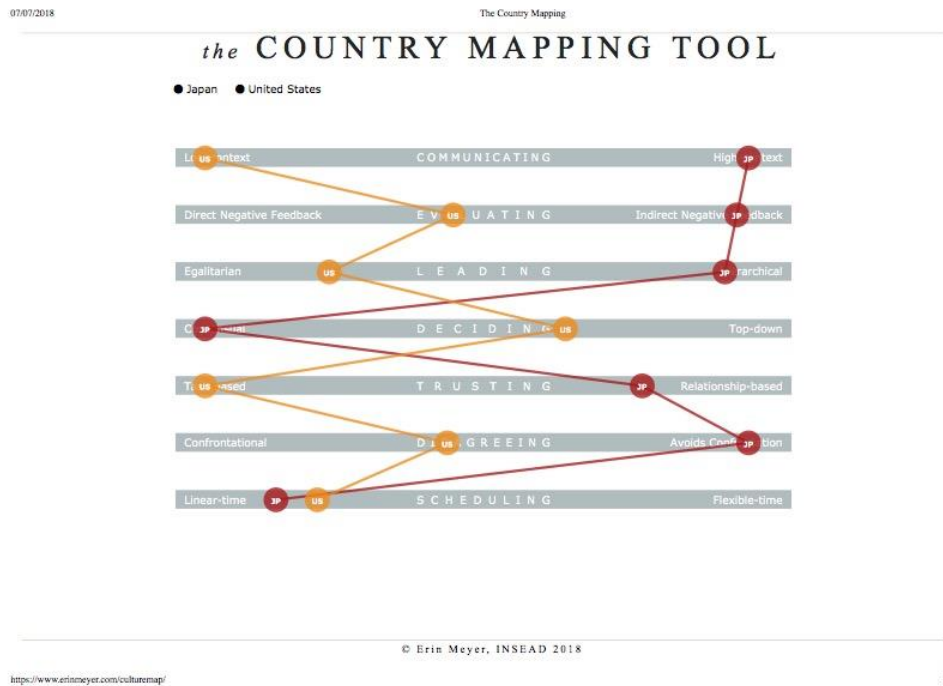


Figure 1: The Culture Map: Country Mapping Tool; Japan and the United States

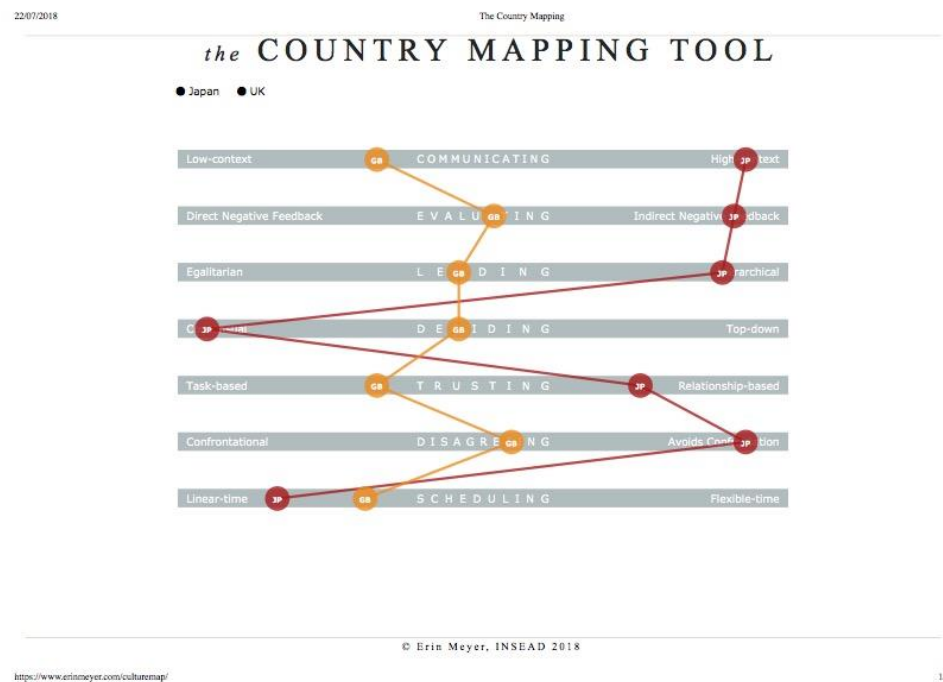


Figure 2: The Culture Map: Country Mapping Tool; Japan and the UK

⁵ The Culture Map, pp. 15-16.

The model recognises that there is a range of acceptable business behaviour in any culture, and the points on the map indicate the centre of a curve where the majority of reported behaviour occurs. Of course, everyone is an individual and the model is simply a place to start when looking at the interaction of cultures. However, areas where cultures show significant differences are useful ones to explore in coaching.

Before I considered Sato-san's specific issues, I needed to focus on our coaching relationship, particularly in three areas. The first was to work out how to develop an effective coaching relationship with him – a partnership of equals rather than a teacher-student relationship. As can be seen from the culture map, Japan is a hierarchical culture and, as such, Japanese coachees are likely to defer to someone who they regard as being in a superior position, for example a teacher, and are less likely to voice their own opinions than individuals from more egalitarian cultures. The second was how to get the real issues on the table; to understand Sato-san's real feelings (*honne*) as opposed to his public face (*tatemae*)⁶; this would hopefully become easier as our relationship deepened. The third issue in our coaching relationship related to the fact that, since Japan is a low-context culture from a communication perspective, indirect communication is often preferred, with an expectation that the recipient of the communication will implicitly be able to understand what is being said (or to “read the air” as the Japanese say⁷).

I thought the most difficult of these areas was likely to be the development of our coaching relationship. My approach to coaching is that it should be:

- a partnership of equals
- with unconditional regard for the coachee
- confidential
- a trusting relationship
- non-directive
- while bringing to bear my experience where appropriate

I thought back to a coaching session I had done the previous week in the UK as part of my Mastered course. It had certainly worked from the coachee's perspective and, as well as ticking almost all of the above boxes, I remembered that it had very much suited my coaching style – I had listened intently, allowing pauses to be filled by the coachee, asked a few simple questions, kept my eyes locked on the coachee and encouraged him to delve deeper with “anything else?” on numerous occasions. Comparing that – arguably ideal – situation with my upcoming session with Sato-san made me realise that a number of the elements that had been present in the earlier session were probably not going to be there today, particularly the depth of the relationship and (at least from Sato-san's perspective) the equality of the relationship.

Developing our relationship as a partnership of equals as opposed to that of teacher/student would therefore be key. However, to do this – and to have a better chance of Sato-san disclosing his real feelings (as opposed to his public face), I would need to work on deepening the relationship itself.

⁶ See for example Sue Shinomiya and Brian Szepekouski, *Business Passport to Japan: Revised and Updated Edition* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2008), 141-2

⁷ In Japanese the phrase *kuuki o yomu* (reading the air) is used, and someone who cannot read the air is described as *kuuki yomenai*

Business (and many other aspects of life) in Japan is generally built on trust⁸ and is relationship based; building relationships is very important⁹, more so than in the USA and the UK. While time spent in formal settings such as meetings is important in creating relationships, it is often more the time spent in less formal settings (lunches, coffees, drinks, golf, karaoke ...) that strengthens the bonds between individuals in Japan¹⁰. While karaoke was probably not the path to take here, some time spent with Sato-san in some other less formal surroundings, perhaps over lunch or at a coffee shop, might therefore help.

But what to do for our initial session(s) while the relationship was developing? If it seemed as if we were making insufficient progress, perhaps I might need to adopt a more directive, or mentor-like approach at first. It would obviously depend on the circumstances, but that may be an option, although clearly there would be a risk that it would then be difficult to move to a more non-directive approach as the coaching progressed.

Focusing next on the third potential issue in the coaching relationship, that of being attuned to the indirect communication style of the Japanese, it seemed to me that applying my listening skills (hopefully at level 3!) should get me a long way there. In addition, my experience of working with and managing Japanese for nearly 10 years, would help me to be able to “read the air”.

Finally, it occurred to me that I would probably need to adapt my coaching style somewhat – for example prolonged eye contact is regarded as impolite in Japanese culture¹¹ and Japanese are much more reluctant to discuss feelings than individuals from the USA or the UK.

Bringing it all together, my plan was therefore to do the following:

- (although I had been through this in our chemistry session) spend some of the time in our first session explaining again my understanding of coaching and my approach, and hopefully getting Sato-san’s buy-in to this
- invite Sato-san to lunch the following week (at no additional cost – I would have to remember in future to factor in the time and cost of these informal sessions into my price for coaching engagements!)
- possibly coach in a more mentoring style in our initial sessions
- acutely listen for implicit messages
- adapt my coaching style somewhat for the Japanese culture

Moving then to the issues Sato-san had mentioned in our chemistry session (and assuming that these were the ones he wanted coaching on), it seemed to me that one way forward might be to introduce him to some of the cultural differences between the Japanese and US Americans (some homework could be to read relevant sections of *The Culture Map*, and *Business Passport to Japan*) then discuss with him the extent to which he agreed with what he had read – what feels right, what feels wrong, and what else might be going on that he is not aware of. Hopefully we could then progress in a normal coaching manner.

⁸ See Isao Takei and Jon P. Alston, *Japanese Business Culture and Practices: A Guide to Twenty-First Century Japanese Protocols* (iUniverse, 2018), Chapter 1 (Kindle location 907)

⁹ See for example *Business Passport to Japan*, 126-131,

¹⁰ See for example *The Culture Map*, 188 and *Japanese Business Culture and Practices*, Chapter 5 (Kindle location 3734)

¹¹ See for example *Business Passport to Japan*, 183; *Japanese Business Culture and Practices*, Chapter 4 (Kindle location 3499)

As the train pulled into Tokyo station, I felt prepared for the day ahead.

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References and Further reading:

Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map: Decoding How People Think, Lead, and Get Things Done Across Cultures* (PublicAffairsTM, International Edition 2015).

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