

Cognitive Change among Foreign Managers in Japan's IT Sector

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Abstract

There is a large volume of research on foreign worker adjustment, though little has taken on the issue of cognitive change. In particular, Japan, despite being considered a "difficult" culture for foreigners to access, has been lagging as a topic of business study since the end of the Bubble Era two decades ago. Japan however is a major employer of foreign IT workers and increasingly innovates in that industry. This original qualitative study includes nine cases interviewed between Winter 2012 and Spring 2014. These interviews reveal changes that occur in cognitive style and management style preferences. These are presented and discussed base on Nisbett's (2003) holistic and analytic cognitive styles, Berry's (1980) acculturation scheme and Adler and Gundersen's (2007) concept of synergy with implications for foreign workers and their managers in Japan.

Keywords: cognitive style; cross cultural management; Japan; North America; holistic; analytic

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Introduction

This study report provides evidence about how North American IT professionals change in the process of working in the environment of Japan. The changes studied here include cognitive, metacognitive, and behavior changes, however mainly the cognitive changes will be examined in this research report. This research project began with intuitions about the subject, namely that North Americans coming to Japan would experience a situation different enough to change their behaviors and thinking that were in place prior to arrival in Japan. These intuitions were formulated as research questions. The research questions were developed into in depth, open form interviews.

Literature review

The literature on foreign managers and acculturation in Japan has languished in the time since the collapse of the Bubble Economy in the early 90s. As economic excitement has shifted to China and other countries, academic interest has also shifted away from Japan. Highlighting this shift of attention, only a handful of academic papers on cognition in Japanese business have appeared in 2000-2014; journal searches on "Japan management cognitive" and similar keywords found only a few each of articles, books, and dissertations.

Nonetheless Japan retains its reputation as a challenging country for acculturation and adjustment in the popular press (Pilling, 2008). As such, Japan and the experiences of foreign workers in it can be a source of insight into cognitive change and acculturation.

This paper is based on original research and investigates changes in cognitive style occur in North American managers working in Japan.

What is cognitive style?

Cognitive style refers to the way a person gathers and evaluates information about their environment (Allinson & Hayes, 1996, 2011). These authors broadly describe two extremes, analytical and intuitive, and gradations between them based on the earlier work of Hammond et al., (1987). Allinson and Hayes however developed the Cognitive Style Index (CSI) specifically for business managers. Numerous studies have been undertaken using the CSI on managers in North American and other countries, however not in Japan. Other writers have criticized this one dimensional (analytical-intuitive) as oversimplifying because these extremes may be mutually reinforcing and in place in managers (Hodgkinson and Sadler-Smith, 2003). This research paper however does not investigate the deep nature of cognitive style. Rather the goal is identify and compare changes in the style of individuals before and after their exposure to the business environment of Japan. Therefore the unitary intuitive-analytical dimension proposed by Allinson and Hayes is taken as a starting point for this work.

The hallmarks of intuitive cognitive style are grasping an overview of a project and understanding its elements in terms of their interrelationships.

The characteristics of analytical cognitive style include grasping components of a project and understanding its elements in terms of categories.

Allinson and Hayes (1996, 2000) have not included Japan in their empirical work on cognitive style, nor have other studies employing the CSI. They do however refer to older works that found inconclusive and apparently contradictory results in seeking to identify differences at the macro (nations or regions) in East versus West cognitive style. Abramson, Lane, Nagai, and Takagi (1993) found Japanese to be more intuitive in style albeit using the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Abramson et al. found Japanese to be slower decision makers, possibly due to "a more feeling-based cognitive style" (pg. 581) reflected in preferences for group harmony, relationships, and sensing the environment as a whole. Canadians, in their study, preferred "a thinking-based cognitive style" (pg. 581). Further, "the Canadians displayed a cognitive style that reduced the importance of the human element in favor of analytical, impersonal, rational factors." (Abramson et al., Pg 585).

Cognitive differences exist between a notional East and West according to Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001). In their work *West* refers loosely to those cultures that inherited their thinking from Ancient Greece. *East*, meanwhile, refers to those cultures that trace their roots to Ancient China, specifically in East Asia. The differences are based in *tacit epistemologies*, long held understandings subsumed by the people of those cultures. They explain that East Asians conduct less categorizing, lean toward grasping an overall view, employ less formal logic, and prefer a dialectic understanding of issues. These are broadly described as *holistic*. The West, exemplified in their work and in Nisbett (2003) categorizes more, employs formal logic, and is more reductionist. These are described broadly as *analytic*.

While the work of Nisbett and collaborators used complex imagery with Japanese and Canadians, Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura, and Larsen (2003) found similar differences among Japanese and Americans using a simplified visual task.

Thus three different models, those used by Abramson, et al. (1993), Nisbett et al. (2003), and Kitayama et al. (2003) find similar cognitive style differences among East Asians and North Americans. Psychology studies have identified cognitive style differences between East and West in other fields of research such as and sociology (Yang, 1986). In the fields of business and management science, Hay and Usunier (1993) quote an interviewee pointing out the difficulty of quick change within an organization and inadvertently describing a holistic cognitive style:

“We [Japanese bank managers] always consider the sequence between the past and the future. Dramatic change is only possible from the outside. But continuity is very important. It is difficult to change things drastically.” (Pg 327)

The holistic approach remains widespread and Japanese business organizations are generally described as holistic for example by recent writers such as M. Abe (2010).

It is a reasonable step to conclude that these cognitive style differences, if they are indeed confirmed, exist among business managers. The studies cited above used

students as proxies for whole populations, albeit Abramson et al. took MBA students as a study population. This research paper accordingly accepts the notion that a broad difference exists as described on a general population level. This paper seeks to identify evidence of those proposed cognitive style differences in the management styles of Japanese and North American business managers. Further, this research paper seeks to identify changes in cognition as North American business managers adjust to work in the host country of Japan.

The Japanese management styles presented below match the cognitive style ascribed to East Asia. Rather than assigning credit or guilt to individuals, these common techniques (according to cited literature and direct observations of this author) emphasize group identity and efficacy. As in the examples of frame and components in the cognitive styles literature, the emphasis in Japan is largely on the frame and relationships. Among the North American techniques noted below, the emphasis is, in reverse, placed on the components which is generally to say on staff members, not the group.

Table 1: Cognitive style in management style preferences

Japanese management style	Analogous or opposite North American management style	Comment
Chourei shiki – regular ritualistic morning gathering	No analogous management technique	Focus on group, not individual; Increases the feeling of group unity; joint presence and joint suffering contribute to group identity (Maricourt, 1994; Nishiyama, 1999).
Kachou at head of island of desks of team	Opposite: Cubicles and offices; geographically distributed teams;	Focus on group, not individual; Front line boss knows the team, their abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and activities in depth (Nishiyama, 1999).
Evening drinking (frequent, late)	Infrequent brief evening drinks; may be open to outsiders.	Focus on group, not individual; Group limited to the organization's members, develops group identity (De Mente, 1994; Nishiyama, 1999).
Feigned drunkenness	No analogous behavior.	Usual strictures of relationships are suspended. Opens a channel for feedback and complaints with no reprisals on the complainer (De Mente, pg 86, 1994).
Seniority based promotion	Opposite: merit based promotion	Focus on group, not individual efficacy; Ensures staff loyalty (Coleman, 1999) and promotion of individuals who embody the goals and culture of the organization (Haghirian, 2010).
Preference for generalists	Preference for specialists	Restricts the value of any one individual; Training includes broad range of

		skills including moral training (Sakai, 2009).
Ideas don't get acted on immediately	Ideas not credited to the author are considered stolen.	Focus on group, not individual; Ideas become part of the group understanding and are not bound to an individual before considered for action (Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, and Triandis, 2002, p. 214).
No individual credit for idea generation	Ideas not credited to the author are considered stolen.	Focus on group, not individual; Develops pre-eminence of group over individuals (De Mente, 1994)
Nemawashi	Meetings outside the group could be considered underhanded.	Focus on avoiding class; Manager seeks solutions one to one with team, not in group discussion (Nishiyama, 1999; Kameda, 1996).
Total Quality Management (TQM)	Six sigma (fixing the product or process).	Focus on the whole delivered product, not the components of the product; Employees become aware of how they contribute to final overall results (Haghirian, 2010).
Wa – maintaining group harmony	Constructive conflict; performance based hiring and firing.	Focus on group, not individual; Avoid upsetting the group at the expense of the individual or team (Haghirian, 2010).
Slow decision making	Slow is considered a cause of failure	Focus is on group participation; Time is necessary for consensus building (Nishiyama, 1999; Abe, 2010).

The above Japanese management styles, all in wide use in Japan, indicate preference for holistic approaches. North American managers that have moved from analytic approaches to holistic approaches have either undergone a change in cognition, or have accepted a different cognitive style on the surface level. The data collected for this research report will help to identify whether managers have undergone either or both of those steps.

Research Questions

Thus the research questions for this report include:

- Can North American business managers move out of Nisbett's analytic category of cognitive style into holistic?
- Are there identifiably positive or negative outcomes to cognitive change evinced by cognitive style?

Because this research seeks to be relevant to the business world as well as to the research community, it also seeks implications for North American managers working in Japan or other East Asian locations.

Methodology

This research paper collected qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews with North American (US and Canadian Anglophone) managers working in Japan's IT sector. The individuals were identified through Linked In as well as the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan (ACCJ) directory. Some individuals came from the first or second degree contacts of the author. In all 128 potential contacts were identified and 76 were contacted. Outreach was accomplished through Linked In (63 contacts), verbal requests (3), email (9), and website interfaces (4).

Of these, 19 responded with a willingness to join the study and ten completed the study. One of the ten was removed from the study as his experience in Japan's IT industry had ended about eight years prior.

The interviews included the same questions in largely the same phrasing and order. All but one were recorded with typed notes made simultaneously. Most included follow up sessions to clarify or expand on issues. Some of the recordings have been transcribed.

A table of cases is shown below.

Table 2: Overview of cases

Case	Nationality	Job Title	Years in Japan
12C	USA	VP Business Development	15
12D	USA	Team Leader	20
12E	USA	Supervisor	8
12F	Canada	Engineer	3
12G	USA	Team Leader	13
12H	USA	Owner	32
12J	Canada	Engineer	7
12L	USA	Logistics Manager	22
12M	USA	Owner	23

Age of interviewees ranged from 30-60.

Discussion with Analysis and Findings

Change occurred in ways that indicate cognitive change, that is, shift from analytical to holistic.

Table 3: Change in cognitive style

Case	Before	After	Change to Holistic Thinking
12C	Top down non-consensus dictator leadership	Bottom up consensus building including use of <i>nemawashi</i>	Y
12C	Reactive not proactive	We are "very Japanese" in approach to quality of service (proactive re customer experience) – TQM approach	Y

12D	One of the broader team	Ghettoized within the org ...later overcame this in diff org where he is part of the harmony	Y
12E	General feeling of satisfaction	Rejected change to his own thinking and management style. Well defined dissatisfaction; Attempted to mentor Japanese staff	N
12F	Tried to make change, get idea across (do code reviews, eat your own dog food);	Appreciation of some benefits of slow speed and patience with long talking through of an issue;	Y
12G	Direct approach	Indirect approach to protect group harmony	Y
12H	Lower level individuals should seek to stand out	Don't rock the boat; look for ways not to rock the boat that you had not imagined before – think from point of view of the management or other counterparty	Y
12J	Individual can impact the group; Individual will be charged by management to pursue a task they propose at short notice; Individual merit;	Individual cannot cause quick change in the org; The large ship can be redirected only in increments; Merit not rewarded; Contributions not recognized	Unclear
12L	Employees live or die based on their merits	Appreciates relationship philosophy of Japan and uses it to bridge with HQ.	Y
12M	Just work and show your merit; be treated w respect	Picks and applies Japanese and North American styles as suitable; Synergy : Able to embarrass a potential client yet gain their custom; US appreciation of time to minimize transaction cost – Japan appreciation of seniority so he moves to get to a senior Japan person instead of politely working with lower staff.	Y

Impact on the manager

After detecting a change in cognitive style by identifying adoption or abandonment of a management technique, the next question is to determine the impact of the change. One way to directly detect such impact is to identify positive or negative outcomes for the manager. Data gathered for this study shows that the shift in cognitive style from a typically Western one, analytic, to a typically East Asian one, holistic, results in some cases in clearly different end states.

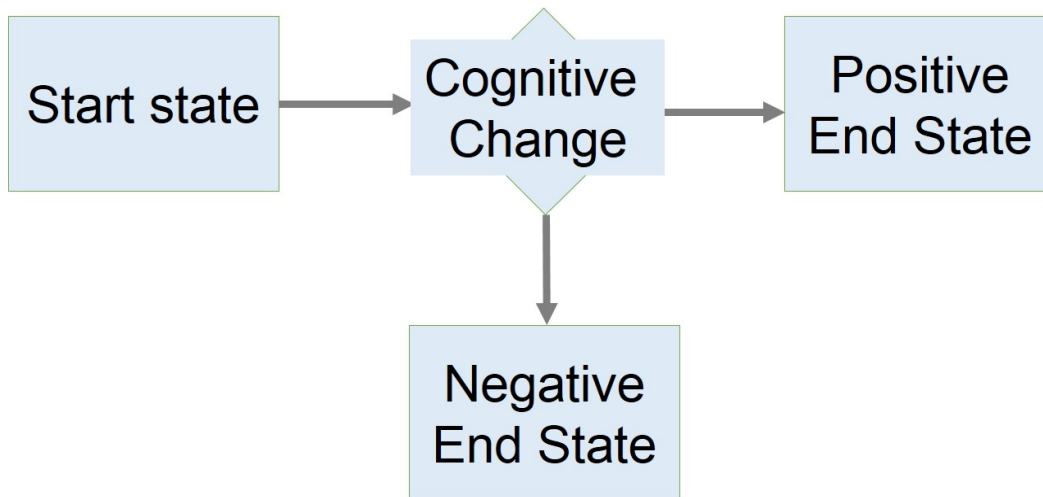
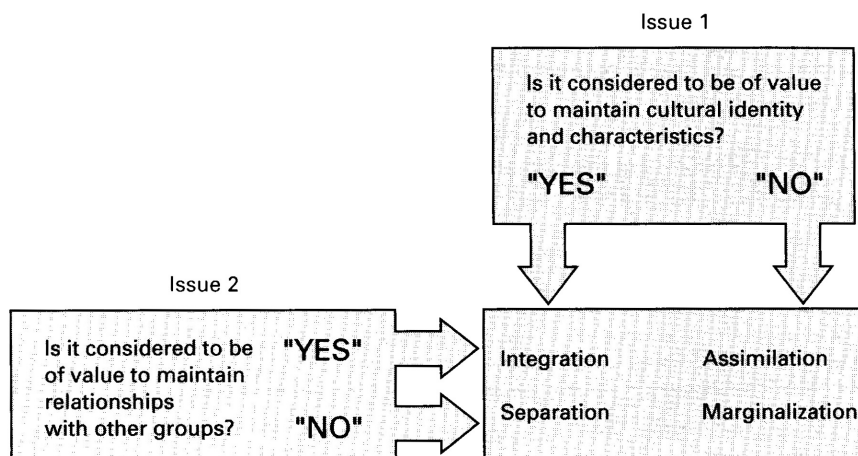


Figure 1

After the change in cognitive style

This research report employs Berry's (1980) framework for acculturation which proposes four states of acculturation: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization. These are arrived at based on the relative importance of relationships and cultural identity as modeled in the figure below.

Acculturation Framework



Source: Berry, J. W. (1980). Acculturation as varieties of adaptation. In A. Padilla (Ed.), *Acculturation: Theory, models, and some new findings*. Boulder, CO: Westview. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 2

The four possible outcomes described by Berry (1980, 1997) and the synergy outcome from Adler and Gundersen (2007) are mapped in the figure below to positive or negative outcomes.

Separation, marginalization, and assimilation are considered negative in this research report because the individual cannot contribute their ideas and styles to the host culture. In a practical worst case scenario, separation and marginalization situations

could result in the demotion, sidelining, or loss of job of individuals who arrive and stay in these end states. Assimilation too, though it may seem safer, could result in the removal of an expatriated business leader who has "gone native" and cannot effectively represent the wishes of an overseas headquarters.

Berry's integration concept is described as the dominant culture accepting some institutions of the non-dominant group while the non-dominant group accepts the basic values of the dominant group (Berry, 1997).

Adler and Gundersen (2007) describe synergies as involving "...a process in which managers form organizational strategies, structures, and practices based on, but not limited to the cultural patterns of individual organization members and clients." (pg 109). Thus synergy does not insist on acceptance of any one set of norms or standards. Synergy and integration are further differentiated in that synergy requires the rise of new solutions which go beyond the available range of solutions offered by the cultural groups represented.

Integration is seen as positive in this report because the foreign manager can contribute management ideas and techniques to the host culture environment. Similarly, synergy is seen as positive because the foreign manager contributes management ideas albeit in changed forms that particularly suit the immediate environment in creative combination with the local thinking and practices. Figure three shows the end states.

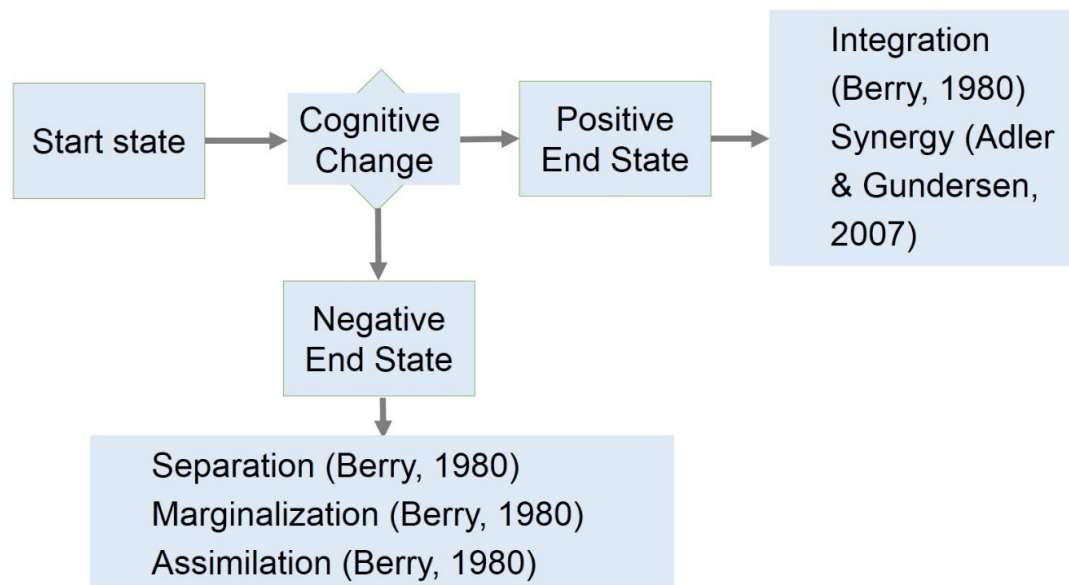


Figure 3

The following table shows the end results for the cases presented.

Table 4: Positive or Negative Outcome

Case	Outcome	End status
12C	Positive	Integration
12D	Negative	Separation
12E	Negative	Marginalization

12F	Positive	Integration
12G	Positive	Integration
12H	Positive	Integration
12J	Unclear	Assimilation Integration
12L	Positive	Integration
12M	Positive	Synergy

The shift in cognitive style from analytic to holistic indicates a change in cognitive style. What remains unclear however in this study is the degree of change. Most of the managers interviewed indicated that they had preferences for both typically North American and Japanese management approaches. Therefore it seems unlikely that one style overrides or erases another in this study population.

Assimilation

This individual has been in Japan only three years prior to the interviews. The passage of time appears to have been too brief for this person to identify their role in the company and the greater context of Tokyo. The individual in case 12J has been able to change his own thinking from “a junior employee should strive to make a mark on the organization” to a more Japanese way, “my ideas are contributed to the group and the group will gain credit and benefit from them”. He further describes his image of the Japanese corporation as one in which the organization seems like a great ship, so big that its direction can only be changed by small increments through the indirect efforts of individuals.

12J has therefore surrendered his analytic approach in which personal identity and merit form the cornerstones of success and satisfaction. He has assimilated to the point that he considers himself part of a group that must survive in order to achieve success. It is not clear however that 12J will continue in this assimilated state. His own overarching goal is to become an entrepreneur, a radically different role in which he may integrate or synergize based on his North American background.

The end state, however, need not be a permanent state. The manager may move to another state as evinced by some cases in this study. Like 12E, discussed next, case 12J has not yet clearly settled into one position in the model.

Marginalization

12E had been unable to find satisfaction working within a Japanese company but in the months before these interviews, was able to find a new understanding of the role as an individual in the context of groups. His new understanding may have started 12E on the path to integration, though too little data exists to know and follow up interviews in coming years will be necessary to confirm the outcome. Moreover, 12E’s time in Japan, only three years as of summer 2013, may yet be too brief for the sensitive process of determining his state.

The experience of this person was ranged from intimidating to disappointing. On one side, the foreign staff was separated from Japanese staff, “we were in our own small space, we were in the “cave” it was an intimidating space.” Physically separated from the mainstream work environment, this individual found himself ultimately

marginalized. Attempting to work with and train Japanese staffers, he found “Japanese engineers were happy to follow what you teach, but do not take it further.” His professional and personal network among Japanese was minimal and in the end he “realized that Japanese management and workers want no change”. Blocked from integration and with his efforts to reach out rebuffed, this person found himself marginalized and unable to contribute to or learn from the host culture. Did his experience with the Japanese employer change his work style or way of thinking? “No,” he responds.

Separation

One case in the study, 12D, worked for several employees with some negative experiences. An early employer accommodated his North American style and thinking in the early 2000s, in a rural region of Japan, Shikoku. Moving to Tokyo he found himself in a Japanese owned multinational where the division head hazed the foreign team through schedule changes and countermanded orders. The result of this experience was that the individual, and his team of foreign workers, were separated from the work process in the rest of the company. Yet they were not marginalized because they developed a coping mechanism of going further up the chain of command to get the necessary support for their work. This situation continued during the entire period of employment with the foreign staff in a sort limbo, not integrated into operations fully, but still retaining some input to the process. Having changed employers between the first and second interviews in this study, 12D finds himself in a new job, comfortably integrated with the Japanese staff of a smaller Japanese organization contributing to projects and products. He has not assimilated fully to the Japanese environment, nor has he developed new synergies with his coworkers. His current status seems to one of integration.

Integration

There are numerous examples of integration among the cases in this study report, these are presented in the following table.

Table 5: Integration examples

Case	Example
12C	Changed to bottom up consensus building including use of <i>nemawashi</i> Introduced limit on working after hours; Accepted as fundamental a Japanese view of top quality customer service Replaced after hours drinking with in-office communication; Accepted Lean integration with suppliers.
12F	Integrated benefits of slow speed of decision making and long talking through of issues while maintaining task orientation.
12G	Able to integrate North American and Japan based skills by being a bridge between Tokyo and foreign based HQ.
12H	Integrated showing of value (North American style) as relationship ceased to be the supreme business development issue as it had been in the Bubble Economy era.
12L	Integrated relationship philosophy of Japan while keeping focus on completing tasks; Bridges understanding between foreign HQ and local operations, etc.

The above individuals have shown a shift in cognitive style by integrating North American and Japanese management styles, using both holistic and analytic approaches.

Synergy

Case 12M indicates the strongest synergy creation among the cases presented. While synergy may be present in Cases 12H, 12J, 12L, and others, 12M has certainly been able to create multiple new approaches that are neither completely holistic nor analytic, neither entirely Japanese nor North American. These new approaches are synergies in Adler and Gundersen's (2007) understanding as described previously in this report.

Go straight for the leader

The individual in case 12M studiously avoids working through the hierarchy of a potential client company in normal fashion. Usual behavior in the Japanese business context might be to develop a contact slowly with or without access to the ultimate decision makers. Where a higher level person is part of a meeting, conversation is commonly managed by a junior staffer with little direct input from the higher level manager. 12M however pushes directly to the higher level person and presents a proposal. Synergy here is based on a North American preference for minimizing transaction cost and the Japanese appreciation of senior staff. Once 12M has accessed the senior decision maker, return to the junior staff by the Japanese organization is unlikely. Put neatly into a trap of responding, and thereby increasing their own face as senior staff, or repositioning the junior staffer as the contact point and losing face, many feel compelled to directly deal with 12M.

Embarrass potential client

Strategically he allows potential clients to think he speaks Japanese poorly. Thus he

surprises them with his highly fluent and technical Japanese. They feel embarrassed when it turns out that the person they were speaking about has in fact strong language skills and has been following the conversation. As a result, when he does speak, they listen more closely. This is a face damaging exercise with respect to the potential client whereas it is face-building for 12M. Normal expectations would be for a new relationship to be severely damaged, if not destroyed by such a maneuver. However, this tactic is successful for 12M because it develops respect in the client for his abilities. This tactic is neither in the canon of North American nor Japanese behaviors but has been developed by 12M, synergizing from both business cultures.

Implications

North American IT managers can change their cognitive style and gain benefits through achieving integration or synergy. The population can integrate, at least most of those in the sample. In some cases they seem to have the resilience to move from negative end states to positive ones.

Limitations

This study report is limited chiefly by the small sample size. However the in depth interviews provided a glimpse into a potentially important theme, cognitive change, for future study.

Another limitation is that these managers are not reviewed by their Japanese co-workers whose contribution could balance the perception of their strengths and weaknesses.

Conclusion

The study reveals that a fundamental shift in thinking can occur for North American managers working in Japan. The shift from analytic to holistic cognitive style can lead these managers into positive or negative outcomes. Those that navigate the process to arrive at positive results may be a source of further learning about acculturation, thinking, and the Japan-North American business-scape.

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