



Risk

MANAGING FOR CREATIVITY IN JAPAN

Risk

<http://a-small-lab.com/projects/managing-for-creativity-in-japan>

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An interview collage on understanding Japanese employee and client “tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity” as perceived by foreign executives in Japan.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

<http://a-small-lab.com/projects/managing-for-creativity-in-japan>

- i. This document (.pdf)
- ii. Searchable interview excerpt resource.
- iii. Annotated visual framework presentation (.pdf)
- iii. Visual framework poster (A3 Size)

I. Project Introduction

Project overview and acknowledgements.

“...tremendous insight for those that want to define new roles and promote creative ideas within Japanese organizations.”

(Alastair Townsend, Tokyo based architect and founder of BAKOKO Design Development)

Managing for creativity in Japan is based on a series of in-depth interviews with Japan-based non-Japanese executives of companies with primarily Japanese workforces. This ongoing study investigates how such managers perceive the creative climate in their workplaces and develops practical and theoretical frameworks for managing for creativity in Japan. This report constitutes a preliminary discussion of one dimension of the creative climate - Risk - “tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity” as perceived by foreign executives in Japan.

Acknowledgements

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An Interview Collage on Risk

Note: This section is an interview collage pieced together from relevant interview excerpts in order to give a bird's eye view of the findings of the study.



Talking about tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity - risk taking - in Japan, I see challenges in four main areas: (1) Clients, (2) Fear, (3) The need for structure, and (4) Difficulties in changing a set system. I also see opportunities in terms of (1) Collaboration, (2) Non-Japanese willingness to embrace change, and (3) Freedoms associated with not being in head office.

First of all, clients in this country do not want to take risks, and they have a need for control and detailed input. That can tend to kill the creativity. These relationships are resource intensive in terms of (1) communication/interaction and (2) prescription.

High communication and interaction requirements result in little time for reflection and low margin for error, which in turn increases the likelihood of our employees taking a risk by trying something new. In addition, what I see as over-prescription of project details (according to proven methods and approaches) decreases flexibility to utilize our specialist knowledge to explore alternative solutions. What this means is that we don't see much demand for creative responses, so we don't provide any. I think that the whole structure of the way decisions are made mitigates against creativity.

I do think that this is true even for Japanese suppliers, but it is harder to earn trust here as a foreign company. Whatever experience you have in the West doesn't really matter, it doesn't translate. This probably makes the element which I like to call 'Prescriptive Clients' even more pressing for foreign firms.

I would also note that when I have been in the client role I have found it challenging to deal with the expectation of prescriptive-ness from our suppliers. Compared to the "here's what we need done, we're the experts and we'll come back when it's finished" relationship which is more typical in the West I have experienced a lot more 'hand-holding' and 'face time' as a non-Japanese client of Japanese suppliers.

Fear is another important element. Fear of shame, failure, standing out, being shown up, showing someone up, or making a mistake is, I would say, a big factor in the (relatively) high risk aversion that I notice in my employees. First of all, this has its roots in the education system - the exam system just burns everyone out. They become good at acquiring information but creativity is more than that.....I also think it comes from the rule based culture here. If you study Japanese art like sumi-e or ikebana (for example) you will notice that everything is run by rules. It is a very rule-laden culture.

Fear of making clients look bad by knowing more than them increases the intensity of the client relationship that I just talked about (and the intensity of the client relationship probably reinforces the fear too).

These two factors - Prescriptive Clients and Fear - create an environment where change is avoided and consensus through discussion is sought.

Next, I believe that my employees have a need for structure. Unless they have been specifically hired for their flexible thinking skills I find that (on the whole) the people I've managed have an innate difficulty with managing something that they don't have a formula or template for. As with the fear which I just mentioned, I think that this is rooted in (1) the education system and (2) the rule-based nature of art/culture of Japan. To successfully manage this you need to provide security and structure around the creative idea and process. And this is particularly true in foreign companies. This is because it is considered 'risky' to even be working for us.

Even if you are an established company like (for example) Unilever people still think 'oooh no, a foreign company... even though they are one of the biggest manufacturers in the world. It's a bit weird, but anyway, working for a non-Japanese company is perceived as risky. There is not the same cliché status and supposed safety that is associated with Japanese companies, and we don't provide the same kind of structure and hierarchy. We don't say 'this is what you need to do, this is the checklist', we tend to say 'this is your time, we need and you to achieve this..... and what else can you come up with?' In order to mitigate these perceived risks, mentoring may need to be a bigger part of a manager's focus.

My recommendation here is to try to become the ‘Template Bringer’. To be someone who can provide a template or formula - a way to do or think about a problem - and then say ‘go for it’. If you do it this way your employees will do a beautiful job. If, on the other hand, you just say ‘we have a problem, find a solution’ I think that the majority of your employees will be lost. If you can develop ‘templates’ which show and facilitate pathways for creative thought and action then you’ll be on the right track. But you need to really think carefully about this because you’ll find that once systems are set in place it becomes very hard to change them. Part of the reason for this is probably the relatively long tenure in Japan, which entails a bit of complacency and contentment.....not the most conducive environment to change.

That said, I have found that this long tenure, along with the need for discussion that I mentioned earlier has led me to become more collaborative in the way I make decisions. I used to dictate but now I hardly ever dictate. I suggest. It definitely works better that way.

Another thing that I would note is that non-Japanese employees or managers may be (in my view anyway) more suitable for change management roles (to crack those set systems which I said were so hard to change) and better at making quick decisions. I say more suitable, but what I mean is not necessarily ‘better’ in any skill-based assessment but ‘more willing’ - the difference lying in (1) different preferences (with respect to learning new skills), and (2) employment/career-path structures (the relative rarity/novelty of mid-career hires in Japan, and the low frequency of job-change).

I talked about the fact that Japanese employees may view working for a foreign company as risky, and I do think that is a challenge for us. But on the other hand, there are positives to being in charge of the Japanese operations of a large international company. It can really be a liberating role - the lower formal gateposts and risk to the parent company make for quicker discussion and execution of ideas. It’s like we’ve got the whole trainset to play with on a smaller scale - we can move more quickly with less bureaucracy if we have a creative idea here.

Lastly, and this relates to creativity and innovation in a Japanese context (more so than it would in the West, I

think) - you can really expect consistent quality. The fear, need for structure, and intense client relationships that I talked about earlier result in risk 'awareness' which leads to consistent results which in turn form the stable base for conscientious, continual, incremental innovation (kaizen). Here they take the cookie cutter and cut the same cookie, and it's a good cookie. Once they get it right it's great and it's designed with reliability and flexibility built in. This is very different to, say, Spain, where somebody would be trying to cut corners to do things faster - resulting in variability, difficulties and bad quality.