

MANAGING FOR CREATIVITY IN JAPAN

CREATIVE CLIMATE – RISK FRAMEWORK (DRAFT)

Based on interviews with foreign executives in Japan

A framework for understanding Japanese employee and client “tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity” as perceived by foreign executives in Japan.

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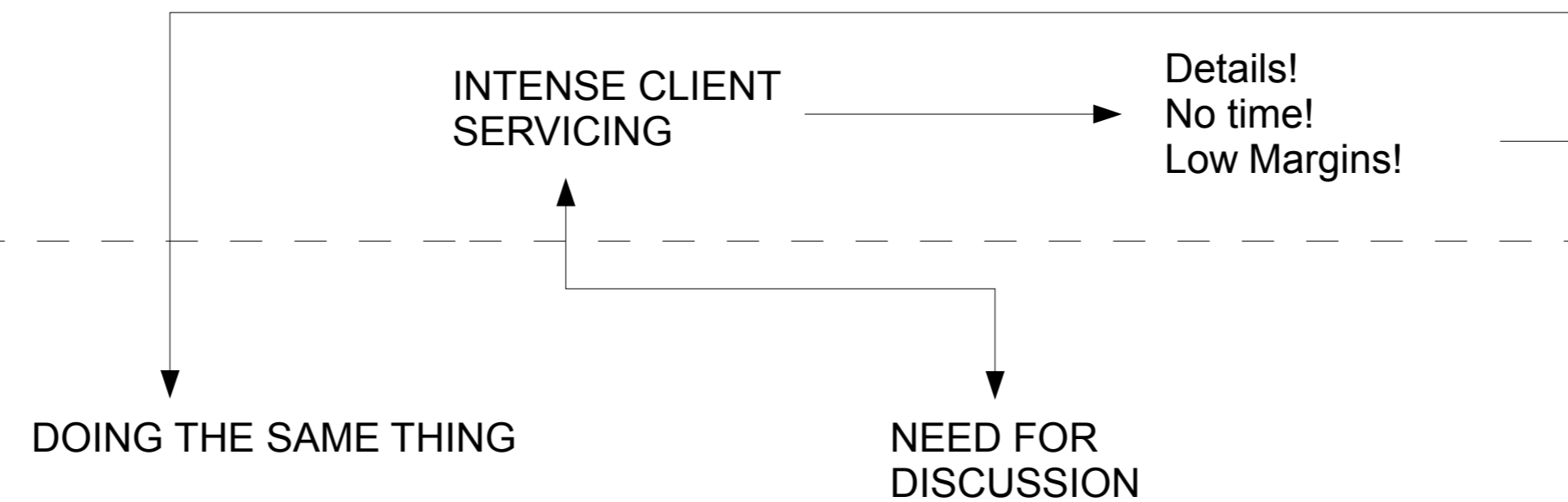


PRESCRIPTIVE CLIENTS

“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”.



PRESCRIPTIVE CLIENTS



Client relationships are perceived as being very resource intensive in terms of (1) communication/interaction and (2) prescription.

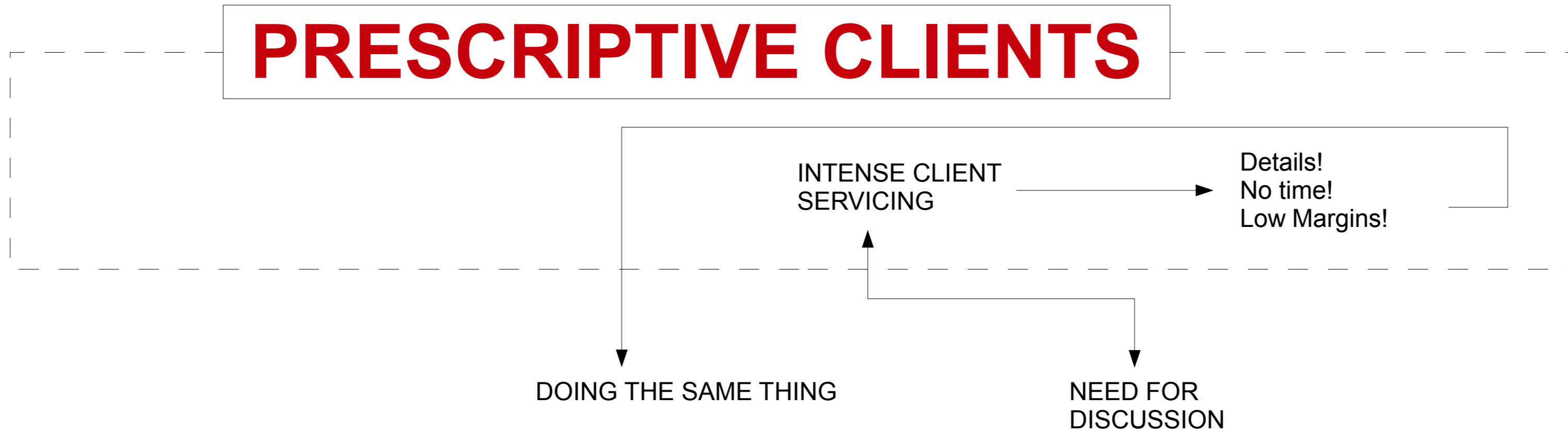
High communication and interaction requirements result in little time for reflection and low margin for error, increasing employee risk aversion.

Perceived over-prescription of project details (according to proven methods and approaches (see 'Need for Structure' below) decreases flexibility to utilize the supplier's specialist knowledge to explore alternative solutions –

“If there is no demand for creative response then there will be none. I think that the whole structure of the way decisions are made mitigates against creativity”.



TRUST IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EXPERIENCE/SKILL/TALENT *(People need to be able to comprehend or place you in a category before being able to work with you.)*



This effect may be compounded by (1) the relative importance of trust and relationships over experience and skills in Japan – ***“It is harder to earn trust here [and get people to take a risk]whatever experience you have in the West doesn’t really matter, it doesn’t translate”*** - and (2) fear (see below).

It is important to note that in the client role non-Japanese managers may face difficulty with *the expectation* of prescriptive-ness from suppliers. Compared to the *“here’s what we need done, you’re the experts I’ll come back when it’s finished”* relationship which was perceived as more typical in the West there may be a lot more ‘hand-holding’ and ‘face time’ involved as a non-Japanese client of Japanese suppliers.



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PRESCRIPTIVE CLIENTS

INTENSE CLIENT
SERVICING

Details!
No time!
Low Margins!

FEAR

DOING THE SAME THING

NEED FOR
DISCUSSION

EDUCATION SYSTEM

RULE BASED
ART/DESIGN/CULTURE

Fear of shame, failure, standing out, being shown up, showing someone up, or making a mistake is considered a factor in high risk aversion.

This fear is perceived to be rooted in the education system, and in the rule based culture.



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PRESCRIPTIVE CLIENTS

(DON'T MAKE YOUR CLIENTS LOOK BAD BY KNOWING MORE THAN THEM)

INTENSE CLIENT SERVICING

Details!
No time!
Low Margins!

FEAR

DOING THE SAME THING

NEED FOR DISCUSSION

EDUCATION SYSTEM

RULE BASED
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Fear of making clients 'look bad by knowing more than them' increases the intensity of the client relationship noted above (and the intensity of the client relationship reinforces the fear).



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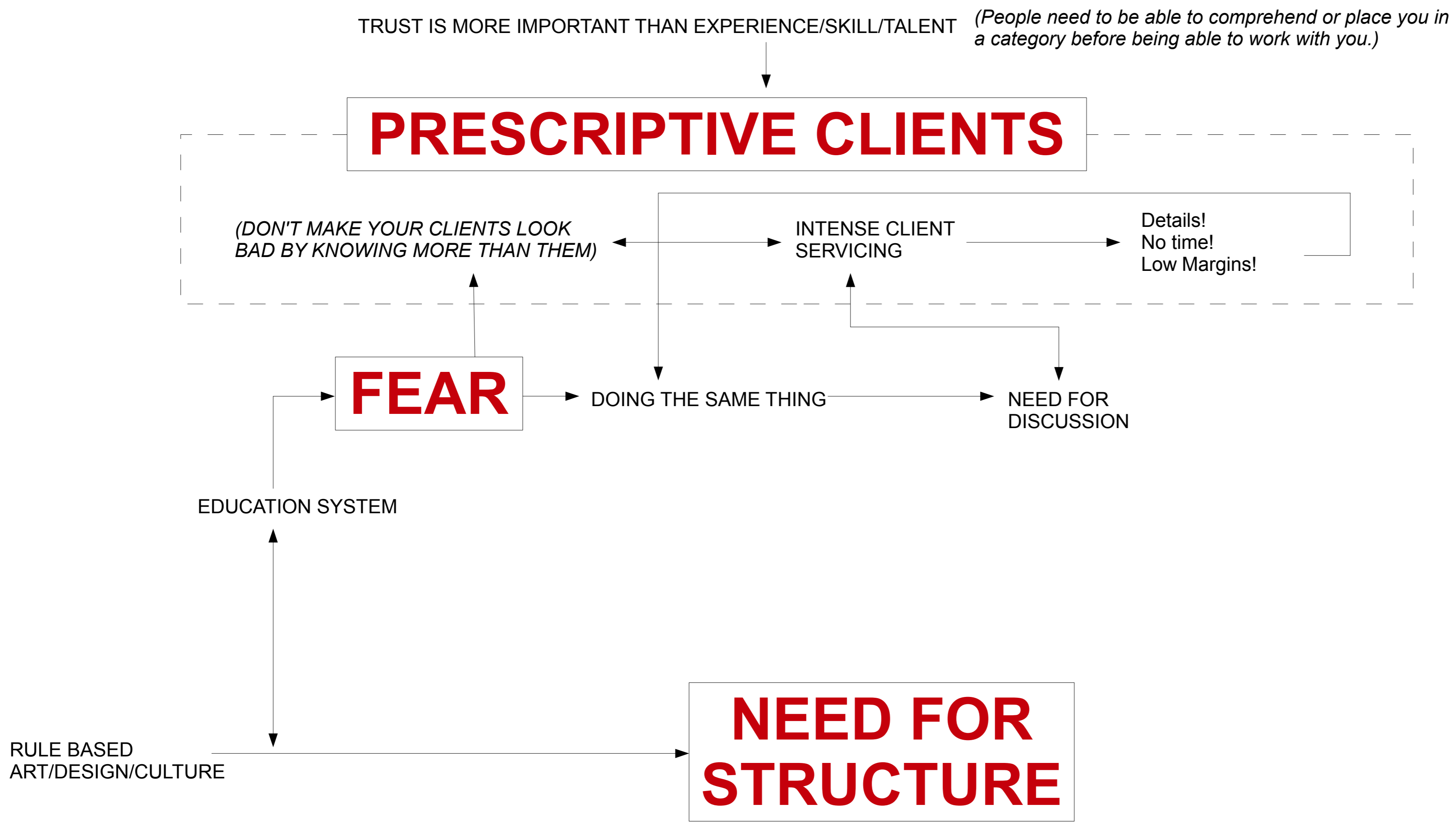
NEED FOR DISCUSSION

EDUCATION SYSTEM

RULE BASED
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To deal with this fear, change is avoided, and consensus through discussion is sought.





Japanese employees (unless specifically hired for their flexible thinking skills) are seen as having an innate difficulty with 'managing something that they don't have a formula or template for'. 'Need for structure' is perceived to be rooted in:

- (1) the education system and
- (2) the rule-based nature of art/culture of Japan – ***"If you study Japanese art like sumi-e or ikebana you will notice that everything is run by rules"***.

This necessitates the provision of security and structure around a creative idea or process.



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RULE BASED
ART/DESIGN/CULTURE

NEED FOR STRUCTURE

BE A MENTOR

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

FOREIGN COMPANIES

This need could be higher in foreign companies due to the risk inherent in working for them - ***“Even if you are an established company like Unilever people still think ‘ooh no, a foreign company....even though they are one of the biggest manufacturers in the world”.***

Working for a non-Japanese company is risky. There is not the same cliché status and supposed safety that is associated with Japanese companies, and there is a relative lack 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 you to achieve this....and what else can you come up with?’”*** – Mentoring may need to be a bigger part of a manager’s focus in order to mitigate these perceived risks.



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DOING THE SAME THING

NEED FOR DISCUSSION

EDUCATION SYSTEM

BRING A TEMPLATE

so

NEED FOR STRUCTURE

BE A MENTOR

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LESS:
Social Status
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Role Structure

FOREIGN
COMPANIES

So you need to be the **Template Bringer**

*“If you as a manager provide a template or formula and say ‘go for it’, they’ll do a beautiful job. But **id you just say ‘here’s the problem, find a solution’, they’re lost”.***

Take advantage of the need for structure and develop templates which show and facilitate pathways for creative thought and action.



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NEED FOR DISCUSSION

EDUCATION SYSTEM

LONG TENURE = DEEP CONNECTIONS/RELATIONSHIPS = COMPLACENCY & CONTENTMENT

BRING A TEMPLATE

but

IT'S HARD TO CHANGE A SET SYSTEM

so

NEED FOR STRUCTURE

BE A MENTOR

RULE BASED ART/DESIGN/CULTURE

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

FOREIGN COMPANIES

Templates need to be carefully thought out, because **“once a system is in place then it is very hard to change that system”**.

Part of the reason for this is the (still) relatively long tenure in Japan, entailing **“a little bit of complacency and contentment”**.



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Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

All of this can lead to a tendency to become more collaborative -

“.....over the years here I've become much more collaborative in the way I make decisions. I used to dictate but now I hardly ever dictate, I suggest. It's better that way, it works better.”

While the 'need for discussion' that derives from intense client relationships and individual fear may adversely affect the risk dimension in (especially) the short term, the need for increased discussion inherent in this type of client relationship can have a positive effect on collaboration skills. In the longer run, the increased trust and openness that can come with authentic collaboration can make up for risk adversity (and possibly begin to reverse it).



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so you might deal with this better

NON-JAPANESE WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE CHANGE

BE A MENTOR

EDUCATION SYSTEM

RULE BASED ART/DESIGN/CULTURE

FOREIGN COMPANIES

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

Non-Japanese employees are (on the whole) seen as more suitable for change management roles – not necessarily better, but more willing. This is not due to any across-the-board skill/ability set differences but rather the result of

(1) different preferences (with respect to learning new skills) and

(2) employment/career-path structure (relative rarity/novelty of mid-career hires in Japan, and job-change frequency).



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NON-JAPANESE WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE CHANGE

BE A MENTOR

so you can enact

QUICKER DECISION MAKING

RULE BASED ART/DESIGN/CULTURE

EDUCATION SYSTEM

FOREIGN COMPANIES → LESS: Social Status, Stability, Role Structure

These same characteristics are also seen as assets to quicker decision making.



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EDUCATION SYSTEM

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

FOREIGN COMPANIES

LESS:
Formal Gateposts
Risk to the non-Japanese parent

QUICKER DECISION MAKING

THE WHOLE TRAIN SET

Being in charge of relatively small country offices in Japan can be a liberating role – the lower formal gateposts risk to the parent company makes for quicker discussion and execution of ideas -

“...we’ve got the whole train set to play with on a smaller scale, and the financial risk to the company if we make a mistake is smaller. We can move more quickly with less bureaucracy is we have a creative idea here.”



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KAIZEN

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Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

LESS:
Formal Gateposts
Risk to the non-Japanese parent

QUICKER DECISION MAKING

THE WHOLE TRAIN SET

Note:
Cutting Good Cookies

“Here they tend to take the cookie cutter and cut the same cookie...and it's a good cookie. Once they get the design right it's great, and it's designed with reliability built in. Compare this with Spain where somebody would be cutting corners to try to do things faster – resulting in variability and difficulties or bad quality”.

Fear, need for structure, and intense client relationships result in risk averseness which equates to consistent results which in turn form the stable base for conscientious, continual, incremental innovation (kaizen).



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