Risk

MANAGING FOR CREATIVITY IN JAPAN

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

- AN ANNOTATED VISUAL FRAMEWORK -

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Online Resources

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

"...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)

1. Project Introduction

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 consitutes a preliminary discussion of one dimension of the creative climate- Risk - "tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity" as perceived by foreign executives in Japan.

Acknowledgements

2. Creative Climate

Define a product or response as creative to the extent that those familiar with the context in which it was created and/or resides in regard it as being novel and valuable to a suitable degree. These creative outputs can be viewed as the end result of an iterative cognitive process which resides in a person in a particular environment.

This study focuses on the perceptions of the 'particular environment', which influence the potential of the person to come up with creative outputs. This is important because organizations must find ways to facilitate the creativity of all their employees if they are to sustainably and successfully acheive their goals. Work environments may impact more heavily on creativity than individual 'creativity' characteristics - In the absence of a supporting environment, potentially creative people will struggle to produce creative output and only a small proportion will succeed, while creative ideas that originate in anywhere but the most powerful, or accepting areas of the firm will likely die. Organisations, which should be pursing creativity in order to achieve their goals, often stifle it in the pursuit of productivity, control and coordination, but there is little evidence that there is a trade-off between creativity and other more 'traditional' organisational aims.

While not in itself a measure of creative output, one widely used and accepted concept of, or proxy for, creativity in the workplace or organisation is that of the'creative climate' - which can be considered a suitable and productive construct for use in diagnosis, improvement and development activities within organisations. Ekvall (1997) characterises climate as being the mix of attitudes, feelings and behaviours which define work and life in the organisation. Isaksen and Lauer (2002) expand on this idea:

> "Climate is an intervening variable that influences organizational and psychological processes which, in turn, influence the overall productivity and well-being of the organization. Climate influences, and is influenced by, the outcome of organizational operations. Climate affects organizational productivity and well-being by influencing organizational processes such as problem solving, decision making, communicating and coordinating, the individual processes of learning and creating, and levels of motivation and commitment."
>
> (Isaksen and Lauer, 2002: 79)

Ekvall's (1991) model (see Figure 01) places climate as an intervening variable between the resources of the firm (people, capital, machinery, ideas) and the organisational and psychological processes (e.g. problem solving, motivation), which affect outcomes, one of which is creativity and innovation.

This study takes Isaksen's adaption of Ekvall's CCQ, the SOQ framework as its starting point, considering nine dimensions (eight positive and one negative) influencing the creative climate:

Challenge: The degree of emotional involvement, commitment and motivation in the operations and goals.

Freedom: The level of autonomy, discretion and initiative in behavior exerted by individuals to acquire information and make decisions, etc.

Trust/Openness: The degree of emotional safety, and openness found in relationships.

Idea Time: The amount of time people can use (and do) for elaborating new ideas.

Playfulness/Humour: The amount of spontaneity, ease, good natured joking, and laughter that is displayed.

Idea Support: The degree to which new ideas and suggestions are attended to and treated in a kindly manner.

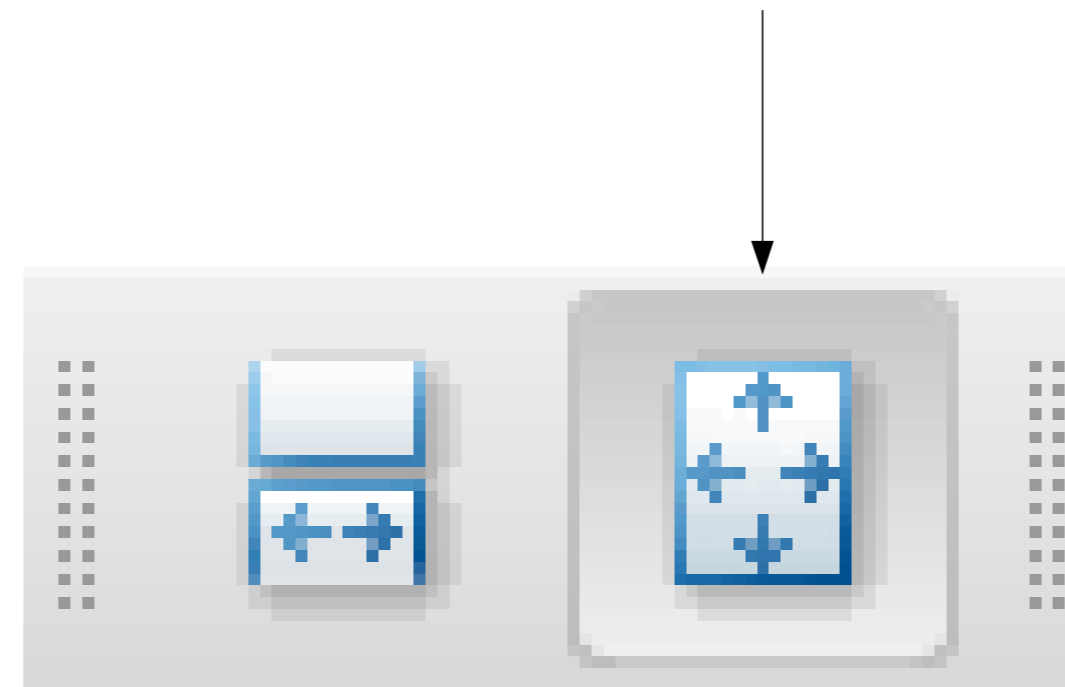**Debate:** The expressing and considering of many different viewpoints, ideas and experiences.

Risk Taking: The tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Conflict: The presence of personal and emotional tensions or hostilities (-ve dimension).

This document focuses on Risk Taking.

Please view the rest of this document in 'one page at a time' mode, not scrolling view.

Prescriptive Clients

Prescriptive Clients

Intense client service relationships → Details!
No time!
Low Margins!

Doing the same thing

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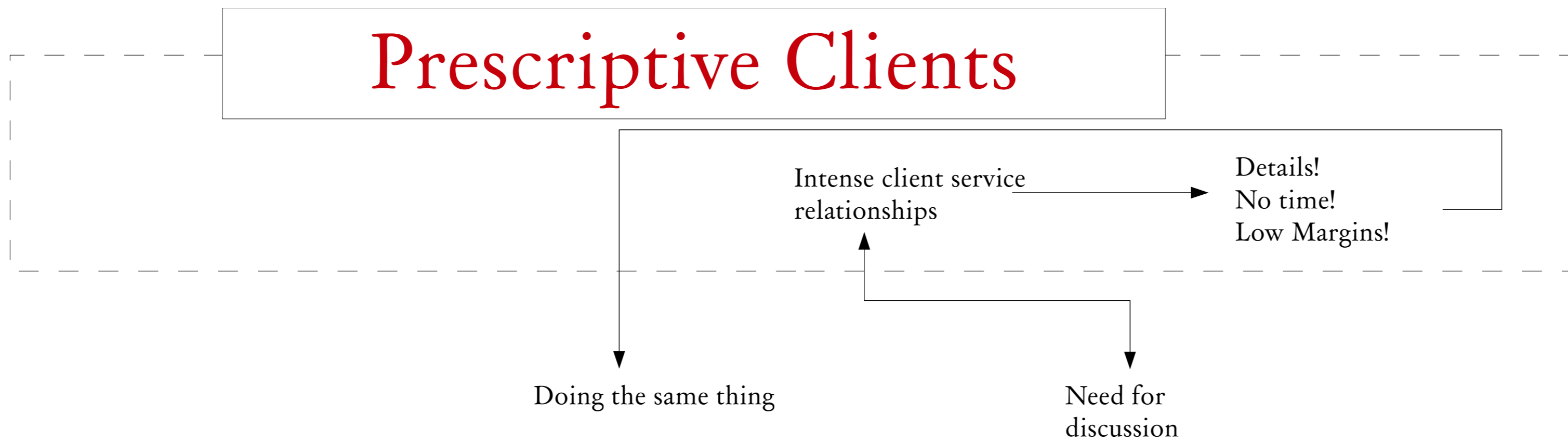
Client relationships are perceived as being very resource intensive in terms of (1) communication/interaction and (2) prescription.

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.)

Prescriptive Clients

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No time!
Low Margins!

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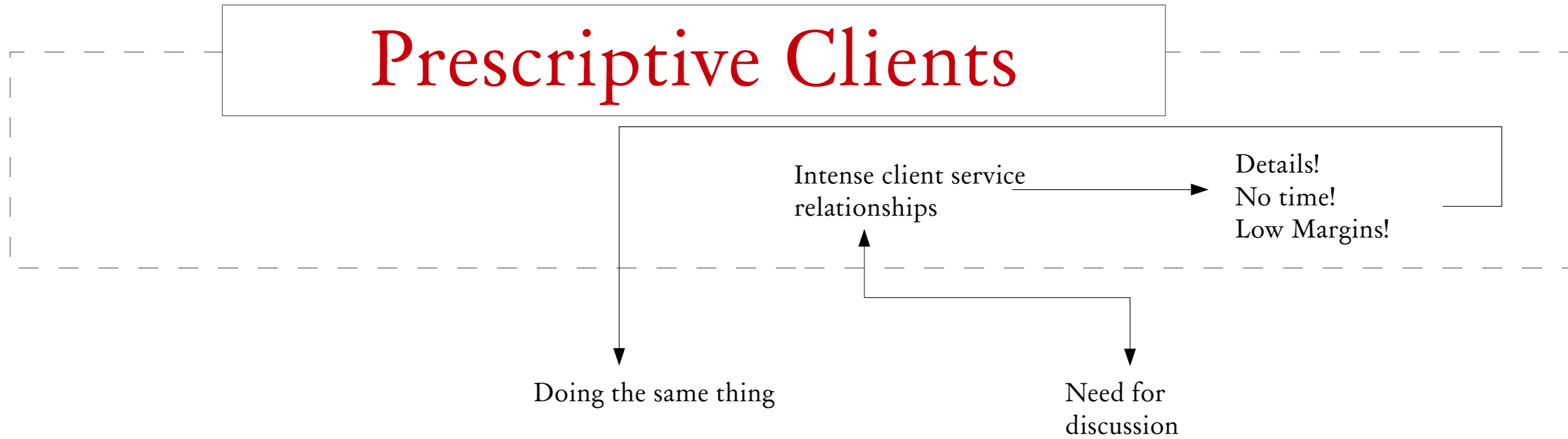
This effect may be compounded by (1) the relative importance of trust and relationships over experience and skills in Japan – *"It is harder to earn trust here [and get people to take a risk] ....whatever experience you have in the West doesn't really matter, it doesn't translate"* - and (2) fear (see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

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/feel bad by knowing more than them

Intense client service relationships

Details!
No time!
Low Margins!

Fear

Doing the same thing

Need for discussion

Education System

Rule based art/design/culture

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

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Low Margins!

Fear

Doing the same thing → Need for discussion

Education System

Rule based art/design/culture

Need for Structure

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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Fear

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Need for discussion

Education System

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 'oooh 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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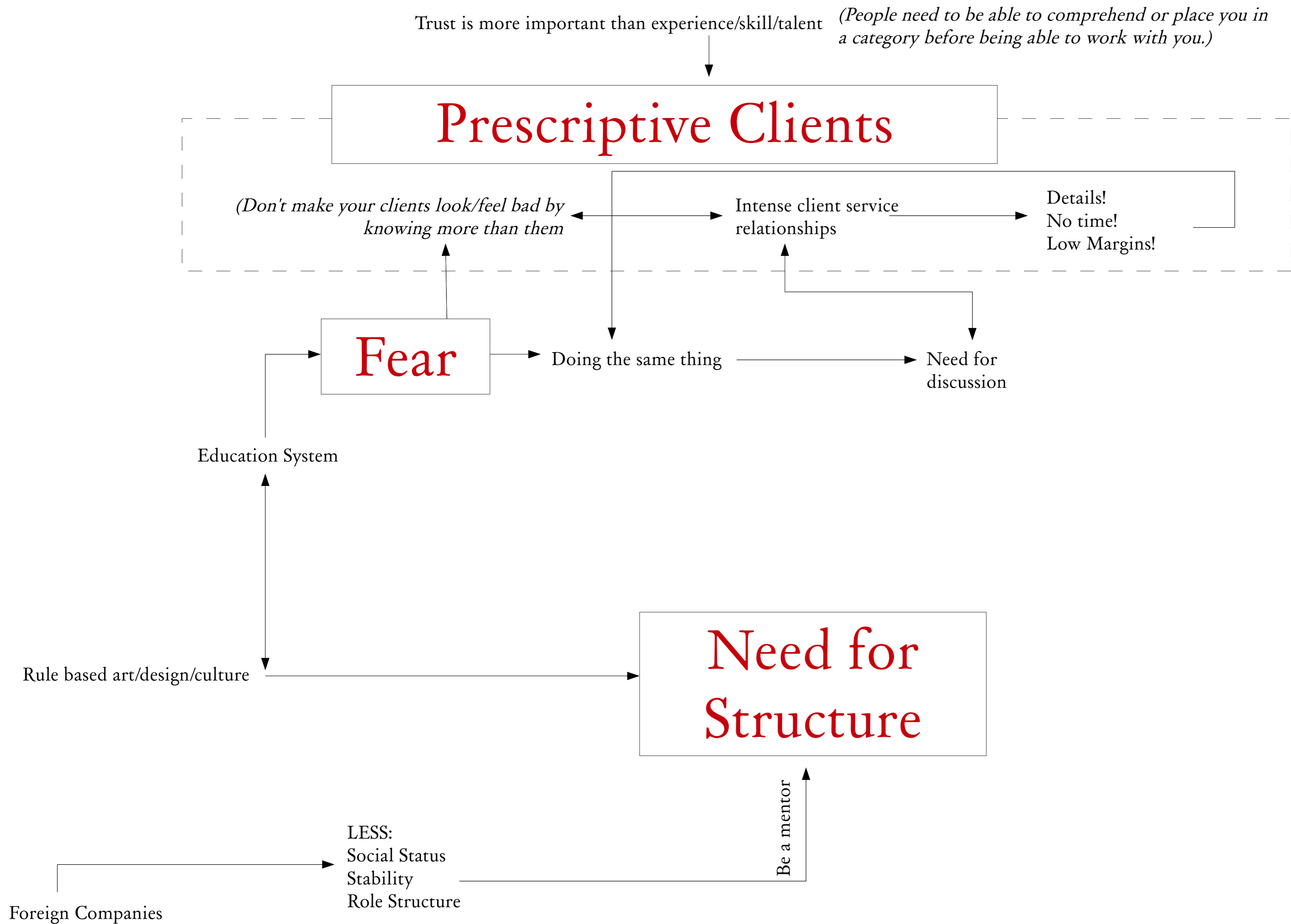Doing the same thing → Need for discussion

Education System

Rule based art/design/culture

Bring a template

so

Need for Structure

Be a mentor

LESS:
Social Status
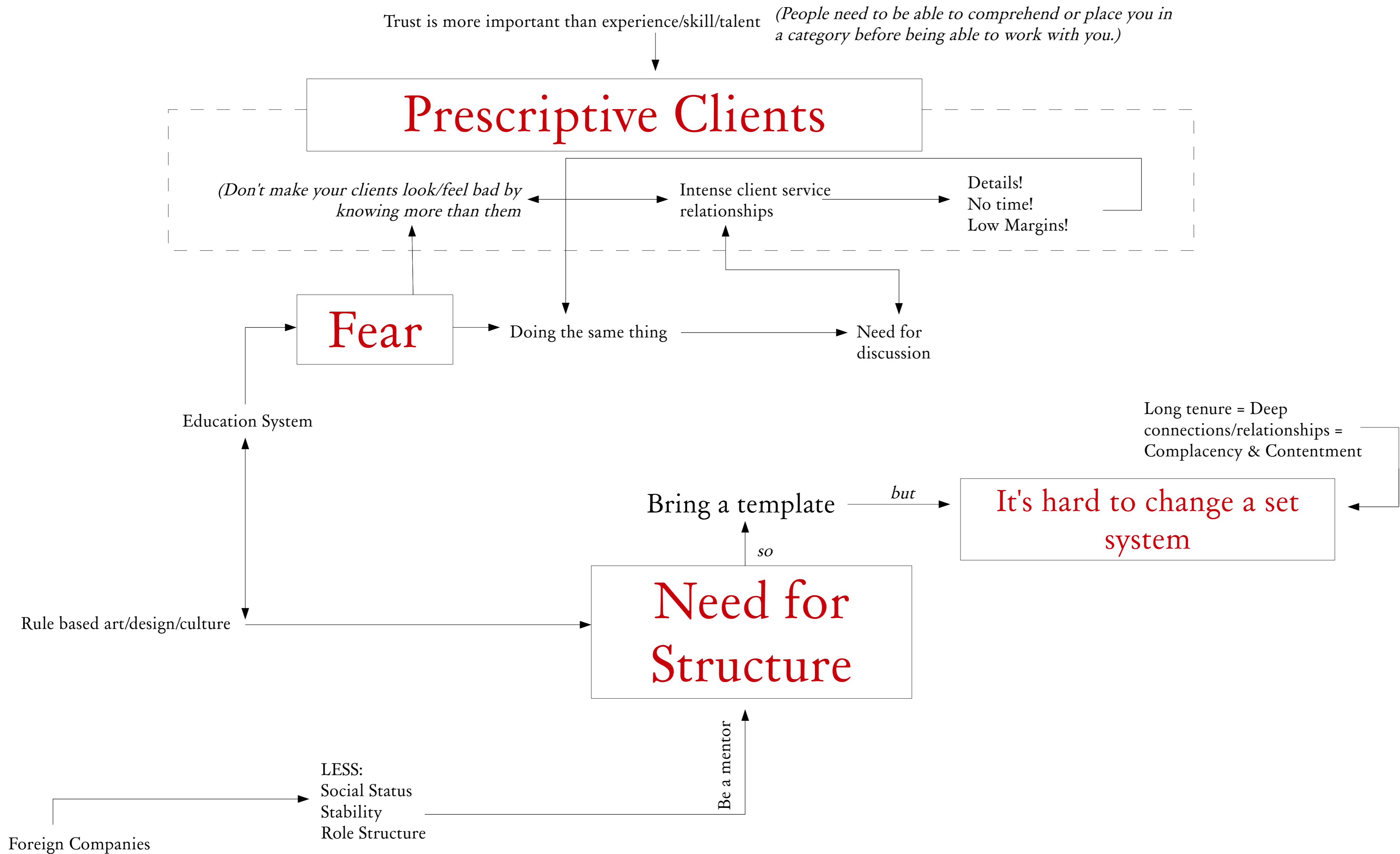Stability
Role Structure

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 if 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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Fear

Doing the same thing → 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

Rule based art/design/culture

Need for Structure

Be a mentor

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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Education System

Becoming more collaborative

Long tenure = Deep connections/relationships = Complacency & Contentment

Bring a template → *but* → It's hard to change a set system

so

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Rule based art/design/culture

Be a mentor

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

Foreign Companies

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).
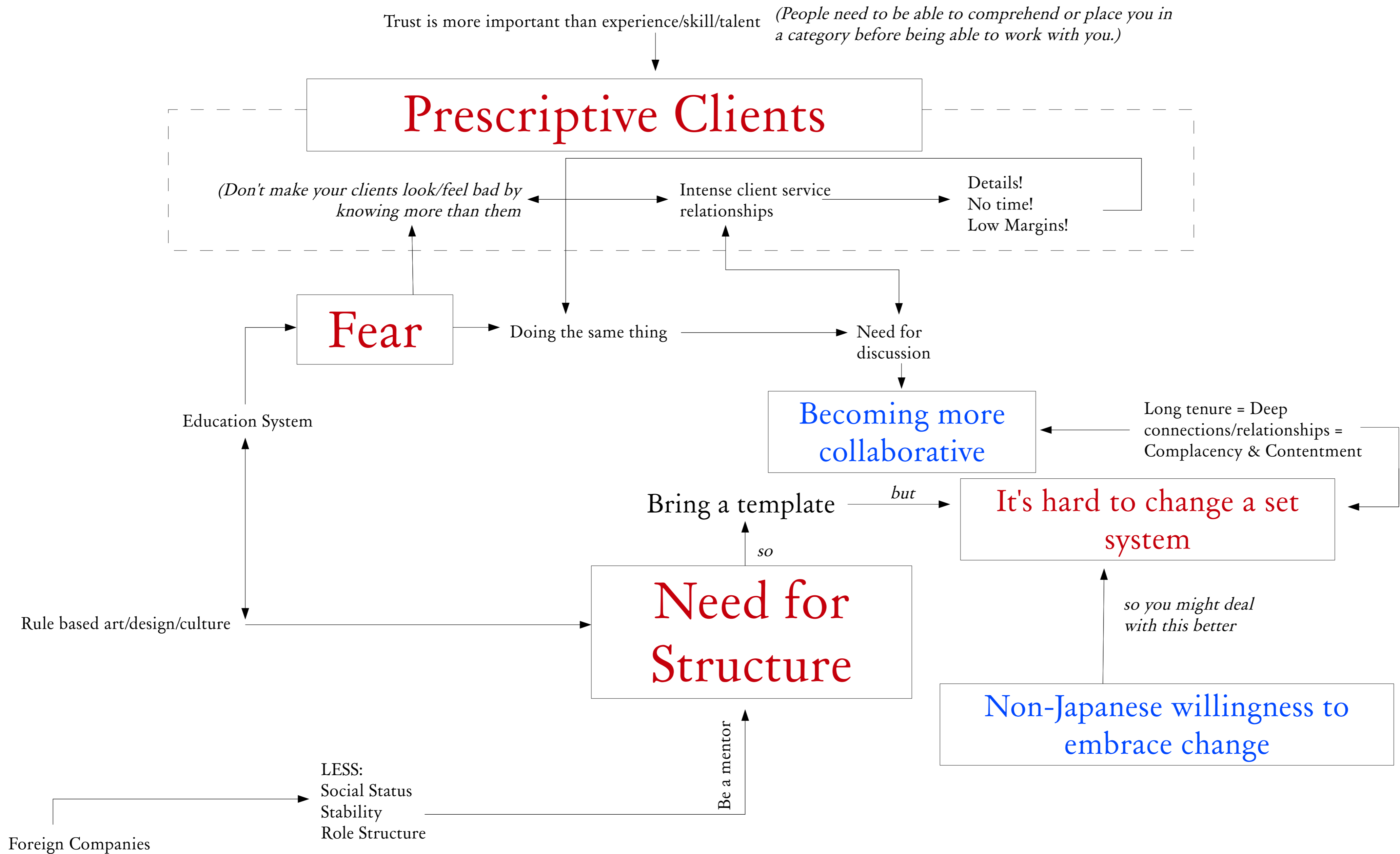
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Education System

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Long tenure = Deep connections/relationships = Complacency & Contentment

Bring a template → *but* → ## It's hard to change a set system

so

Rule based art/design/culture

Need for Structure

so you might deal with this better

Be a mentor

Non-Japanese willingness to embrace change

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

Foreign Companies

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

Prescriptive Clients

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Education System

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Rule based art/design/culture

Be a mentor

Non-Japanese willingness to embrace change

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

so you can enact

Foreign Companies

Quicker decision making

www.a-small-lab.com/managing-for-creativity-in-japan/ | chris@a-small-lab.com

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Rule based art/design/culture → ## Need for Structure

so you might deal with this better

Non-Japanese willingness to embrace change

Be a mentor

LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

Foreign Companies

so you can enact

LESS:
Formal Gateposts
Risk to the non-Japanese parent

Quicker decision making

The Whole Trainset

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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Fear

Doing the same thing

Need for discussion

Education System

Consistent quality

Becoming more collaborative

Long tenure = Deep connections/relationships = Complacency & Contentment

Kaizen

Bring a template

but

It's hard to change a set system

Rule based art/design/culture

Need for Structure

so

so you might deal with this better

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LESS:
Social Status
Stability
Role Structure

so you can enact

Foreign Companies

LESS:
Formal Gateposts
Risk to the non-Japanese parent

Quicker decision making

The Whole Trainset

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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Becoming more collaborative

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Kaizen ← Bring a template → *but* → ## It's hard to change a set system

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Stability
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Non-Japanese willingness to embrace change

Foreign Companies

so you can enact

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