



Success

MANAGING FOR CREATIVITY IN JAPAN

A draft framework for understanding characteristics of a successful foreign manager as perceived by foreign executives in Japan.

- AN ANNOTATED VISUAL FRAMEWORK -

a-small-lab.com

Chris Berthelsen (chris@a-small-lab.com)

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Online Resources

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

- 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)

I. 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 constitutes a general overview of the characteristics of successful foreign managers as perceived by foreign executives in Japan.

Acknowledgements

(i) The searchable interview excerpt resource associated with this project is a featured resource of the New York University Leonard N. Stern School of Business Center for Japan-U.S. Business and Economic Studies ([link](#))

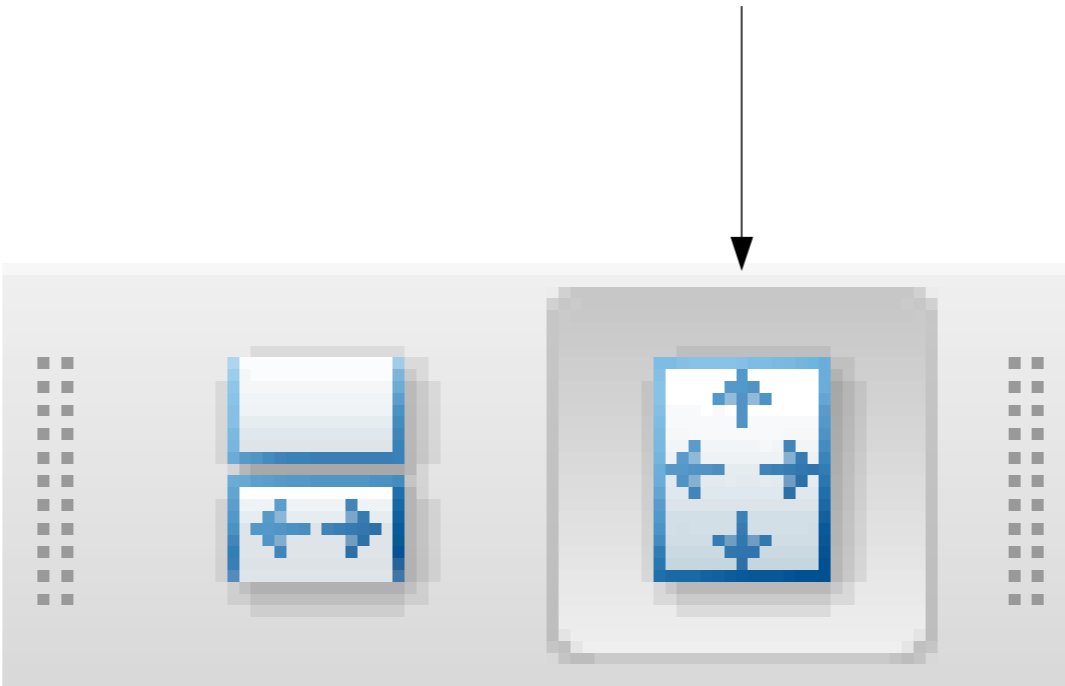
(ii) This project was carried out, in part, while a Monbukagakusho (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) funded research student at the Graduate School of Commerce and Management, Hitotsubashi University, in Tokyo.

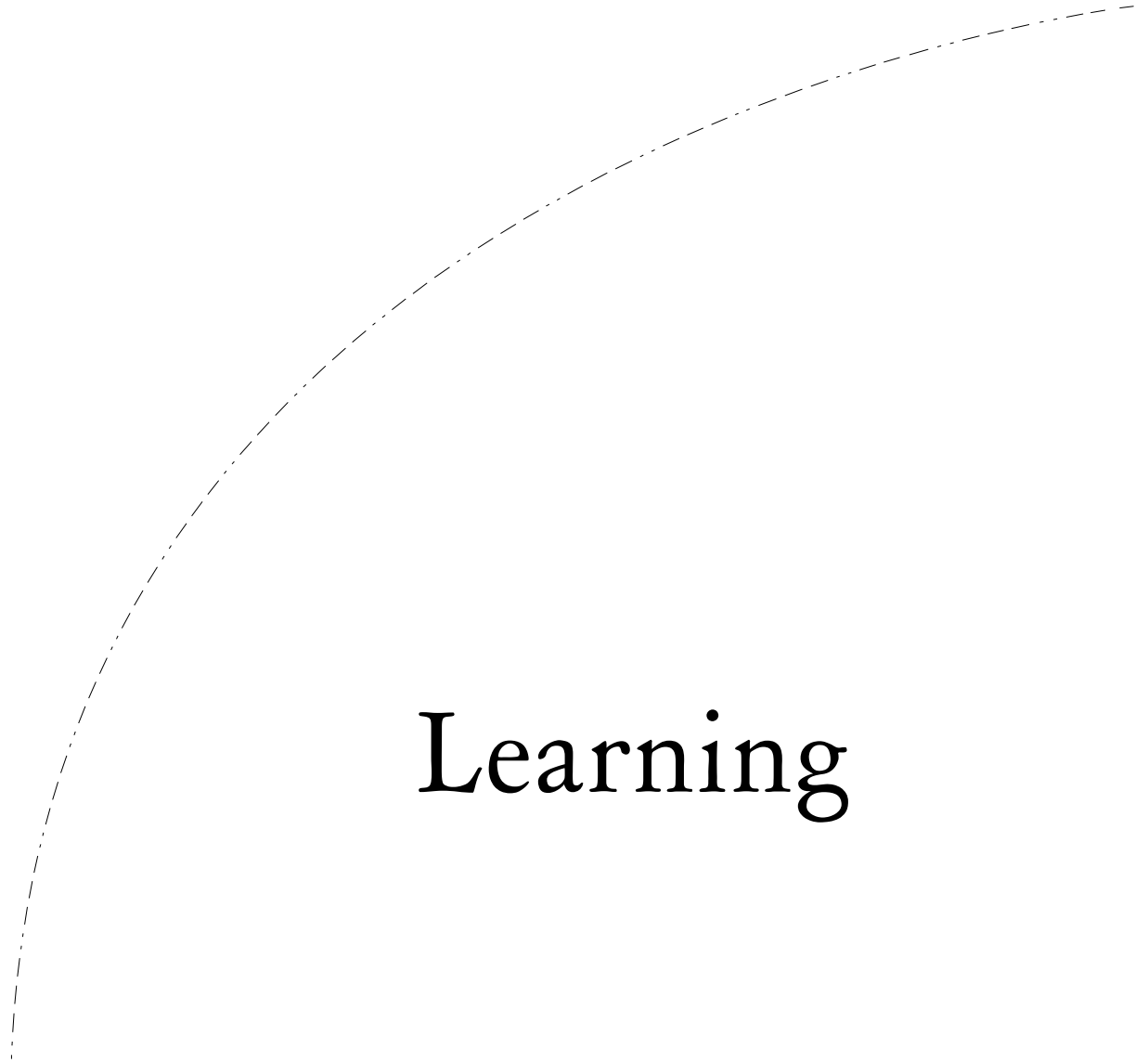
(iii) To the managers who generously set aside a couple of hours each to share their experiences your help is deeply appreciated. This has been an invaluable learning experience for me.

“...I say this not from a moral point of view but from the point of view that if you don't (do these things) you'll fail.....”

(Anonymous study participant)

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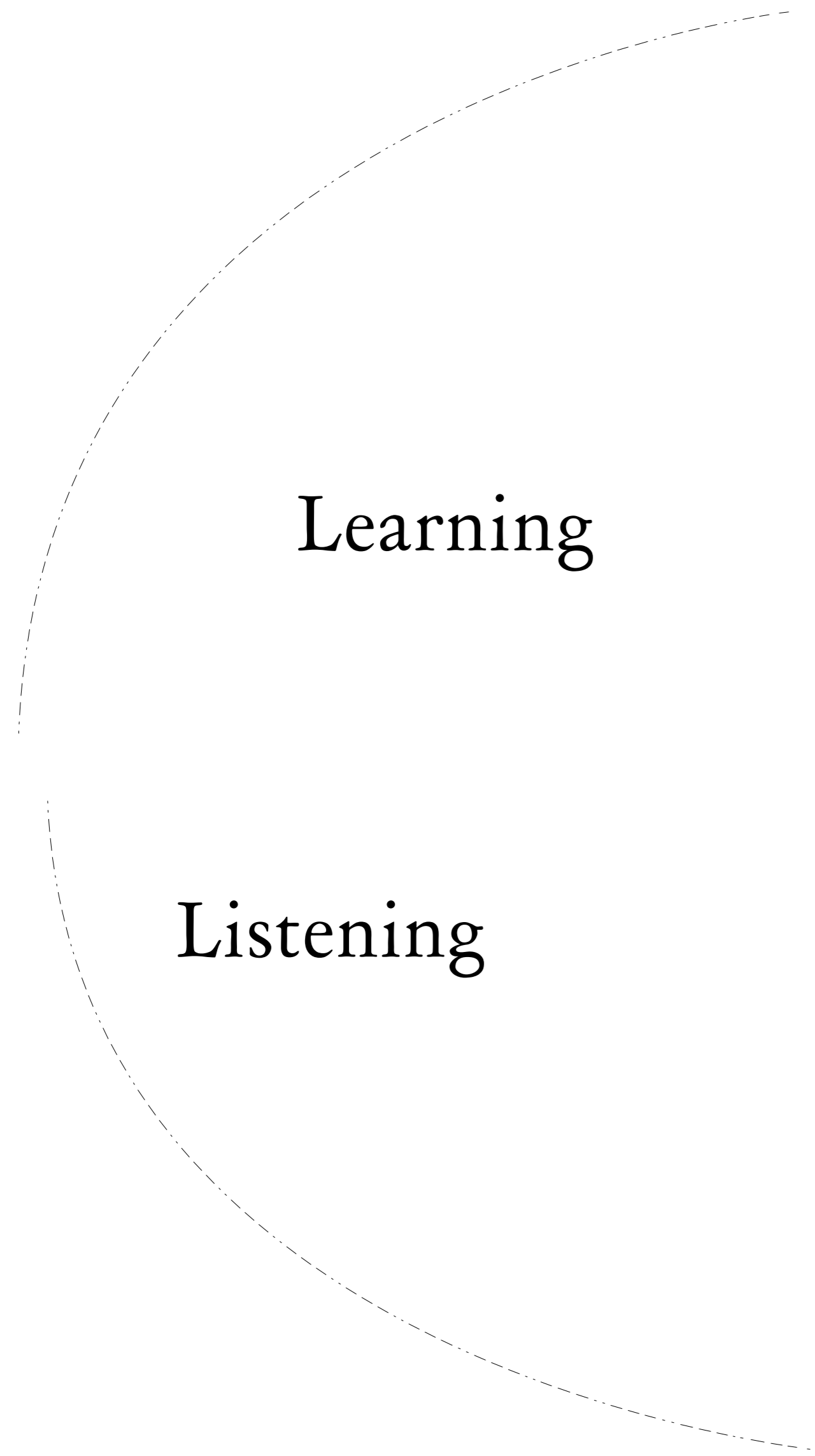




Learning

There are four central characteristics of a successful foreign manager in Japan.

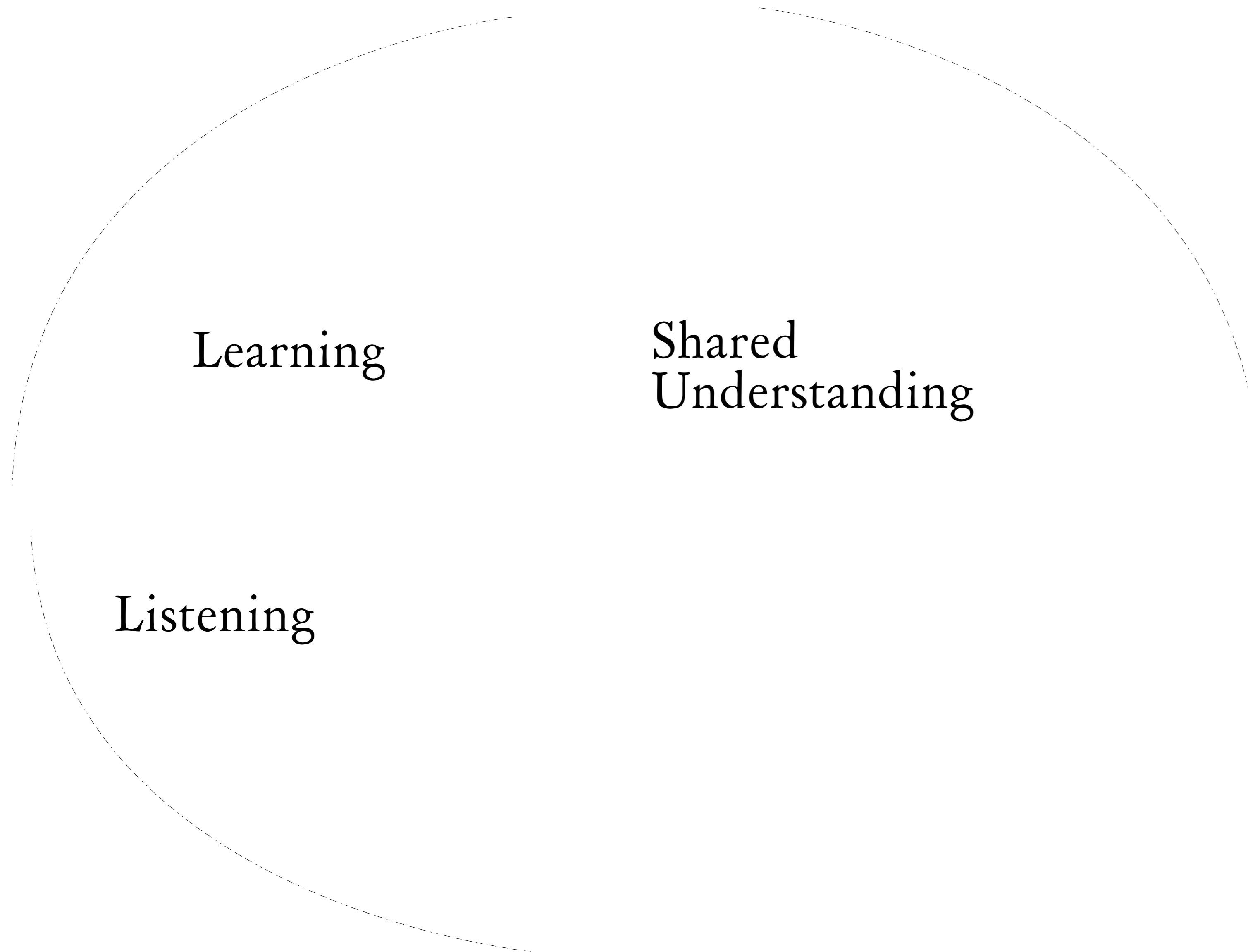
(1) Learning



There are four central characteristics of a successful foreign manager in Japan.

(1) Learning, which is closely related to

(2) Listening



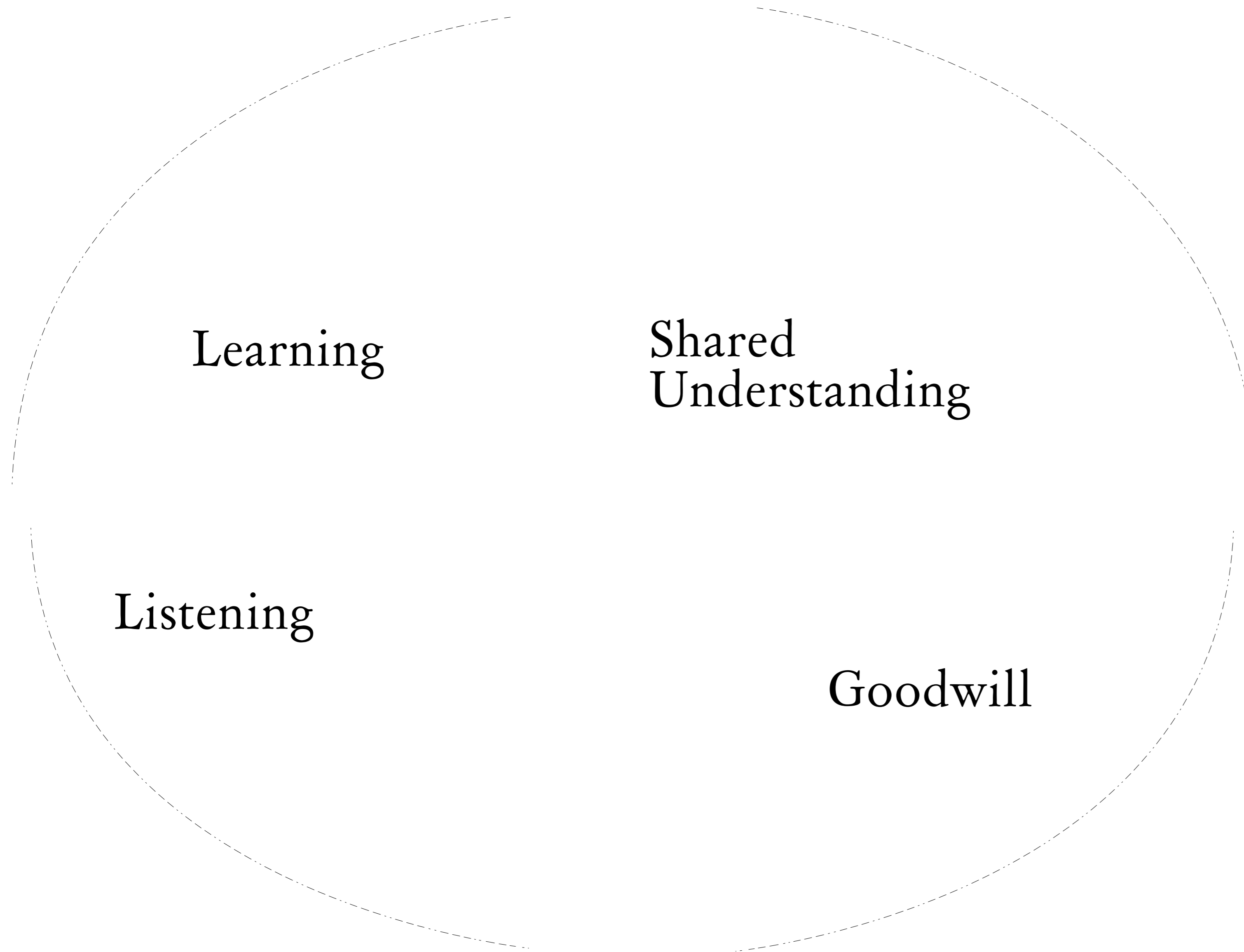
There are four central characteristics of a successful foreign manager in Japan.

(1) Learning, which is closely related to

(2) Listening,

the two of which facilitate the ability to create

(3) Shared Understanding



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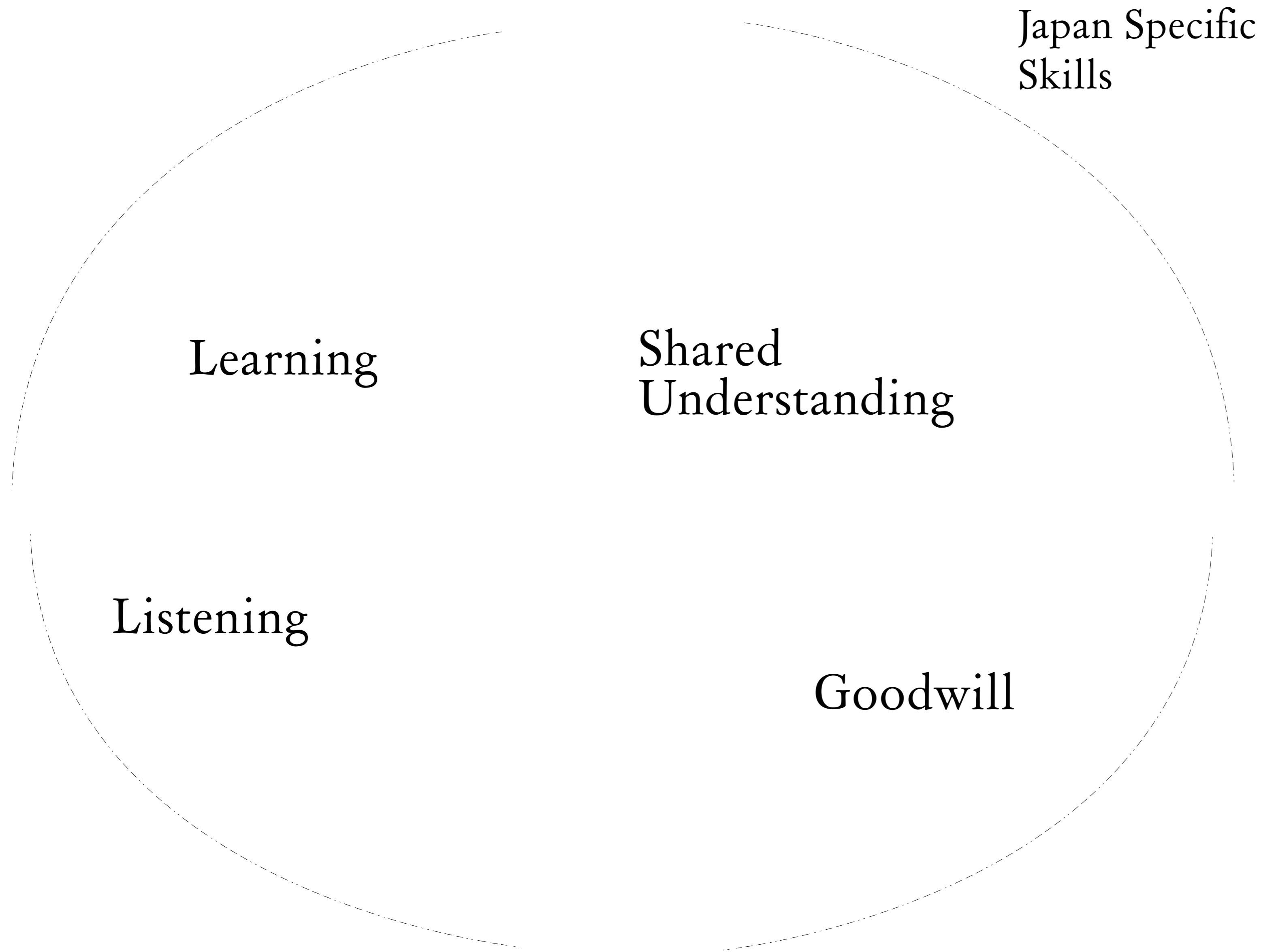
(2) Listening,

the two of which facilitate the ability to create

(3) Shared Understanding,

all of which rest on

(4) Goodwill.



These four central characteristics are supported by

(1) Japan Specific Skills,

Being able to
break the rules

Japan Specific
Skills

These four central
characteristics are
supported by

- (1) Japan Specific Skills,
a willingness or ability to
- (2) Break the Rules,

Learning

Shared
Understanding

Listening

Goodwill

Being able to
break the rules

Japan Specific
Skills

These four central
characteristics are
supported by

- (1) Japan Specific Skills,
a willingness or ability to
- (2) Break the Rules,
while holding a
- (3) Long Term View

Learning

Shared
Understanding

Listening

Goodwill

Long Term View

Being able to
break the rules

Japan Specific
Skills

These four central
characteristics are
supported by

- (1) Japan Specific Skills,
a willingness or ability to
- (2) Break the Rules,
while holding a
- (3) Long Term View
and still being able to
- (4) Be Ruthless when it is
needed.

Learning

Shared
Understanding

Listening

Goodwill

A bit of ruthlessness

Long Term View

Being able to
break the rules

Japan Specific
Skills

All of this is wrapped in
the relationship with the
home office.

Learning

Shared
Understanding

Listening

Goodwill

A bit of ruthlessness

Long Term View

Home Office Relationship

Being able to
break the rules

Japan Specific
Skills

Tolerance for
ambiguity

Embrace
change

Curiosity

Learning

Shared
Understanding

Receive advice

Rewire your
thinking

Listening

Goodwill

A bit of ruthlessness

Long Term View

Home Office Relationship

Learning

Don't teach, learn. Anyone who is not open-minded and curious will not succeed. *"A lot of foreigners come here, particularly in our industry, to 'teach them how to do things right'... but the society and culture here is so advanced that it's not relevant to act that way."*

You need to have a high tolerance for ambiguity and be able to embrace change - *"You have to rework your head because when you are in this country things don't run your way, they run the Japanese way. You have to rewire the way you think... and be receptive to advice."*

Being able to
break the rules

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Long Term View

Home Office Relationship

*“It's a case of really,
genuinely listening, and
that's a challenge” and a
skill.*

The ability to *'listen across
cultures'* is important and
this is something
particularly important in
Japan but that can be
learned anywhere -

*“I've worked with CEOs
who have never been to
Japan before, but who have
a lot of global experience
and the successful ones
have this ability....” - How
they embrace culture is
important.*

Listening means *“being
sensitive to the vibe. Take
a more holistic approach.
People will give you their
best if they don't feel
threatened.”*

Being able to
break the rules

Japan Specific
Skills

Listening is key to
communication.

Tolerance for
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Listening

Trust Socializing

Warmth

Goodwill

Being
human

Communication

Respect

A bit of ruthlessness

Long Term View

Home Office Relationship

Listening is key to
communication.

Which provides a platform
for goodwill (and shared
understanding).

*“Maintaining harmony
while creating positive
dissonance is important.
This has to do with
generating goodwill, so [in
a way] it's a personal
characteristic – being warm
and human while at the
same time creating
understanding of the need
for change.”*

You may find that *“you
need to get out socializing.
You need to do the
Japanese thing.... You need
to do whatever it takes to
get that personal trust
before you even start
talking about business.... If
you can get that, I think
there is huge potential for
you and your company.”*
But *“never burn bridges
and never piss off a client.
Once trust is broken it's
pretty much permanent.”*

While this is rarely true in
other cultures there is
probably a heavier
emphasis on it in Japan.

Being able to
break the rules

Japan Specific
Skills

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Curiosity

People
management

Nemawashi

Learning

Shared
Understanding

Receive advice

Rewire your
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Collaboration

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A bit of ruthlessness

Long Term View

Home Office Relationship

“If you do not prepare properly you can issue all these directives but no one will follow them and that's often surprising to foreign managers here.”

Nemawashi (a kind of informal process of preparatory negotiations/discussions) and people management are important. And spending time building relationships both within and outside of the company will aid this.

Because *“people want to discuss everything and make sure everybody agrees with a particular course of action before taking it”* successful work will be collaborative work.

Being able to break the rules

Japan Specific Skills

So, obviously, you can't come in and dictate your mandate from head office.

However you still need to

- "understand when someone really is opposing you and get rid of them if they are affecting performance. There is a mix of receptivity and sensitivity.....and perhaps ruthlessness as well."

Tolerance for ambiguity

Embrace change

Curiosity

People management

Nemawashi

Learning

Shared Understanding

Receive advice

Rewire your thinking

Collaboration

Relationships

Listening

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Warmth

Goodwill

Being human

Communication

Respect

Recognize your opposition

Strength

Long Term View

A bit of ruthlessness

Home Office Relationship

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Cultural knowledge /experience

Japan Specific Skills

Language ability

People management

Nemawashi

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Long Term View

Home Office Relationship

As noted earlier, these characteristics are not peculiar to Japan, but they may be relatively more important.

Japan specific skills, or rather understanding can be beneficial. Having the "cultural knowledge that brainstorming in the classic sense does not work in Japan" for example - "You need to understand what works and what doesn't work, and how to get the same results but in a different format."

Language skills can be useful, especially in life outside of the office, but remember that "that because you're able to understand the language doesn't mean that you are of the culture."

Being able to break the rules

Japan Specific Skills

Tolerance for ambiguity

Cultural knowledge /experience

Language ability

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Curiosity

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Long Term View

Home Office Relationship

“There are advantages to not being Japanese though. You can start jumping up and down and yelling ‘Come On!’ - you couldn’t do that if you were Japanese.”

Being a foreigner means that you have more leeway to bend the rules. You can come at issues in a different way, and they’ll accept you. “But you can’t get away with just being a foreigner. If [you] speak a load of rubbish or are unfair [you] won’t get away with it but I think that it is accepted that non-Japanese will have different approaches to problem solving.”

Being able to break the rules

Japan Specific Skills

Finally, self confidence and thick skin are important in helping you take a long-term view of your work.

Tolerance for ambiguity

Cultural knowledge /experience

Language ability

Embrace change

Curiosity

People management

Nemawashi

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Being human

Communication

Respect

Recognize your opposition

Self confidence

Strength

Thick skin

A bit of ruthlessness

Long Term View

Self confidence doesn't mean that you always assume you are right, *"because actually, in Japan you are going to be wrong a lot of the time. But it does mean that you need to have the confidence to just keep going....."*

"It takes extra tenacity to have an impact, contribute, make a difference or change things. I get beat up every day but I've got to be able to come back the next day that much better for it."

And for client relationships, perseverance is important. If you don't get work straight away *"(and you won't) you have to believe that it might happen in a year's time – because it might."*

Home Office Relationship

Being able to break the rules

Japan Specific Skills

All of the above is wrapped in the relationship with the home office.

Managers may struggle when the home office expects them to get results in the same time frames as they would in postings in other countries -

“If it is the case that their boss back wherever doesn't want to hear about cultural differences in creative approach or whatever and they just say 'Where are the results John?' then they will have to do things that they feel will get them the required results in a short period of time so that they can move on to their next assignment”

“..they just force people to do things. But when they leave there is a trail of damage that the next guy has to come in and clean up. So it's not really success in the long term. It's a selfish result.”

Cultural knowledge /experience

Language ability

Tolerance for ambiguity

People management

Nemawashi

Embrace change

Curiosity

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a-small-lab.com
Chris Berthelsen (chris@a-small-lab.com)