



Japanese Work Style

[Slide 1] Welcome to this e-learning session on Japanese work style.

[Slide 2] The Japanese work style is cooperative, streamlined and process-oriented.

[Slide 3] Topics we will cover in this session include the culturally-based value of time, and how it affects deadlines; the emphasis on process over results; cleanliness and the so-called “5S” system made popular by Toyota; ways of solving problems; and the Japanese notion of *kaizen*, or “continuous improvement.”

[Slide 4] Deadlines can be a troublesome issue when Japanese and non-Japanese people work together.

[Slide 5] Here’s a real-life example.

It is Friday afternoon and Tetsuo Yamanashi, a Japanese executive, is waiting for his new subordinate Alfonso Batista to submit a report that Alfonso had promised him would be ready that morning. Mr. Yamanashi needs the report right away so that he can submit it to his own supervisor in Tokyo. He had taken Alfonso at his word that he would submit the report on time. 5:00 comes and goes, but no report arrives on Mr. Yamanashi’s desk. He goes to Alfonso’s office, but finds that he has already left for the day. At 5:47 Mr. Yamanashi receives an email from Alfonso, apologizing and explaining that he wanted to include some important additional data he had just found. In his message Alfonso promised to submit the report first thing Monday morning. Mr. Yamanashi feels very frustrated by this situation.

[Slide 6] Deadlines are important in many cultures, but in many cultures if there are things that come up that make meeting the deadline difficult, the deadline can often be extended.

[Slide 7] In Japan, however, a commitment to a deadline is absolute, with no flexibility for changes.

[Slide 8] Part of the different view toward deadlines has to do with the fact that for Japanese people, process is extremely important, while for people in many other cultures, results take precedence over process. Meeting a deadline is part of doing things “the right way” in Japan, and there is only one right way to do things. In addition, because deadlines are extremely strict in Japan, Mr. Yamanashi is probably under intense pressure from his superiors in Japan to deliver his own work to them.

In some cultures, time is considered to be precious, moving fast is a priority, and people don’t want to waste time. In other cultures, many things may happen at the same time; so deadlines may be less important in these cultures. In Japan, meeting deadlines shows a person’s commitment in working with clients and superiors, so no effort is spared to accomplish this.

Punctuality is taken for granted as a necessary element of the process. No matter what the reasons are that might cause a person to miss a deadline, stating those reasons will often sound like excuses to Japanese ears. To meet a deadline is to demonstrate an attitude of responsibility.

[Slide 9] On the other hand, in spite of this strict approach to time management, in Japan there is not the sense of “rushing” that exists in many other business cultures. In fact, some things can be rather time-consuming, such as the decision-making process. Japanese business teams have no problem missing windows of opportunity if they have not had enough time to research the situation thoroughly enough. Japanese colleagues will move at their own pace, and doing things properly is more important than arriving faster at a desired result.

[Slide 10] This emphasis on process can be frustrating for non-Japanese, as this case study shows:

John Mwangi, an employee at a Japanese company, was preparing some presentation materials. Although he had already revised the materials several times, his Japanese supervisor never seemed satisfied with how they looked. Many of the changes that were requested involved matters such as margins or typeface. John felt frustrated spending so much time on what he considered to be merely cosmetic matters.

[Slide 11] In some cultures people emphasize results over process, or details are considered less important than substance; but in Japan, process and appearance are all-important.

[Slide 12] When you submit a report to a Japanese colleague, they will expect it to be a polished final draft, even if everyone knows that it will be subject to further changes down the road.

[Slide 13] When you understand your Japanese colleagues' focus on process, you can help them feel more comfortable by showing that you are adhering to the "correct" process yourself.

[Slide 14] Note that they will not be as impressed with great results if the process that achieved them was poorly managed.

[Slide 15] One way that Japanese companies emphasize process and procedure is through a system called "5S." 5S is a set of practices that has come into the spotlight because of its central role in Toyota's manufacturing processes. The 5 "S"s are five Japanese words that begin with S, describing a general set of work procedures:

- ☐ *Seiri* means "straighten up"—get organized, sort your supplies, and decide what you need
- ☐ *Seiton* means "store"—everything should be in its place, so that work procedures can move forward in a smooth, streamlined way
- ☐ *Seiso* stands for "shine"—keep everything from office surroundings to equipment meticulously clean and organized
- ☐ *Seiketsu* is "sanitize"—keep the workplace clean, sanitary and safe
- ☐ *Shitsuke* can be thought of as "sustain" or "strive" to keep on completing these processes every day

[Slide 16] One of the most important elements of the 5S system is *seiso*,

[Slide 17] to shine or clean.

[Slide 18] The first character "sei" means "purify" or "cleanse" and the second character "so" means "to sweep."

[Slide 19] Everyone in Japan knows how to clean.

[Slide 20] In schools children do the cleaning themselves, beginning when they start school at 6 or 7 years of age. In offices, too, everyone participates in keeping their surroundings clean. No leaving used coffee mugs in the sink for "somebody else" to wash!

[Slide 21] This approach fosters a sense of ownership and raises morale, while at the same time it allows people to keep track of any problems with equipment or supplies, so that they can be corrected quickly.

Wherever you go in Japan, you see people sweeping and cleaning—from the Buddhist monk polishing the floor of the temple, to the gardener raking leaves, to the housewife pouring a bucket of water over the sidewalk and scrubbing it with a broom. The value of cleanliness is also reflected in the elaborate system of slippers in houses, inns or even restaurants—one pair for the tatami rice mat areas, another for the kitchen, another for the bathroom and toilet areas. It's a common mistake for people visiting Japan to forget to change out of the toilet slippers in traditional restaurants, trampling all over the tatami mat dining area unless someone stops them first.

[Slide 22] When problems occur—since they inevitably do—there is a precise method for solving them. The Japanese use the acronym *HoRenSo* to describe this process.

Ho stands for *hokoku*, or “report,” *Ren* stands for *renraku*, or “contact,” and *So* stands for *sodan*, or “consult.” Report-contact-consult: When a problem occurs, employees should always report it; they should contact the relevant people, and they should consult with others to get their advice, rather than trying to solve the problem themselves. In essence *HoRenSo* is a reminder that problem-solving should be collective, not individual.

In practice, *HoRenSo* is also a kind of back-and-forth process of collaboration. Let's say a manager makes a request and the employee who is carrying it out begins work on it, by creating a set of options, an initial plan, an outline or a rough draft. At that stage he consults with his manager and asks for advice. His manager gives their reaction and input, and the employee then proceeds further with the work, then once again sharing it with his manager, and so on until it is completed.

As a result, the final product is a collaboration between the requester and the requestee, and there are no surprises because the requestor knows how the work is going at every stage.

[Slide 23] Another crucial Japanese process for solving and preventing problems is summed up by the term *kaizen*, which is now in common usage in the international business world as well. In Japanese “*zen* (善) means “the good,” as in “good actions lead to good rewards,” and “*kai* (改) means to “search for, reform, revise and improve.” *Kaizen* is the process of observing a situation and constantly searching for ways to improve it.

[Slide 24] From the standpoint of *kaizen*, problems are seen as teachers showing us how we can improve.

[Slide 25] As situations evolve and improve, goals for improvement also evolve.

[Slide 26] *Kaizen* is the reason that Japanese colleagues will tend to emphasize criticism and areas for improvement when interacting with employees, in a way that might seem negative to non-Japanese. Praise of subordinates is not built into the culture the way it is in other parts of the world. Japanese managers believe that if they point out defects and weaknesses, that will help employees engage more effectively in continuous improvement.

[Slide 27] Part of *kaizen* is *hansei*, a term that is difficult to translate into English, but which means something like “reflection on areas for improvement,” “self-criticism,” or “thinking about how one could have done better.”

[Slide 28] *Hansei* can be done individually or collectively, but a post-mortem meeting, called a *hanseikai*, is always held to discover flaws in the process. While after a major project or event many of us might just be inclined to say “Whew! Glad that’s over!” and move on, in Japan people customarily get together to carry out a detailed analysis of how everything went. Even if it went relatively smoothly, they always find ways to improve the process and make it more efficient.

Japanese people often feel that people who weren’t brought up in Japan don’t understand the concept of *hansei*. They may feel that explanations of the reasons for problems are just excuses.

[Slide 29] The *hansei* attitude does not try to explain away or excuse problems, but looks for constructive solutions. If you want to demonstrate that you know how to engage in self-reflection, ask “What can we do to avoid this problem in the future?” and make suggestions based on the answers.

[Slide 30] All of these processes work together to create a streamlined way of working that leaves little room for doubt—people always know what steps they should be taking to research, prevent, or solve any problem that might arise. Adhering to these processes can help create a more coherent and streamlined work environment, and that is probably why so many international companies are now adopting similar practices.