

The Importance of Intangible Factors in Productivity

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Abstract

In this paper, the author discusses the importance of the intangible factor of communication in the workplace from the perspective of productivity enhancement. First, the paper will focus on intercultural communication between Japanese and people from other countries. Then the paper explains about Kaizen, and the significance of conveying the intentions of the top management to workers and finally will conclude with a focus on understanding the indispensability of worker empowerment, helping workers actually take the helm of their organization.

Introduction

The system of scientific management proposed by Fred, W. Taylor (1856-1915), called Taylorism, or *Taylorismus*, which brought about enormous advances in productivity in a mass production, especially in the automaker Ford in the United States, was brought into question in Germany where it did not work well (Fukushima, 1995, p. 231). *Taylorismus* puts emphasis on the standardization of all tools and implements and working conditions to improve productivity. On the other hand, Elton Mayo (1880-1949) advocated a theory with an emphasis on the relationships between employers and employees to increase productivity, based on his research conducted in the 1920s at Western Electric, the manufacturing arm of AT&T. The research “The Human Relations Movement: Harvard Business School and the Hawthorne Experiments (1924-1933)” triggered a shift in the study of productivity management “from a scientific to a multi-disciplinary approach” (Roethlisberger, and Karsh, 1958). This study raised questions about how productivity is related to workers’ needs and motivations. In order to enhance workers’ motivation, smooth and satisfying communication between workers and management as well as amongst workers is indispensable. More recently, the fact that “psychological factor affects

innovation” (Lee, 2016), showcased the importance of studying intangible factors in management.

“The decline in measured labor productivity growth over recent decades is a matter of considerable concern and debate among academics, as it is in business and government” (Goldin et al. 2021). Although we are living in the technological development led by computer science, humanistic elements have to be taken into consideration to solve above mentioned productivity decline.

Specifically speaking, how we communicate with others is the area the author of this paper hopes to shed light on in order to reduce tensions in workplace relationships and enhance efficiency and productivity by unleashing full potential of employees. In this paper the author discusses the importance of the intangible factor of communication in the workplace. First, the paper will focus on intercultural communication between Japanese and people from other countries. Then the paper finally will conclude with a focus on understanding the indispensability of worker empowerment making workers actually take the helm of their organization.

The first part is mainly focused on cross cultural communication between Japanese and

people from other countries. It is doubtful whether people from different cultural backgrounds can fully understand the meaning or intension of ambiguous Japanese expressions even when they are literally translated, because Japanese communication sometimes contains ambiguous expressions. Especially in cross-cultural business settings, this use of ambiguity occasionally causes difficulties in mutual understanding if the real intention of a communicator is not fully understood. Barry (1992) observes that “the Japanese tend to communicate via nuance and euphemism, often leaving important things unsaid, … This difference in approach often leads to misunderstandings …” (p.35). The later part is focused on empowerment of workers. We tend to think CEOs really taking the helm of his/her organizations. However, an organization is in safe hands if a person who holds actual working information and skills takes the helm (Marquet, 2015). “It’s often someone unknown to the public who bears much of the weight” than “the person at the top of the pyramid, the front of the stage, or the head of the boardroom table (Zweig, 2014)”. Hence keeping workers’ motivations high will enhance the efficiency and productivity of the organization.

Expatriate(s) who are working with Japanese people are required to pay considerable attention in their communication because they are working under totally different cultural background from their home countries. When anybody working in different cultural circumstances from that of one’s own will have the same situation. In order to reduce tension in cross-cultural business settings, it is necessary to embrace possible potential differences in the cultures and languages, and then seek mutual understanding of the respective viewpoints through knowledge enhancement. It is imperative to know what types of difficulties can be predicted in a particular intercultural business communication setting in order to facilitate smoother communication within project working groups.

This thesis will discuss several cross-cultural settings with possible problems and, through root cause analysis, look for possible solutions to prevent or successfully handle any uneasy atmosphere in order to make cross-cultural projects or business interactions more successful.

Example 1

Background 1

A project manager is originally from an English-speaking country and his or her project members are Japanese who have only received education in Japan. They are working in a company in Japan.

Issue 1

The English-speaking manager feels that his or her subordinates are not speaking to the point enough, and he/she cannot keep listening to what they say until the end, as he/she feels they are not really answering his/her questions. There are some cases that even a closed question is not answered starting with in either “Yes” or “No (Tano, 2024).” The manager feels as if subordinate’s circumference story telling endlessly continues.

Root Cause Analysis 1

The root cause of this problem may be due to differences in the composition structure of language (Fig.1). Ono (2002) claims that this structural difference comes from the respective school education in an English-speaking country vis a vis Japan. English paragraph writing starts with composing a topic sentence followed by supporting sentences, putting the important message at the beginning, subsequently supported by reasoning, evidence, or examples. Japanese school composition classes teach 『起承転結』 *Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu*. 『起』 *Ki* means “introduction;” the topic for the following information is given. 『承』 *Sho* “development,” which follows the introduction and gives further information about the topic which leads to 『転』

Ten. *Ten*, the third stage in this format, implies change and refers to the introduction of a surprise, something which seems only vaguely related to the original topic” (Berglund, 2004, p.77). 『結』 *Ketsu* is the conclusion, and it wraps up the topic, or as Berglund (2004) says, “ties everything together” (p.77)

According to Ono (2002) English and Japanese formal dissertations can be compared as “straight-to-the point” versus “beat-around-the-bush style.” Ono also states that there might be a risk that western people will not be able to read a thesis to its conclusion with patience “because only after the detailed reasoning and explanations comes the conclusion at the very end” in the case of Japanese compositions. Another characteristic of formal dissertation which makes cross cultural communication difficult is that Japanese use “indirect appeal” rather than “direct appeal” (Ono, 2001). (See Figure.1)

I believe that the same kind of problems may also affect cross-cultural spoken communication as well. Let’s apply Ono’s analysis to spoken communication. Imagine a manager listening to a subordinate report about the progress of a certain project. The foreign manager wants to hear the core message, or the point of discussion as the first thing. However, the Japanese subordinate’s

report always starts from an explanation of the given project, things which the manager already knows. The manager feels irritated and cannot endure listening to what the subordinate is saying. At every utterance of the subordinate, the manager might mumble “I know that...”, “I know that...” There might be some situations in which the manager’s irritation will reach an intolerable level, and the manager may walk out before the subordinate reaches the conclusion of his/her report.

Possible Interventions 1

Brooks and John (2018) address the issue of training in business communication. they posit that “professionals such as litigators, journalists, and doctors, are taught how to ask questions as an essential part of their training” (p.1). They believe that this training is actually essential for managers and workers who should “think of questioning as a skill that can be honed – or consider how their own answers to questions could make conversations more productive.”

Training workshops should be required for both the foreign manager and the Japanese subordinates. Everyone should be aware of possible differences in communication style. If the manager asks the subordinates to report based on the manager’s preferences in the training workshop, the Japanese members will know how to report. The foreign manager should also be able to shift his/her listening style, so that there is less feeling of irritation. The method of role play will help everyone develop their capabilities in reporting to the manager or listening to subordinate.

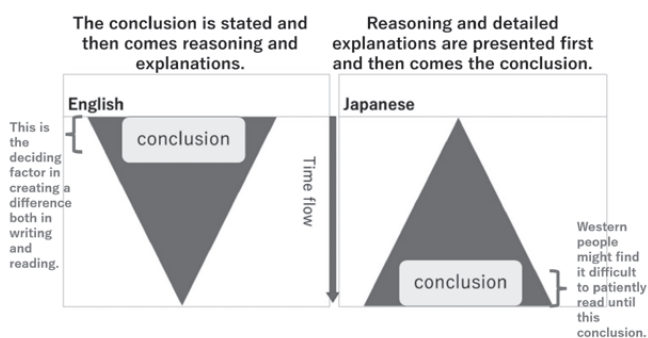


Figure. 1 English and Japanese Paragraph Structures

『ポイントで学ぶ科学英語論文の書き方』 (Ono, 2002, p.9)
 Note: “The composition of a paragraph in English starts with important information in a topic sentence, and then supports that with reasons and explanations. On the contrary, a Japanese paragraph starts with explanations and puts important information at the end.” (translations by the author).

Example 2

Background 2

This example is almost the same as the first one. However, what is different is that the manager has to give important instructions to his/her subordinates. The manager is asking them to do an important and necessary task, but

one outside of their job description. There is an urgent issue which has come up in the company so that it is necessary to handle it immediately. If they follow the manager's instructions, they will be obliged to work overtime.

Issue 2

Almost immediately the manager's instructions are interrupted by the subordinates. As soon as the manager starts telling his/her subordinates what has to be done, there is such vocal criticism that the manager finds it difficult to continue speaking. Although there may be convincing reasons for the manager's request, these reasons cannot be delineated and the manager faces resentment from the staff.

The manager may not be able to offer any details because his/her request involves a global project which requires agile partnerships and demands confidentiality as there are many competitors in the global market. Or it could be the case of a global merger. Not only in Japan but all over the world, consolidation in various industries has been observed over the past decades, such as steel industries, hotels, banks pulp and paper companies and others, which almost always accompanied by a merger. In almost every case the process and development of such mergers seems to be kept secret from workers and be only known to a handful of board members until a certain point. However, at the time of such consolidation, the process may require non-regular tasks in various areas. If the counterpart company is based in a different country, both companies need to deal with a lot of differences. There are tasks which have to be kept confidential, but also have to be done swiftly. The author believes that the partnering of companies in different countries will increase in the future, and the number of cross-cultural projects, partnerships, and/or mergers may surge.

Root Cause Analysis 2

The cause of this conflict may also be related to differences in communication styles and direct

versus indirect expression styles of English speakers and Japanese speakers, which may lead to a lack of understanding between them. The Japanese staff cannot understand why the manager abruptly asks them to perform tasks which are outside of their normal job responsibilities. However, when seen from the manager's side, he/she is just following the standard composition rules, which put the most important information first, just as the topic sentence almost always appears in the first sentence of a paragraph. The important information is: *This has to be done*. Actually however, the most important piece of information should be the managerial side which is bound by confidentiality agreements and therefore no explanation of the reasons for these instructions can be offered. However, the manager may not even be able to say this.

Possible interventions 2

I strongly believe that the manager should learn to understand the Japanese style of communication and indirect expressions. Japanese subordinates prefer to have the peripheral circumstances explained in the first place. The possibility of secret project, merger, or financial partnership should not be divulged directly. However, if a possible partner company requires value assessment of the financial health of the company, and even if the manager said something like "Now is a good time for us to check the financial health of our company in the same way that we, employees have periodical health checkups." Some of the subordinates with good intuition might understand the real circumstances behind the manager's words and their ensuing responsibilities, and there may be a possibility that they will spontaneously follow the manager's instructions.

This might not be applicable in the above-mentioned case, but an evaluation of assets and liabilities of a company is inevitably carried out when a company is facing a possible merger or acquisition (M&A). This evaluation process is part

of due diligence: “A comprehensive appraisal of a business undertaken by a prospective buyer, especially to establish its assets and liabilities and evaluate its commercial potential” (Oxford Languages, 2024).

If the subordinates are all experienced in the Japanese communication style, implicit expression may be effective enough, or rather they may even prefer indirect messages. There are often cases where the expression “financial partnership” is preferred when discussing a possible merger or acquisition. This epitomizes preference for indirect expression in Japanese. Implicit expression and periphrastic expression are specific features of the Japanese communication style (Barry, 1992; Ono, 2002). Even if the most important information is not stated directly, Japanese may surprisingly be able to “surmise” or “read between the lines” of the manager’s explanation to see “the conclusion” even if it is not actually stated.

The spirit of “reading between the lines” is well illustrated in the expression 『今日の茶漬』 *Kyo no Chazuke* or 『茶漬』 *Chazuke* whose literal translation is “a bowl of rice with green tea poured over it.” The host offers the guest a bowl of *Chazuke*. This expression may be used by the host to induce the guest to act without saying anything directly. The guest reads between the lines and understands that it’s time to leave. This is a thoughtful, considerate expression showing respect to the guest by implying that the host has not prepared a meal to serve the guest, there by encouraging the guest to spontaneously take his/her leave. When the guest is visiting someone and has stayed quite a long time, and is then asked, “we have nothing special to serve you, but would you like to have a simple bowl of rice with green tea?”, the discerning guest well understand that it’s time for them to bid cordial farewell from the side of the guest. A proposal for a cup of green tea or another cup of green tea also have the same category of expressions used in Kyoto. Prizing a guest’s wrist watch is also used when a host want to make a guest be aware of the time.

If you are prized your wrist watch by a host, stop talking and just give it a thought. Isn’t it a good time for you to leave the place?

Likewise, if a Japanese subordinate understands the company’s or organization’s position and its circumstances, I believe the subordinate will work and act spontaneously just after hearing the manager’s euphemism even if the task is outside of the usual scope of their job. By the time the instructions are given to them in detail at the very end of the communication, they will fully agree to do what is required of them. Consequently, there will be fewer objections even though the work might not be in their job description.

Example 3

Background 3

In this scenario, the project manager is asking for some ideas about possible solutions concerning an issue in the workplace. Through interviews with staff members, the manager has come to realize there is an issue in the workplace. However, when the manager asks how the situation can be improved, there is no one who wants to voice their opinion. No possible solutions have been proposed by staff members even though it is an immediate problem for them.

Issue 3

The staff does not know about what their role might be in changing their working culture or practices in their working environment. There is no culture of changing the workplace environment from the grounders. In Japan, it’s almost always top-down, so they are passive rather than proactive. The staff is aware that there is a problem in their working situation, but they do not have a habit of making suggestions about any possible solutions.

Root Cause Analysis 3

In the hierarchical top-down business culture of Japan, employees are usually not asked for

their opinion, but rather told what to do. This is the norm everywhere in Japan: at home, at school and in the community. This is also the norm in Japanese companies. Such hierarchical organizational structure is quite like the class-oriented society of the past. The rank-and-file have not yet been given the jurisdiction or empowerment commensurate with their capacity, even in the field of education. In such situations, it is actually very difficult to report workplace issues to managers, and furthermore, voicing opinions about possible solutions to any given issue in the workplace seems to be out of consideration. Once people have acquired a certain mind set or behavior pattern, it is hard to change their attitude.

Analysis of *Kaizen* and empowerment to solve the issue

Analysis of *Kaizen* to solve the issue

In this section, the author will seek for the solution for this issue through the lenses of *Kaizen* (Kenneth and Lamber Posted by Schmid, 2022. Portaker, E. 2025) or improvement process which has been used long time and said to be the secret of economic growth in Japan. Then a concept of empowerment will be studied in an attempt to apply it to this case.

The Japanese *Kaizen* or “improvement” concept was first introduced after World War II in the Japanese auto-maker Toyota in its efforts to improve its production processes and the overall health of the company. The Japanese automobile industry was trying to penetrate the United States market. After that, the *Kaizen* concept was also introduced in American automobile production. *Kaizen* has been studied by MIT and other research institutes to discover the strength of Japanese industry. So many researches have been conducted about *Kaizen*. The figure 2 (Kenneth and Lamber 2022) shows one of the *Kaizen* process diagrams among others.

Mishima (2011) states that *Kaizen* should be implemented cautiously, paying attention to the following points: 1) assign one person to be in charge of the *Kaizen* process; 2) the most problematic area should be tackled first to demonstrate visible improvement in order to encourage the workforce; 3) make *Kaizen* a continuing practice; 4) create an environment where people can freely voice their opinions about possible improvements in the work place; 5) incorporate numerical analysis to evaluate the results; 6) enhance the awareness or sense of participation among everyone in the workforce; 7) have periodic meetings where everyone can reflect on changes; and 8) develop a procedure for reviewing the entire *Kaizen* process (pp.7,12,20,21). This is the gist of *Kaizen*.

Feldman (1992) argues that the Japanese concept of *Kaizen* is process oriented rather than

Continuous Improvement (Kaizen): Putting it into Practice

Posted by Linda Schmid | Nov 15, 2022 | Business Management



Kaizen process diagram

ineth P. Lambert, Jr.

**Figure 2. Kaizen process diagram
(Kenneth and Lamber Posted by Schmid, 2022)
Business Management**

Note: *Kaizen* is a circular activity in a workplace to solve a particular workplace problem. From the Standard wok, worker need to make problems visible, and develop countermeasure, by determining its possible root cause. And then hypothesize solutions which will be followed by test run of that hypothesis. After implementing solution(s), successful case will become their standard work.

[accessed on Jun 20th, 2024] [Available at <https://rollformingmagazine.com/continuous-improvement-kaizen-putting-it-into-practice/>]

result oriented. He further argues that anxiety should be eliminated. This looks good on paper. However, the author cannot state that *Kaizen* process will be a panacea.

Analysis of Empowerment to solve the issue

As Burton and Kagan (1996) argued, the concept of empowerment gradually took root in the early 1980s in British society, however, “there is much rhetoric about empowerment, but little real giving or sharing of power with marginalized people” (p.3). Employees or the rank-and-file in a company, may not be “marginalized people,” that Burton and Kagan are writing about, but when it comes to the hierarchical power structure in companies or other organizations in Japan, there are some commonalities between these two groups of people. Thus, even though everyone is given equal rights in society under the law, or is given the freedom to voice their opinion in the company, there is still difficulty in voicing one’s opinion and having it heard by those in higher positions. In other words, there is little real given or sharing of power with lawfully empowered.

The notion of empowerment was first introduced to the social sciences by the American psychologist Julian Rapport in 1981. The theory of social empowerment is widely used in the field of business nowadays. Goldsmith (2010) believes that in order to empower employees, leaders must consider the following elements. 1) It is necessary to relegate the necessary power for employees to take charge of their work place to create a positive work environment and to make full use of their expertise. 2) The higher-ranking person should not criticize the workers or their work preferences without realizing that such criticism may damage their self-confidence and prevent them from sharing their ideas with their managers or company executives. 3) Workers should be provided with some form of self-governance over their own duties and allocation of resources.

Goldsmith (2010) continues his critique of employee empowerment. “The process does take

longer – employees will only believe they are empowered when they are left alone to accomplish results over a period of time – but it’s effective and worth the time. If a company has a history of shutting down or letting go of initiators, for instance, the leader can’t just tell employees, “You are empowered to make decisions” (p.2). This process will take time but once the project members acquire the skill necessary to use their power effectively, its beneficial effect will continue to be felt long into the future.

One concrete example of empowerment can be found in Marquet (2015). Marquet, captain of a nuclear submarine, stopped giving instructions to his officers and crews, in other words, “the top-down, command-and control leadership model” (p.81). On every other submarine crew requests permission to do something, and the captain gives permission using a command. For example, “Submerge the ship.” “Submerge the ship, Aye.” Marquet stopped giving commands. Instead, he started to convey his intention(s) to them. By using “I intend to...”, he turn passive followers into active collaborators (p.81). “If you want your people to think, do not give instructions but give them intent.” By doing so, the psychological ownership shifts to the crew, empowering them. “It might seem like it’s a small change of language, but it was hugely powerful.”

Workers often have specialized knowledge and skills that is not the privy managers or top executives. Just as it is impossible for a captain to know every detail about a nuclear submarine, it is nearly impossible for managers or executives to know every detail of a company. What Marquet did was “embedding the capacity for greatness in the people and practices of an organization, and decoupling it from the personality of the leader (Marquet, n.d.).” He argues that there are two important pillars for successful empowerment: technical competence and clarity of purpose. Workers must know why they are doing the work they do and how to do it. He continues that it is important to create an environment where workers think for themselves. By giving control

to his officers and not taking control himself in specific matters, things run smoothly because the person in charge of a specific matter usually has much more information about it than the person in the higher position.

Possible interventions 3

I strongly recommend the empowerment of the workforce to give workers a chance to think about their working environment and possible improvements. It takes time to change workplace custom, as it is difficult to change people's mindset and their behaviors. But small steps in the *Kaizen* or improvement approach, or empowerment will lead to greater changes in the future. In order to realize *Kaizen* or empowerment, an expansion of the workers' role in deciding and implementing new policies is required in the workplace. Executives are requested to create the environment for them.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the importance of intangible factors, i.e., communication, for efficiency and productivity enhancement. Predictable issues were addressed and thorough root cause analysis of each issue, possible solutions were contemplated in order to make the working environment a better place.

Tangled communication is sometimes caused by differences in culture. There is no reason to blame anyone person, yet still the people involved in the given situation had to suffer. And the agony of the workers will affect operational outcomes of such organizations. In order to increase efficiency and productivity, there is a need to embrace differences and then mutually trying to understand the respective viewpoints. If an expatriate is communicating with people from a different cultural area, he/she may face a difference in comprehension level even though the words or phrases are literally correctly heard and understood. Even though such an expatriate is working in a hierarchical structure, the person in the top position must be open to listening to



Figure 3. Give control (Mouquet, 2015)

Note: there are two important pillars for successful empowerment: technical competence and clarity of purpose. Workers must know why they are doing the work they do and how to do it. It is important to create an environment where workers think for themselves. Not taking control but by giving control to his officers in specific matters, things run smoothly because the person in charge of a specific matter usually has much more information about it than the person in the higher position.

subordinates. Even though staff members are working under the leadership of a person from a different cultural background, they need to consider how they should behave, not just doing what they are told. Such mutual recognition of cultural difference is required in the cross-cultural international working environment. Day-to-day activities are often learning opportunities for both sides.

There will be more and more opportunities for people around the world to work together in the same organization as a group. When you are facing difficulties understanding people from different cultural areas in a given environment, it might be a good opportunity for you to expand your knowledge base, and arise your level of intercultural sensitivity. We should all consider innovative transformational strategies to make the world a better place. We need to keep in mind that the tangible factors or scientific tools are not only the management strategy to increase efficiency and productivity of organizations. We rather need to focus on intangible factors, i.e., communication, to increase efficiency and

productivity propelled by people's motivation.

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「付度」英訳できない？霞が関官僚「あるべき姿」

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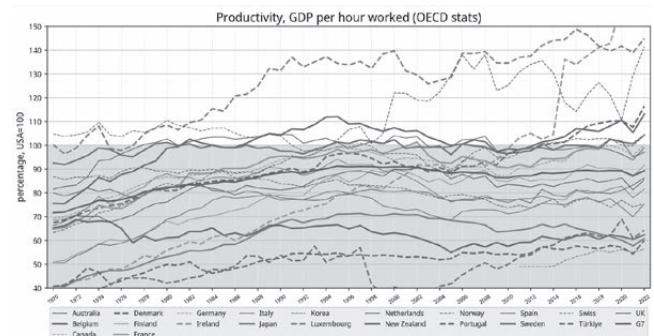
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Appendix

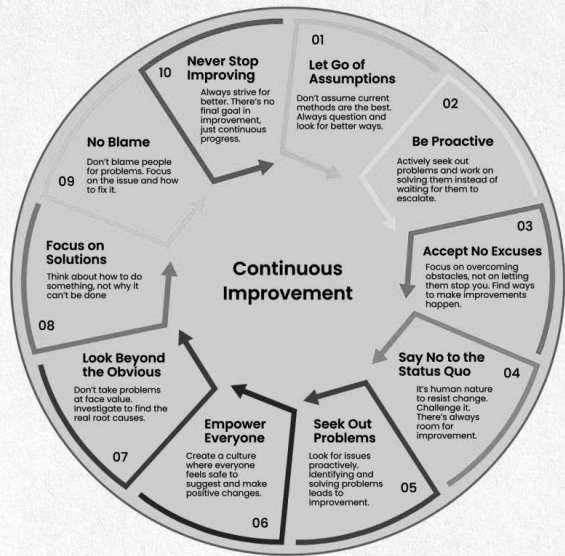


Productivity, GDP per hour worked (OECD stats)
GDP per hour worked (percentage; USA=100)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Workforce_productivity#/media/File:Productivity_-_GDP_per_hour_worked_in_OECD.svg

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