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Die Bedeutung japanischer Sprachkenntnisse

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The most important task for an expatriate is to learn the local language, no matter how difficult it may appear. The language is the key to the culture, in which the local staff was educated and according to which they live their daily life. This is especially the case, when expats are assigned to culturally distant countries such as China, Japan, Korea or any other country in the Far East.

After having been in Japan for several months, most conversations with other foreigners were full of negative comments about Japan, the Japanese people, the language, the culture, just everything. The reasons behind this attitude were always the same: the inability to understand what is going on in Japan.

My "survival" and later success was based on my effort to learn the language. The language enabled me to understand the people in their daily life. I learned to understand what lies behind the way they acted in general and also towards me. Things that appeared ridiculous in the beginning suddenly made sense. Besides, I became able to exchange opinions, raise and answer questions, which again gave me more insight into their thinking.

Coming to Japan you notice quickly that you can hear English all day long; even the Japanese language is full of English words. However, this does not mean that all Japanese are fluent in English. The use of English words in the Japanese language is rather a way of the young people to show that they are different. Young people influence the media and

therefore English words appear everywhere. However, English cannot be used as a broad basis for conversations and you will notice quickly that you cannot be successful without good knowledge of the Japanese language.

Take this example: Foreign managers are usually sent out to Japan when business is not going well in the Japanese market. To do his job right the expatriated manager has to identify those amongst the Japanese staff, who have new ideas, are willing to share local market intelligence and would support the development and implementation of turn-around plans. The normal way to go about this is to have meetings in the company. However, if these are done with an interpreter, there is always the risk that the interpreter could filter the answers, for example because he or she is pressured by people within the company, who have different agendas.

But you do not only have to learn the language, you also have to know about the cultural differences in expressing ones thoughts. Japanese people are very often in the conflict of expressing their "honne" (true thoughts and/or intentions) and "tatemae", (untrue thoughts and/or intentions). If you do not know the difference you will never understand your Japanese business partners. The solution is to learn and get acquainted with one of the most important habits in the Japanese business world: unofficial meetings in small restaurants or bars, where the stress and the pressure of the daily work can be forgotten over small dishes, beer, glasses of sake, and sometimes even "karaoke". It is during these gatherings that the Japanese open up and tell more about their thoughts. It is here that ideas, considerations and resentments can be exchanged freely. The above-mentioned "honne" will become visible, thus supporters and opponents to new ideas can be identified. In the bars the basis for a successful business improvement or turn-around management will be set up by doing plenty of "nemawashi" (laying out the groundwork for any changes).

Unofficial, but efficient meetings like this simply require the command of the Japanese language to enable a relaxed and open atmosphere without an interpreter. Without sufficient "nemawashi" nothing will be really successful in a Japanese environment. It is the most important element of any change management.

If you make the effort to learn Japanese, do not just concentrate on the speaking alone but learn to read and write as well. I admit, when I looked at the Japanese characters for the first time, it caused me headaches. How can one learn all these complicated characters? However, it is possible to learn them and it is worthwhile. The ability to read and write helps you to be more accepted in the Japanese community (in and outside the company) and to get on without much help. It also enables you to look at business documents yourself and double check oral with written information.

Taking all aspects of daily life together, my experience shows that it is not only worthwhile but also necessary to be able to speak, read and write Japanese, if you want to successfully take over a position in Japan. This requires very intensive language training. The command of the foreign language, combined with studies of plenty of books and articles about Japan prepare the manager for his task in Japan. In this respect, a revision of expatriation policies appears to be necessary in many companies.

After all the theory, I would like to end my report with some practical advice: the first Japanese word, which is important for the aforementioned wining and dining sessions is "kampai" (cheers). Pronounce the vowels like in Italian and the consonants like in English. But never make the mistake to say "kampei"; this is the Chinese equivalent and it is doesn't sound funny at all in Japan. Also never ever use the Italian version of "cheers" when offering a toast. (I leave it up to you to look into a Japanese dictionary or to very carefully ask a Japanese to whom you must be very well acquainted.)

**Hinweis**

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