



Eat Miso Soup First!?

Cultural Barriers in Unawareness

Why don't they stay focused?" "Why do they stick to such an incidental point?" "Why do they quickly jump to action without careful consideration of associated matters?"

These are typical frustrations that we may often sense coming from either Westerners or Japanese – or both. Through my experience in bilingual facilitation support for global corporations operating in Japan, I've come to believe that the cause for such frustration is not simply a matter of language, but rather a matter of differences in underlying beliefs and thought patterns that subliminally affect people's behavior.

A few years ago when I was working for a global pharmaceutical company, I had the chance to work with a colleague from Canada. One day, when we went out to eat Japanese food, I noticed that Roger picked up a bowl of *miso* soup, and finished it all. Then he moved on to another dish and finished that. Roger's eating style was to focus on each dish, one by one, according to a defined pattern. Seeing him eat Japanese food in what I perceived as a Western approach was a big eye-opener for me in regards to team effectiveness in a cross-cultural setting.

From my perspective, a typical Japanese approach would have been to sip some soup, then move to a small portion of the entrée, have a small bite of rice, and repeat this triangular routine until all the dishes were finished around the same time. In fact, this is how Japanese children are educated on how to eat properly, which is known as *sankaku-tabe* (triangle-eating). You may have very well encountered triangle-eating in a business context here – and it may have been an irritating experience.

My point here is that you would run the risk of being misinterpreted, misunderstanding others, making an improper judgment or arriving at a wrong decision if you are not fully aware of differences between yourself and others. Roger may appear disorganized to a Japanese trained in triangle-eating. I may appear understandably strange, on the other hand, if I fall into triangle-eating at a French-course dinner.

As a solution to preventing such misunderstandings and increasing efficiency in a team environment where people come from different backgrounds, it is recommended that you make a concerted effort to pinpoint what kind of approach you adopt prior to getting down to business in any in-depth discussion. Mutual agreement on key processes in decision-making, the problem-solving approach, and the dos and don'ts (i.e., ground rules) would help improve productivity at meetings and minimize people's irritations on both sides.

Clarifying the meaning of key terms would also be helpful, as a word sometimes has different nuances in English and Japanese. The use of a third-party facilitator is also very effective in promoting active discussion and helping ensure communication without underlying barriers. The story of triangle-eating helps a team set effective ground rules. During the process of discussion, people become cognizant of the subtleties at play. After all, fine-tuning communication and organizational effectiveness in your company means an improved business.

Masanori Homma

Consultant
Center for Management and Organization Effectiveness
Japan
masanori.homma@cmoe.jp