

Personal Relationships and Organizational Culture Awareness

The Keys to Collaboration in Japan

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In my time in Japan as the Office of Special Investigations' Chief of Counter-intelligence at Yokota Air Base from 2010 to 2012 and as a Language Enable Airman Program scholar who has conducted multiple Language intensive training events and joint operations in country from 2013 to the present, I have seen firsthand how cultural awareness is an enormous factor in the success of joint operations. However, awareness of Japanese societal culture alone is not enough. To be successful in Japan, United States Forces Japan and other personnel stationed in country must make significant efforts to build interpersonal relationships and to gain a deep understanding of the organizational cultures and priorities of the Japanese units with whom they are operating.

US personnel in Japan are often adept at demonstrating standard Japanese cultural norms of business dealing. For example, Americans quickly learn to how to seat counterparts at a conference table based on their ranks, how to bow when appropriate and how to hand out business cards with the necessary levels of respect. However, these mundane, rote actions are often where attention to culture stops, and they are not enough. Japanese professional collaboration is built on the strength of individual interpersonal relationships. Therefore, US personnel whose cultural awareness is very shallow tend to be unsuccessful in developing operations and sharing intelligence because they have failed to build the relationship foundations upon which business can be conducted. Conversely, personnel who demonstrate a high degree of focus on preoperational relationship-building tend to do very well because they obtain the person-to-person buy-in from Japanese counterparts that facilitates successful operations.



(USAF photo by Airman 1st Class Anna Nolte)

Figure 1. Cultural awareness boosts lethality and strengthens partnerships. Col Shane Vesely, USAF (left), 353rd Special Operations Wing commander, shakes hands with Col Hidenori Ichigi, Japan Air Self-Defense Force (right), 2nd Tactical Airlift Group commander, in front of a US Air Force MC-130J Commando II while Maj Jacob McCauley, USAF (middle), 1st Special Operations Squadron director of mobility, looks on at Kadena Air Base, Japan, 28 October 2021. Partnership between the USAF and JASDF allows both forces to work together when responding to adversaries, ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Appropriate cultural awareness in Japan also gives due consideration and respect to how Japanese entities function internally and how they set their operational priorities. In Japanese governmental organizations, very little autonomy lies at the tactical level. This often makes Japanese public servants risk averse. Therefore, understanding the organization's power structure, decision-making procedures, and an individual counterpart's tolerance for risk is key to effective and efficient partnering because it enables US members to focus their lines of effort at the appropriate echelons. Further, in the world of counterintelligence and law enforcement, Japanese priorities often do not succinctly align with American priorities; criminal and privacy laws differ, and the governments' perceptions of critical threats to national security vary greatly. Cognizance of this, and the demonstrated willingness to support Japanese mission sets that do not necessarily fall into the American priority structure are important, because implicit or explicit

treatment of Japanese priorities as inferior will very quickly stymie collaboration by promulgating an insensitive and arrogant perception of Americans.

For these reasons, it is incumbent upon experienced personnel to help newly arrived members understand that effective cultural awareness is far more than knowing when to bow. Tactical leadership teams must guide their members to achieve their full collaborative potential by helping them to appreciate the necessity of individual relationship-building and organizational culture understanding. This level of comprehension is vital to successful international partnering with Japanese governmental entities. 🌟

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