



Mediating cross-cultural conflict

By Tania Coke, Senior Mediation Consultant at Consensio

In Japan, interpersonal relations are governed by the notion of “wa”. According to this philosophy, individuals are expected to prioritise the harmony of the group over their own personal interests. They do this by “reading the air” (kuuki wo yomu), to sense the collective feeling in the group and then choosing their words and actions so as to fit in. It is very unusual for people to say or do anything that goes against the group feeling – in line with the oft-quoted adage: “The nail that sticks out will be hammered down”.

This deference to other people's opinions, and reluctance to express one's own, can be shocking to British sensibilities. My British upbringing taught me that it's good to think independently and stand out from the crowd. What Brit would prefer to be a sheep than a goat? In my observation, this British emphasis on individuality and self-expression has become stronger in recent decades. We are quicker than ever to assert our opinions, especially on social media where, “unlike in the offline world, there is little or no personal risk in confronting and exposing someone” (BBC).

There is a Japanese word, “tateyoko”, which could be used to symbolise these two behaviours. “Tate” means vertical, whilst “yoko” means horizontal. The Japanese culture tends to the horizontal in that the focus is outwards, on relations with others. The British is closer to the vertical axis, because of its greater focus on the self.

Of course, neither extreme is intrinsically right. There are times when it is right to express an opinion strongly, even if it means standing out. And there are times when it is wiser to hold back our personal opinions and focus on what other people think. So both cultures, Japanese and British, have something to learn from the other. In Japan, as the population declines, businesses are increasingly looking overseas for customers and workers. This has triggered a conscious cultural shift in the workplace. Many Japanese companies are running global communication programmes, training their employees to be more assertive and

to adopt more western ways of communicating at work. Often it is “gaijin” (foreigners), such as myself, who deliver this training.

I find it hard to imagine the same thing happening the other way round: British companies bringing in Japanese people to train their employees to be more oriental in their communications. Perhaps the comparison is unfair, because the British workforce is already far more racially diverse than the Japanese. But it is interesting just to entertain the idea. And I suspect the typical British employee would do well to spend a little less time expressing their own opinions, and a little more listening to other people and “reading the air”.

The point I want to make is that there is always something to be learnt by looking to cultures, mind-sets and worldviews that are different from our own. We can gain awareness of our own predispositions, by seeing how they differ from those of others. Workplace mediation offers an opportunity for parties to explore some of these cultural differences that may result in workplace conflict in a safe environment with an impartial mediator. Secondly, we can challenge ourselves to step outside our comfort zones and usual behaviours and experiment with different ways of relating to others. Then we will be in a position to choose, consciously and creatively, how to behave in each situation, drawing on a wider repertoire of interpersonal skills, and greater openness to behaviours different from our own. So now you have a new excuse to go on that dream holiday to Japan...

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