

# *IBI Quarterly*

*vol. 8 – April 2006*

**Dear Reader,**

We are happy to provide you with our second IBI Quarterly of 2006. Iris Kuhnert, Director of ICM Consulting, Japan specialist and network partner of IBI, captures the story of a Japanese manager who tries to integrate his personal values with the traditional Japanese values of his country. Like the IBI Quarterly by Tao Yue on China, this edition is once more a reflection of the many changes taking place in a world that seems to become 'flat' (Thomas Friedman) – and that requires professionals in the field of intercultural management development to continuously update the support we provide to our clients.

Throughout the year, we will continue to focus on specific countries, their cultures and the recent developments taking place there with contributions from IBI Network Partners:

***IBI Quarterly September***

Ann Means and Lina Bilkha will capture recent developments in India.

***IBI Quarterly December***

Pawel Walentynowicz will give you first-hand insights into what is happening in Poland.

We wish you interesting reading!

**Ursula Brinkmann, Ph.D.**  
**Intercultural Business Improvement**

## **Typical Japan – bouncing back and forth between National and Individual Culture**

**Iris Kuhnert**

During the past decades Japan has experienced such a dynamic development in both economics and cultural development that one may ask what is still there that can be called “typical Japanese”. And even for Japanese people it is sometimes not easy to cope with the dynamic of changes and to find a balance between their individual targets and the behaviour that is expected by traditional Japanese values. This report is written not as an academic abstract but as an approach to show the sometimes contradictory and complex behavioural patterns to be observed by the author when working with Japanese and to invite the reader to explore culture as an evolving system.

I would like to share the story I learned during a recent business trip to Japan. It is about a Japanese manager aged 37 in Tokyo. For easier reference I would like to call him Mr. Taniyama. Mr. Taniyama has just started his job with a U.S. based foreign investment company. It is his third employer. His first employer was a Japanese company which he joined after graduating from university at the age of 23 and worked there till the age of 30. The second one was a British investment company. And here is his story.

When he was about to prepare for his graduation from university, he also had to think about a company he would like to work for. Since he was interested in finance and global investment strategies he already thought about joining a foreign investment company in Tokyo at that

time. Coming from a rural city 100 km North-West of Tokyo where traditions were kept high, it was a challenge to face his parents with the idea of joining a non-Japanese company.

Being Japanese, Mr. Taniyama made sure that he wrapped up his idea in a very implicit way – which was talking about his ideas as if it was about a third person who did not belong to the family. His parents quickly made statements that indicated their dislike about “letting down parents and Japanese economy by joining foreigners”. Their attitude was based on the thinking that if parents have to work so hard in order to enable their offspring to go to university, the children must pay respect which also applies to the company they will join – meaning that working for foreigners is only the third best choice. The best choice is working for one of the big “keiretsu” the conglomerates Japanese economy has brought up since 1865 such as Mitsui, Sumitomo and Mitsubishi. The second best choice would be working for a Japanese company that is not that big but still Japanese; and the third best choice is to work for a foreign investment company.

Mr. Taniyama understood that he did not have much of a choice – and applied for a job with a Japanese company. Luckily, he could join one of the leading Japanese finance corporations thus making his parents very proud. After a couple of months though, he realized that his ideas and business proposals were not appreciated by his superior. They were considered too progressive and he was advised to be more patient and to learn from the experience of the older managers. It was the first time he realized that his individual contributions could not be



developed just due to the fact that the group and seniority orientation of the company did not allow for “youngsters” to stand ahead and to provide outstanding ideas. He kept quiet because he did not want to offend his superior – and above all, he definitely did not want to be the source of shame within the company or his family. At the age of 27 he married one of the office-ladies of his company. Since he worked long hours he did not have really the chance to meet other woman outside the company. But this lady was very nice. She had studied one year in the U.S.A. and they found out that they both shared the opinion that the traditional seniority system within Japanese companies is not up-to-date. As it was expected by the employer, she resigned from her job when getting married. The expectation was that she should raise the children while the husband is earning the living. And since she knew the company it was further expected that she accepts long working hours without any complains.

However, at this stage the individuality of the two came into play. They had other plans than what was expected from them. They carefully planned the next step in order to achieve more personal freedom and opportunities to develop. The couple carefully screened the market for other potential employers and soon Mr. Taniyama applied for a job with the British company. He dared to tell his parents about the interview he was going to have with the HR director of the British company. The interview went well and soon he decided to join the British company. Only after everything was secure he could tell his parents about the change who reminded him of the responsibility he has as the head of a family.

He enjoyed working within the new organization,

however, although the new working contract stated 20 days of paid vacation which the HR director mentioned he was entitled to use, he soon found out, that none of the Japanese colleagues really took the vacation. They continued to do it the “Japanese” way, which meant, taking utmost 10 days and keeping the rest for urgencies such as when getting sick.

Although the company was highly successful his Japanese colleagues argued that in Japan one can not take more than 10 days of vacation. If so, it implies the person is not needed anymore. Interestingly, the British expatriates took all their vacation and Mr. Taniyama felt that his individual values were getting in conflict with those traditional Japanese values which implied that one identifies with the company 100%. It was a challenge for him to find a balance between his individual values of having a private life and to enjoy vacation with his wife and his Japanese colleagues who seemed to alter all positive aspects of the British mother-organization into those social constraints that made life in Japan sometimes so difficult for him.

The basic difference he experienced was about individuality and group. He certainly wanted the group (= the company) to be successful but he did not subscribe to the expectation that all his life should be structured according to the needs of the company. He wanted his own life, too. So after a couple of years he was disappointed that the British management did not take advantage of the synergies that could be developed by utilizing the group oriented values of the Japanese with the more individual business attitudes of the British. He was looking for another company which provided more individual development.

Now, being at the age of 36 it is not so easy to change your job in Japan. Since it would be the third change,



other Japanese people might think that he is not a reliable person and that he is not loyal with his employer. Nevertheless, he and his wife agreed to take the chance for another change. And he applied for a job with an American company.

Negotiations took quite some time but shortly after his 37th birthday he felt satisfied with the salary and the fringe benefits he had negotiated and he was looking forward to his new career. This new job was definitely different from the two assignments he had before. He was expected to contribute in a very pro-active way and to develop his own ideas in order to create business opportunities. He felt very comfortable with this and at some stage he thought that he is not in Japan anymore. He could use his individual talents and was encouraged by his North-American boss to develop individual strategies. So he finally had found an environment that seemed to fit his individual values. Yet, when it comes to meeting Japanese clients he is facing a big challenge, every time. Still in his late thirties most of the clients did not accept him as an equal business partner at the beginning and it took him quite some effort to increase his status in correspondence what his clients expected. His American superior is supporting his efforts to meet the expectations of Japanese clients expecting a more senior finance manager and helps him wherever possible. It is the first time he really feels that he can be the individual person he wants to be, still keeping corporate goals high but also taking care of his own interests and private life.

Although meetings with clients are sometimes still a challenge he enjoys the dynamics of traditional Japanese values and his individual

values. He actually thinks that his previous companies helped him to understand the traditional Japanese values and how he can cooperate with people who still consider change or influence from outside as something threatening. Without this experience it would not be possible for him to prepare for meetings with his clients.

To Mr. Taniyama reflecting on his own interests and values and opposing them to what is being expected by traditional Japanese is now a challenging fun. Creating synergies between individual aspects and group and seniority aspects is now his major achievement and it helps his company being very successful. He is very well aware that Japanese traditions are still highly valued. However, he is also assertive about the positive aspects individual contributions can have on the development on Japanese companies.

When I listened to the story of Mr. Taniyama I thought that this man truly found a balance between traditional Japanese values and the modern style of more and more Japanese business man and women. This new generation of Japanese business people seem not only to have the special knowledge and skills needed to do the job but also the soft-skills needed to address a changing national culture.

He probably would be a great consultant to those companies in Japan that are looking for ways to maintain traditional values such as group orientation, consensus building and harmony and yet wanting to embrace change in order to maintain a leading position in the market or in order to develop a truly global



organization.

After I had to talk to Mr. Taniyama I thought it would be great to empower more Japanese business people like him – and also I thought it would be great to spread this story in other cultures that are somewhat resistant to change – such as the German business culture.

To find out more about our Japan program, please contact Iris Kuhnert at [info@ibinet.nl](mailto:info@ibinet.nl).

## **What makes IBI special**

The Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC), a valid and reliable self-assessment tool. More than 6,000 people, all working in an international context, have filled in the IRC. This makes the IRC database one of the world's largest sources of information on intercultural competences. In just three years, we have built a world-wide network of 80 IRC Licensees.

IBI has developed a unique approach for coaching expatriates and their partners, integrating in-depth assessment, coaching and country-briefings to make your investment pay off.

We have created a tight network of seasoned intercultural professionals that support you in doing business in four economically vital regions: Asia, North America, and Central and Eastern Europe.

Frequent exchange and supervision ensure the high quality of our services.

IBI cooperates with researchers specialized in analyzing large databases for continuous quality checks of the IRC questionnaire within a changing world and globalizing business.

IBI stands out with its partnerships of specialists to cover the strategic, operational and personal challenges of your work in an international environment.

If you want to find out more about how we can support you in strengthening the intercultural competences of your staff, please contact Ursula Brinkmann, Ph.D., at [ursula@ibinet.nl](mailto:ursula@ibinet.nl). We look forward to speaking with you.

