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BUSINESS

Spanning a wide cultural gap

Consultant teaches American executives Japanese protocol

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A group of American executives travel to Tokyo to discuss a joint venture with a Japanese conglomerate. In their briefcases, they carry terms that will make both companies rich.

Still, the Americans come home empty-handed.

Chances are their failure had more to do with etiquette, or the lack thereof, than with business strategy.

Which is not to say the Americans were rude — in all probability, they were courteous and respectful. But without an understanding of Japanese society and the world view it creates, manners just aren't enough to save a business deal from falling into the cultural chasm that separates the two countries.

That's where Doug Lipp comes in.

Mr. Lipp, 35, works to remove some of the cultural barriers facing American-Japanese business ventures. Armed with videocameras and 18 years of experience in Japanese language and culture, Mr. Lipp consults individuals and private industries considering an entry to the Japanese market.

He explains many of the key differences a business delegation can expect in Japan and uses the video camera to make sure the lessons stick.

"You can talk all day about the effects of certain behaviors, and the American will say, 'Yeah, I've got all that,' but that's just knowledge," Mr. Lipp said.

Taped role-playing sessions of introductions, business card exchanges, presentations and even social conversations are reviewed and discussed. Trained team members with experience in Japanese culture, or who are themselves Japanese, analyze the subject's behavior and watch for potential problems.

"The Japanese member of the training team can say, 'Look, you probably don't realize it, but when you do this, the Japanese are going to react this way,'" he said.

Mr. Lipp, a cultural trainer for NEC in Roseville, has loaned his services to the Sacramento Area Commerce and Trade Association's Pacific Rim Committee and the Learning Exchange.

Most Americans run into problems because they fail to understand key differences in the way Japanese conduct business, Mr. Lipp said.

"Here, you might pick up the phone and call a



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client or supplier and say, 'Hi, Joe, I just wanted to check on those prices.' Then, after the business, you might say, 'By the way, how was your golf game?'

"With the Japanese, you want to flip-flop that. Salutations are first, business last."

American executives who have been frustrated in attempted dealings with Japanese firms might ask themselves how much time they spent getting to know the people with whom they sought to do business. Hours spent away from the office — on a golf course or in a drinking establishment, for example — can be more valuable to launching a deal than days spent in a boardroom.

An American envoy equipped with this knowledge is sure to do better than one who isn't, but he isn't out of the woods yet. As it turns out, even honest attempts at socializing can be troublesome to both parties.

The reason, according to Mr. Lipp, is a fundamental difference in the way members of the two cultures converse.

A conversation between two Americans is filled with interruptions, points and counter points, statements of accord and dissent. Mr. Lipp compares the process to a game of table tennis.

A Japanese conversation, on the other hand, operates more like a bowling match — lots of careful preparation and set-up before the delivery. All the while, the others in the match watch patiently and in silence.

Mixing these two styles can complicate dealings even when both parties have the best of intentions, Mr. Lipp said. Interruptions, however harmless or welcome they would seem to an American speaker, serve to befuddle the Japanese.

Continuing the sports metaphor, Mr. Lipp explained the Japanese perception: "A Japanese picks up the (bowling) ball, rolls it down the lane

and then, the next thing he knows, the American runs down the lane, picks up the ball and runs away with it."

The real communication breakdown, said Mr. Lipp, occurs when members of each culture understand little of the other. Learning about another culture brings you face to face with your own and helps you understand the reactions you have to another.

For example, in learning that crowded Japan values cooperation and conformity, many Americans

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recognize their appreciation of assertiveness and individuality stems from traditions of pioneering and entrepreneurship.

Much of what makes Japanese business and social life unique stems from the country's Shinto religion. Shintoism, virtually unknown outside Japan, teaches that purity and harmony can be achieved through ritualistic behavior. The same task, performed the same way every time, can some day be perfected and contribute to spiritual perfection.

It accounts for the puzzling Japanese habit of stating one opinion in an official setting and another, possibly opposite, one much later in private, Mr. Lipp said.

It is also the driving force behind detailed ceremonies that accompany everything from business card exchanges to introductions. Without a primer from Mr. Lipp or other consultants, these formalities generally leave Americans scratching their heads.

Even after a training session, Americans on business trips aren't expected to be flawless in their dealings with a new culture, according to Mr. Lipp.

"You won't be expected to be too perfect, but there is greater respect for the effort," Mr. Lipp said.