

Maurer's Healthcare Insight (117)

Foreigners' Edge

P. Reed Maurer

So it's almost Christmas and the end of another year and you wonder, "Why am I still in Japan?" A Christmas tree cut in September costs a small fortune if you can find one not already reserved. Holiday decorations confined to hotels and department stores do not give that "Peace on earth and goodwill to all" feeling. Traditional year end *omochi* poundings and shrine visits leave you cold in spite of the warm *sake* served with both.

As you reminisce about this year the fondest memories are those when you were out of Japan, not in Japan. Hard to get positive vibrations from the comparison between what you wanted to achieve at the beginning of the year and your tally of actual results. And how can you forget the stream of corporate visitors who not so subtly hinted that the Japan sub was not getting "with the program."

God knows you tried to be patient in endless meetings. Worked your butt off to get a consensus on issues that should have been resolved in half the time. You bit your tongue every time someone told you your idea would not work in Japan. Even when the results were good there was a sense of too little too late. As you ponder your objectives for the New Year, leaving Japan is at the top of the list.

There Is a Better Way

There is a cure for this affliction of wanting to get out of Japan rather than staying in Japan. Take heart in the knowledge that many have gone before who did not want to leave Japan when their time was up. Others left but tried everything to come back, some successfully.

The cure is not an exercise in self denial or a personality altering experience. Just follow the steps outlined below for a full recovery. Try it, you'll love it!

Don't Try to Fit in

Face up to the reality that if you are not Japanese you cannot fit in. You look different, act different, and speak different. You must be born Japanese to be Japanese. If you are from the US this is a tough concept to get your head around. Why? Because you were raised to believe anyone can be an American. Unless you are a pure blood native American Indian you trace your roots to some other country. Everyone came from somewhere else. The Japanese family tree begins in Japan. Anthropologists would argue this is not true, but I never met a Japanese who could trace his roots to Korea or China or somewhere



in the south Pacific.

So give up trying to fit in and start to enjoy standing out. Exercise your ego by being different. You will be noticed and remembered. This is a great advantage when visiting customers and partners. People are primed to listen no matter your age, the school you graduated from, or your title. You are just a person without all the baggage Japanese must carry around for life.

Get Realistic about the Language

If you were sent here to do business you would be a fool not to study Japanese, but a bigger fool if you believe you can become fluent. There are bilingual foreigners, missionaries come to mind, but I do not think you were sent here because of your language skills.

Get to know enough Japanese so you are not surprised, can navigate the transportation systems, and get fed. Because a lot of communication is non verbal, pay attention to facial expressions and body language. Listen to what you are told and never ever kill the messenger. Ask for clarification, repeat what you think you heard for confirmation.

It's hard to do, but listen double the amount of time you talk. That is why you have two ears and only one mouth. When you must talk use an interpreter if your audience does not understand English. But do not degrade your senior Japanese managers by using them as interpreters. They should be briefed in private as to your intentions and objectives then allowed to speak for you in their own words.

How you say something is often more important than what you say. Respect and politeness are understood in any language. Above all, be humble. Remember the people you meet and do business with today will still be here after you are long gone.

If you do not like or disrespect the people you are dealing with you have a problem because this is a very "wet" society. Maybe it is because the Japanese live so close together that they develop a high degree of sensitivity to others. Difficult to hide your true feelings.

I once had a great boss and wonderful person. He was a Brit and during World War II he was repeatedly parachuted behind Japanese lines in Burma with a contingent of Gurkas. Their mission was to walk back to friendly lines killing as many Japanese as possible and blowing up everything of military significance.

Needless to say he did not like the Japanese. Recognizing his deep seated, non-erasable emotions he secluded himself from meeting Japanese visitors. This was a wise decision.

Go Local

With so much to do in Japan it doesn't make sense to spend your free time hanging out where you only meet other foreigners, or flying out of Japan every time the children have a school holiday. In Tokyo there is professional entertainment to suit every taste. World class musicians come here because this is where the money is. Of course you must plan ahead because tickets go quickly. Outside of Tokyo there is "to die for" skiing in the winter, hiking in any season, and wonderful hot spring resorts in a variety of quaint, scenic places.

Eschew McDonald's and hotel restaurants for Japanese establishments that serve great food in an informal atmosphere.

There are tons of places to choose from. Go to *sumo* or a baseball game. These are two places where Japanese let it all hang out and you can be part of the action.

Invite your direct reports and their wives to a dinner, or show, or into your home. Join a service orga-

nization like Rotary, or maybe your university back home has an alumni group in Japan. If you have a hobby you can be certain there are Japanese with the same interest.

The whole point is to enjoy Japan and not try to duplicate the life you had in your home country. If not you will surely regret it after you leave.



Thrive on the Edge

Accept the fact you are in the minority, a stress inducing fact of life in Japan. You live on the edge of society not in the mainstream. But take heart in the lack of minority persecution. In every establishment I can think of you will be welcomed with politeness rather than rejection. With very few exceptions you will feel safe. If you get lost someone will invariably give you directions or take you where you want to go.

Yes, there are disadvantages from not just being another face in the crowd, but there are huge advantages of being unique. It will make you contemplate the kind of person you really are. Then, you can answer the question, "Why am I in Japan?"

P. Reed Maurer wanted to write this article for a long time.