

## Getting to the ‘Honne’ of the matter: Part two

### Turning frustration into success

By Philip Carrigan

In my last column, senior ex-pat executives shared valuable insights into the complex world of the Japanese Pharma industry. I asked them to explain major challenges and the issue of *honne* was discussed. *Honne* means true feelings and desires and these inner emotions are often masked. I also asked these 19 senior executives to offer advice to newcomers to Japan and many agreed the most successful executives were able to use Japanese strengths to their advantage.

I remember listening to former representative director of Alcon, Scott Manning, at a conference a few years ago describing his initial frustration with Japan’s perfectionist attitude and standards of super high-quality.

Scott said some of Alcon’s shipments were returned unopened to HQ because the boxes were damaged. The boxes had never been opened. In fact, this practice of returning damaged packaging is common to all Japanese industries. If the box has been damaged, than its contents may not be up to par, according to local logic. Rather than argue the point, Scott took this cultural difference on board and raised the company’s standard of global shipping, using Japan as a role model of excellence. He turned what some may have seen as a negative, into a positive. Now Alcon Japan is a shining example of quality and excellence worldwide.

GK Kannan, former president and representative director of Allergan KK, and now general manager of Baxter-Bioscience, said success in Japan was a matter of endurance. His “it’s a marathon not a sprint” mantra suggested a strong, forthright approach.

“Be fearless and ask all of the questions you need answered no matter how discomforting others may feel,” he said. “Frame the questions, of course, with a velvety coat and be persistent. Repeat and repeat till you get to the answer. It is all about stamina.”

On cross-communication challenges, a long-term Japan executive espoused Dales Carnegie’s principle of winning people to your type of thinking and letting the other person feel the idea is his/hers. He suggested to use the group to your benefit.

“In Japan, when you present something new to the group, the first thing that everyone will see is what is not in there,” he said. “They will look at the deficiencies or weaknesses in the idea.

“Give them time to digest the new idea and hold a follow-up meeting to discuss with the team. This aspect of consensus building I think is very unique to Japan and any new non-Japanese executive has to be patient and show understanding of this process in order to win the trust of his group.”

Undoubtedly, the most common piece of advice given was to learn the basics of the language and most importantly, understand cultural differences and similarities.

Optia Partners general manager Bruce Robinson, formerly of Novartis, Pfizer and Pharmacia, suggested we should not be overly concerned about Japanese business etiquette.

“You are a foreigner and not expected to do things like a Japanese executive,” he said. “On the other hand, remember that the aggressive, western-style Japanese manager who you like and think would do well outside of Japan may not be well thought of or respected by his/her Japanese colleagues.

“Think of your role as being a mediator between the global office and the local working groups. Shield and protect your local staff from excessive oversight from global offices. They will respect and work harder for you. And take the time to explain the Japan business environment to global staff.”

Patience, too, was a common theme. Rome was not built in a day and neither was making changes within the pharmaceutical industry in Japan. One American marketing director, with significant achievements in Japan, explains.

“Be patient in communication as this can be laborious and confusing; keep asking "why?". But don't let this patience translate into inaction. Gather the facts and then pull the trigger on a decision as firmly as you would in the West. People may not appear to comprehend, but they do appreciate leadership. Then follow up afterwards to make sure everyone understood your firm decision.”

A director of logistics states that it takes a lot longer for a new ex-pat executive in Japan to truly understand local business affairs, compared to other countries.

“Wait, observe, and comprehend fully before acting, and proposing or attempting to make change happen,” he said. “Avoid the temptation to 'jump in' and act on instinct, which can often be out of calibration in this culture. Often, more time will enable you to really understand what's happening and you'll come up with a better proposal. In general, the time spent up front will be saved later from quicker and more effective implementation.”

“Some modesty, too, could go a long way in making effective change. Japan was a very successful market before you came and will survive and continue to do well long after you have returned home.”

A 35-year-old MBA agreed. “Don't think that the Japanese way of doing business is all foolish and cumbersome and pre-historic as you would be advised in tons and tons of related literature. Be patient!”

A general manager of a growing medical-device company explained that “the best you can do is to surround yourself with a good team of people with “can do” attitudes”. Even if they are not the top in their field, the attitude can be used to great advantage in managing. He also passed on an important tip for the newly arrived executive.

Find a 'trusted advisor'

Find someone in your organization you can use as a sounding board to test your ideas and proposals before 'going live'. You will need more than just an understanding of Japanese culture. Ideally, find someone who has also experienced Western culture. You will then be able to obtain a balanced view, and comprehension of what you're attempting to achieve. Having this type of support can save much heartache and significantly increase your effectiveness.