



# Techniques for effective virtual communication with Japanese partners

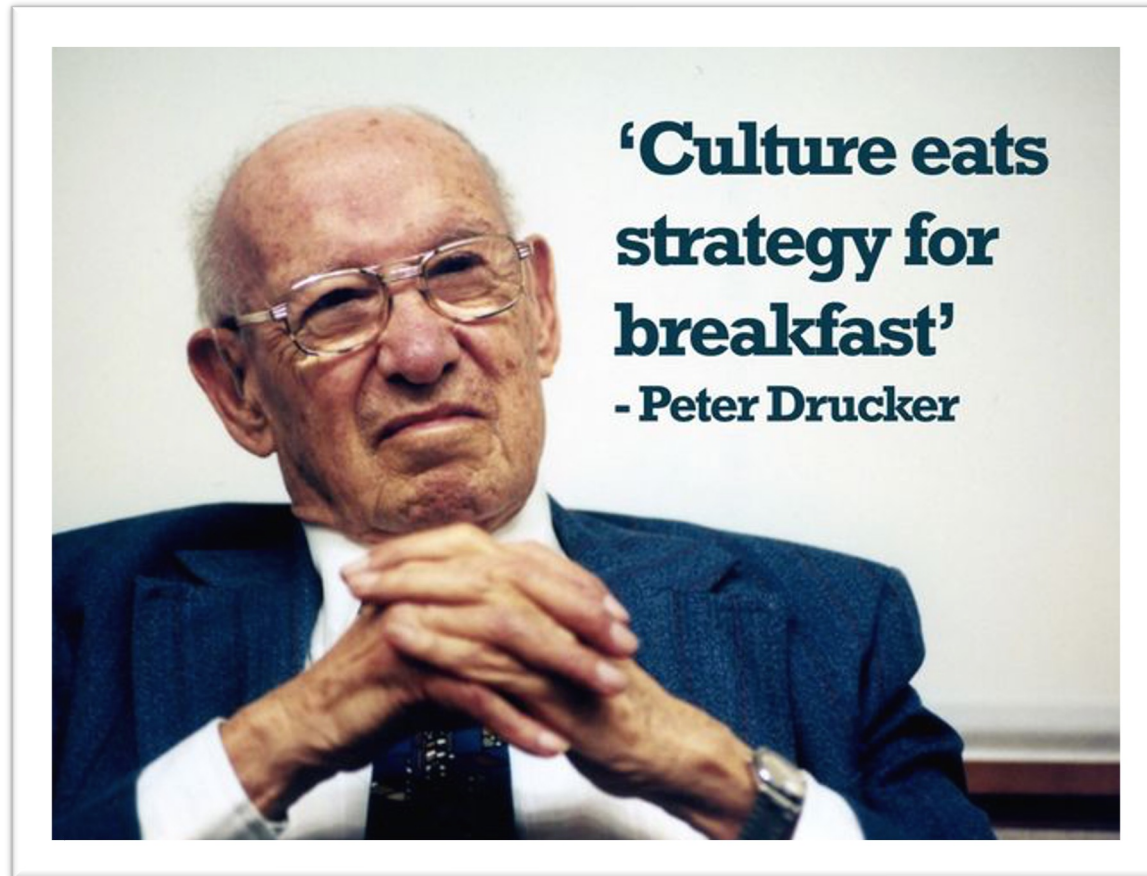
Martin Glisby

13 February 2024

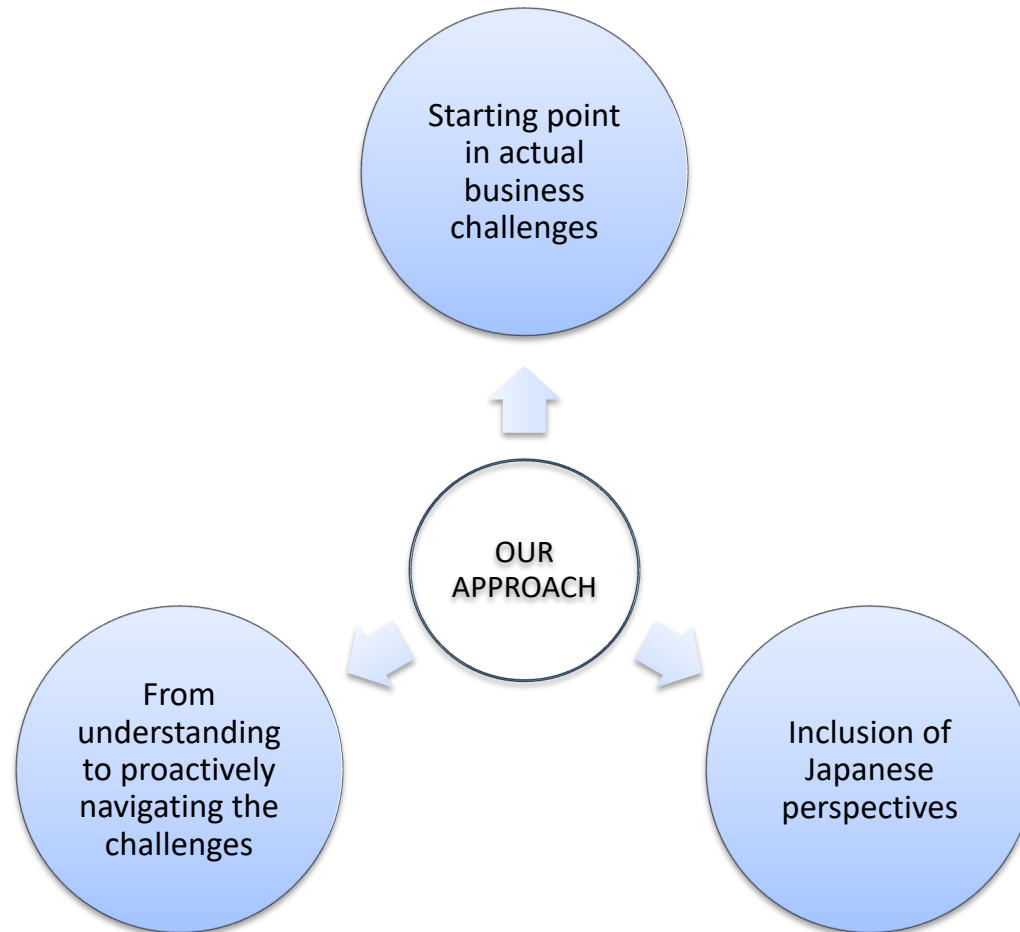


**EU-Japan Centre**  
for Industrial Cooperation  
日欧産業協力センター

# Why is culture important?



# A novel approach



# Overall aim of the webinar



*To provide strategic insight, tactical guidance and real-life examples of how to improve the efficiency of virtual communication with Japanese business partners*



# Key challenges: European perspectives



Reoccurring statements include:

- *Apart from some technical issues I think it (virtual communication) works well.*
- *My impression is that it can work, but only for regular, formal meetings.*
- *For sharing already framed information, an online meeting with the Japanese works well.*

# Key challenges: European perspectives



The following statements, however, also suggest underlying frustrations and challenges with virtual communication:

- *We find that it's actually quite hard to get an online meeting. It's as if they try to avoid online meetings.*
- *It's good not having to travel, but our meetings are generally less productive than before.*
- *It is very difficult, if not impossible, to have an open and frank discussion online.*

# Key challenges: European perspectives



- *Getting clear answers during meetings is even more difficult now than before.*
- *In online meetings they are even more quiet than they usually are.*
- *Sometimes they mute us for a long-time during meetings, only to revert with a short comment.*
- *We find it more challenging to reach good decisions. It is as if everything is being put on hold.*
- *It appears as if nobody in Japanese online meetings has a clear mandate.*
- *All we find is extreme attention to detail and only willingness to review already known material.*
- *I simply cannot understand what they want, and they are not telling me.*
- *Much too late we realized that we got out of line without even knowing it.*

# Key challenges: Japanese perspectives



The Japanese informants also expressed considerable frustration, **but for substantially different reasons** than their European partners:

- *An online meeting is almost like e-mail for us.*
- *Online meetings are good for exchanging information, but e-mail is better.*
- *We have our own specific way of communication in Japan; and we cannot do the same online.*
- *Right now, we experience historically big problems because we need more than just online information sharing.*
- *In virtual meetings there is too limited opportunity for us to understand deeply and discuss informally and openly.*





# Key challenges: Japanese perspectives



- *We often have to postpone important issues and decision-making.*
- *They (the company's European counterparts) think it's very convenient with online meetings, but for us it's different; we need to do nemawashi first and then decision-making in closed teams.*
- *It is hard for us to use our judgement during online meetings (...) we are missing facial expressions, body language, and ambience.*
- *We cannot judge the overall situation and use the right timing.*
- *I cannot really connect with people online.*

# Key challenges: Japanese perspectives



- *The (virtual) meeting just stops with a click. All is gone and we are losing the opportunity to understand more deeply after the meeting. After-meeting discussions are much more effective.*
- *I need a chance to discuss informally after the meeting.*
- *In Japan so much of the negotiating and trust building is done outside formal meetings.*
- *The biggest disadvantage is no dinner after the meeting. No open discussion opportunity.*
- *We need to create a personal space for talking before and after (virtual meetings).*

# Probing the underlying assumptions



*“When to discuss what – with whom and how”*  
differs markedly in Japan and Europe.  
This is the cause of ineffective communication  
- not the content itself.

**EUROPEAN  
EXPECTATION:**

**MEETING**

**MEETING**



**JAPANESE  
EXPECTATION:**

Pre-alignment

**MEETING**

Follow-up

# Probing the underlying assumptions



Survey, Glisby & Holden (2015)

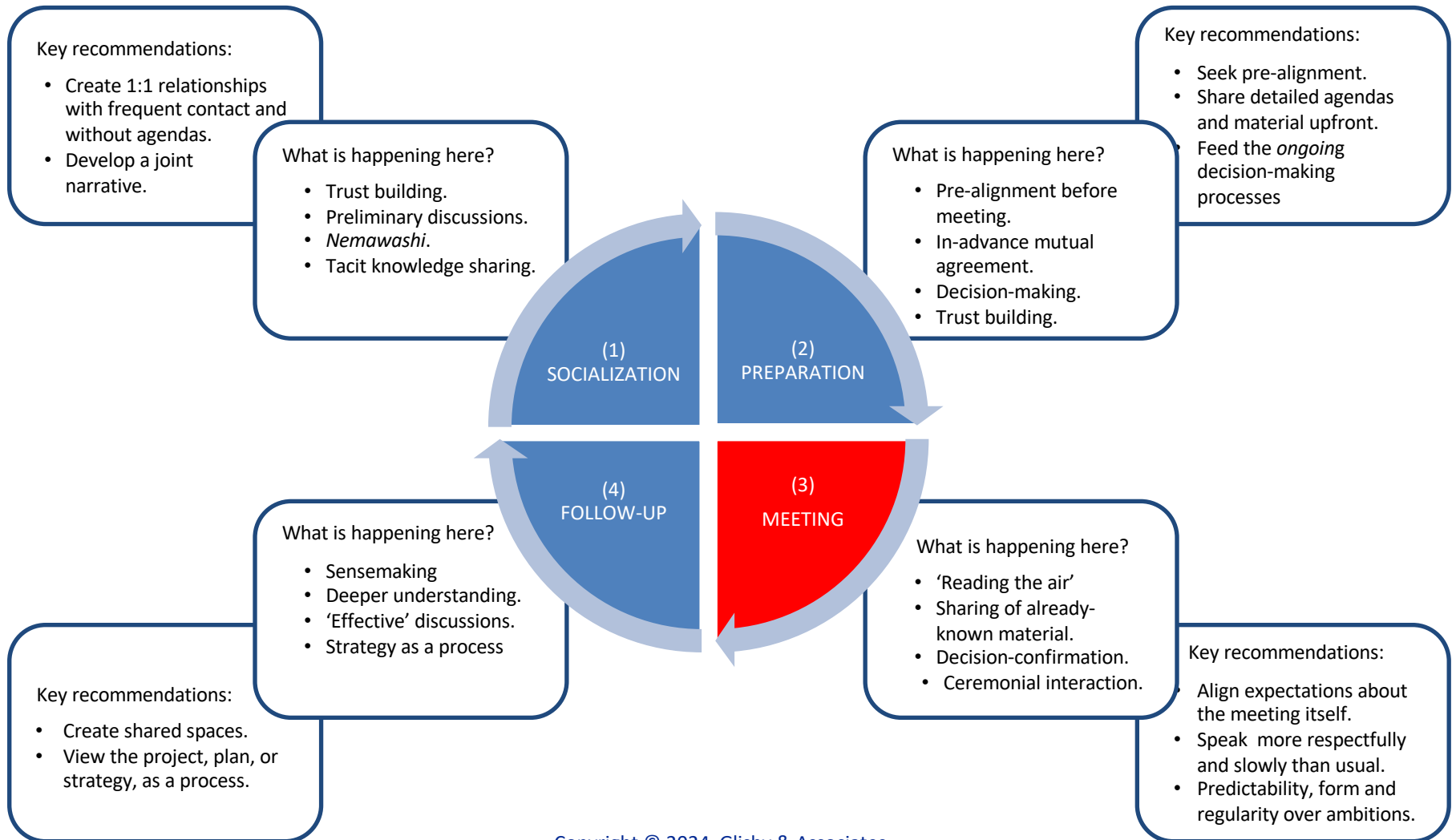
How to improve meeting efficiency?

85% of all Japanese respondents replied:

- (1) prior groundwork
- (2) prior reporting, and
- (3) prior (mutual) understanding.

事前準備、事前通知、事前理解

# The communication wheel



# Summary of key recommendations



THE COMMUNICATION WHEEL	1. Use the 'communication wheel' to get on the right wave-length with your Japanese business partner
SOCIALISATION PHASE	2. Create one-to-one relationships with frequent contact and without a specific agenda
	3. Create common cognitive ground by developing a joint narrative
	4. Apply the Japanese practice of <i>nemawashi</i>
PRE-ALIGNMENT PHASE	5. Seek pre-alignment with your Japanese partner to enhance efficiency and build trust
	6. Book meetings before the actual meeting to share all agendas and material upfront
	7. Feed the Japanese <i>ringi</i> process to enable and influence decision-making
MEETING PHASE	8. Speak more respectfully and more slowly than usual
	9. Apply contextual understanding to smooth communication
	10. Predictability over ambitions: Predictability, form and regularity are what create trust at all levels
FOLLOW-UP PHASE	11. Create personal space for talking before and after online meetings
	12. Craft and implement a 'knowledge sharing document'
	13. Focus on the process rather than strategy in itself
	14. Appoint an intercultural knowledge facilitator to help navigate the tacit knowledge flows

# Insight in a nutshell



Europeans typically stress **content**, while the Japanese stress **context** for ‘good communication’.

Japanese perspective: the key contextual issues are **When to discuss what, with whom, how and where.**

**The very emphasis on context** (when and where) rather than ‘what’ in the first instance is a key to understanding the nature of communication with Japanese partners.

- Seek pre-alignment with your Japanese partner to enhance efficiency.
- Apply a contextual understanding to smoothen communication.
- Create a wide range of context for connecting, knowledge sharing, and building trust.



## GLISBY & ASSOCIATES

*Trusted advisors to top  
executives with special  
reference to Japan*

[www.glisby.com](http://www.glisby.com)  
[martin@glisby.com](mailto:martin@glisby.com)