

Telecommunications, Environment/Energy and Health

Roger Fernandez

Gifts are integral to building and maintaining relationships in Japan. Gifts needn't be expensive, but timing, presentation and symbolism are of utmost importance. Timing—for colleagues, a box of sweets made in the town which you just visited on a business trip. Simple handmade crafts upon visiting a friend's house. Cups for tea, elegant in their simplicity, for a birthday or anniversary. Presentation—taking the time to wrap a gift properly and giving it at the appropriate time. Symbolism—to thank colleagues who covered your work while on travel, to demonstrate appreciation for those who show kindness and to mark special days for close colleagues, friends and family. If multiple items are given, one must never give an even number as this means the gift, and, symbolically the relationship, can be divided.

It took me many months to understand basic Japanese gift-giving etiquette but from my arrival to the moment of departure fourteen months later, gifts, both material and those less tangible—patience, kindness, understanding, trust and inclusiveness—were given daily. Some of the closest friends I have and treasure were those developed while living in Japan, but that is a topic for another essay. The gifts I describe here are those gained professionally through the unparalleled generosity of my Japanese colleagues during my year as a Mansfield Fellow. As noted above, one never gives an even number of items. Almost without exception, such gifts usually come as five—five sake cups, five sets of chopsticks. In keeping with this custom, I will discuss the top five Japanese professional gifts given by my colleagues at the Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, gifts that I will never forget and that can never be divided: **team work**, the value of building and maintaining professional **relationships**, emphasizing **details** and, encouraging **communication** and **consistency** in one's professional life.

Team work. Often professional tasks in the U.S. are given to an individual with a goal and timeline. One seeks clarification on specific points and retreats to his office or cubicle and works until a draft is ready for review by appropriate colleagues. This approach to a task or large project is almost unheard of in Japan. Cubicles and, with the exception of the highest ranking staff, offices do not exist in the Japanese government and therefore staff share large open spaces with rows of desks. Teams of six or eight are placed together in a group with defined tasks that the entire team

is responsible for completing. This open setting offers the ability to easily share information, help each other and learn from each other. Conversely, should a staff member's performance not be at an appropriate level, team members can identify and address issues more quickly than if a person were isolated in a private space. As an integrated team member, I too was expected to do my assignments as given by the chief, and it was clear that the team was counting on my performance.

While this situation could not be re-created in the U.S., I returned with a clear understanding of the value of working as a team in order to accomplish large tasks and the need to articulate clear expectations such that staff understand their roles and how their success or failure to complete their work can and will impact others.

Building a functioning and productive team relies on **relationships**. The Japanese place a high value in getting to know colleagues on a personal level as a basis for building a productive team. It is not human nature to enter a team and immediately trust a colleague's motivations, value their opinions or share professional goals if a bond does not exist. My team would have lunch together daily and spend one evening each week having dinner so that we could discuss work and personal topics in a more informal setting. Prior to beginning a new large task or if a new team member were to join or depart, the team would schedule a special dinner to kick off a task, to welcome a new member or to say farewell and thank you to one that left. Finally, the team would regularly schedule reunions with former colleagues, for one never knows when one may work together again. Paying attention to the human side of relationships in a professional setting is vital for trust and understanding within a team.

While the U.S. does not have the same lunchtime culture, upon beginning large projects, I bring all staff together in informal settings to allow the group to get to know each other. In some cases, we have traveled to regional offices to meet and discuss tasks, building trust and making it easier to seek each other's assistance and support. This takes time and energy but it pays off. Valuing the personal **relationship** in a professional environment has been invaluable to me, and something to which I paid little attention prior to Japan.

Emphasis on **team work** and **relationships** also creates a level of unprecedented **communication**. Teams communicate with each other continuously. In a bullpen setting, one hears others' **questions**, comments and concerns on an ongoing basis and can add his opinion, which is often not possible when one is in an office or cubicle. People have open meetings without doors, again allowing for free-flow of information. In this way, I noticed that tasks were often completed more quickly, for problems were identified early and certain people with specific expertise were able to

step in to help right away as opposed to after an issue had become a major problem. The value of open **communication** with colleagues and management on a regular basis and encouraging others to share in their work is something I now understand. Prior to Japan, I often would close my office door during a time of struggle where now I reach out to others for assistance and encourage the same behavior.

Emphasizing **details** in every task is something that was expected of every team on which I worked. Mistakes, small or large, were simply not tolerated. While this often created both lateral and vertical layers of review and caused delays, the end work products of the teams were always superb. While one must always consider time constraints, considering **details** in my work and most importantly seeking the input of others prior to finalizing a product is a value I brought home from Japan.

Finally, **consistency** is a professional value that the Japanese hold in high regard. Showing up on time, telling people when you are departing for the day, and clearly communicating your personal schedule such that people can plan accordingly are all expected. While the level of professional independence in the U.S. is often a great benefit in terms of raising productivity and work-life balance, one must also consider others' schedules so that they can plan accordingly. Also, **consistent** performance, and delivering your products on time and on budget are on the surface obvious, but not always practiced. Following a schedule, delivering on time and setting those expectations for others and **communicating** one's expectations are core traits I brought home and applied in my work environment.

I am not saying the Japanese workplace is a utopia. Rather, I had the distinct privilege of observing the Japanese workplace from the inside for one year. Through this experience, I was able to glean those aspects of a Japanese workplace that I could bring home, enabling tremendous improvement in my professional life. My colleagues at the Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry allowed this through their unending patience, kindness, understanding and trust in me and their willingness to include me in their daily professional lives, providing me the professional gifts that I will always carry with me and can never be divided: **team work, relationships, details, communication and consistency.**

Roger Fernandez participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency from 2000–2002. During his Fellowship year in Japan, he served in full-time placements in Japan's New Energy Development Organization (NEDO) and Ministry of the Environment and in the office of the Honorable Tatsuya Ito, LDP Member. He currently is a team leader at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.