

American communication relies heavily on words. We expect communicators to be clear, precise, and skilled in expressing themselves verbally. We value people who have good presentation skills and are good at discussing and debating.

In contrast, Japanese communication relies heavily on non-verbals. Words are important, but so are body language, gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, posture, and "non-word sounds" such as the hissing sound that Japanese often make when confronted with an unappealing proposal or situation. Japanese speak of haragei, the art of silently communicating "belly to belly," through intuition rather than with words.

One reason that Japanese are able to rely more heavily on non-verbals for their communication is due to what scholars refer to as a high degree of shared context (background information). For example, think of the communication style between you and your spouse, or between your parents. One raised eyebrow can clearly say "You forgot to take out the garbage," and a certain tone of voice can communicate volumes. This is classic high context communication that needs only a minimum of words in order to get the message across. Japanese tend to have this style of communication with everyone, not just their spouses.

It is important to sharpen your antennae and notice the non-verbals of the Japanese you are working with. Also, be sure to leave enough silence and not overwhelm Japanese with a torrent of words.

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