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COMMUNICATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
ASIAN AND U.S. MANAGERS

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Consistently, the AACSB (Association of Collegiate Schools of Business) has argued for business schools to intensify their efforts for getting international concepts into all business courses. That challenge has been accepted; schools of business are attempting to infuse an international business dimension into their curriculum, even to one business school offering a one-year executive development program focusing only on Pacific Rim countries. We argue that non-business schools have long been interested in and involved with foreign studies, often turning to business interests to supplement their usual anthropological, geographical, economical, and political research areas.

International business studies are thus increasing in momentum: at area study centers, at multinational companies, at professional meetings, at executive seminars, each seeking to increase understanding in order that orderly trade and communication may occur.

And at the core of international business exchanges are managers, or top level executives. They must communicate well in order for business to occur; they must understand something of other persons and their culture in order to succeed.

Our descriptive study thus seeks to add to cultural understanding of selected managers in the city-state of Hong Kong (N=249) and the south-east Asian countries of Singapore (N=62) and Malaysia (N=6), for a total of 317 managers. A data base of U.S. managers (N=6,223) makes up the comparative sample, along with occasional references to U.S. Chairmen, Presidents, and Vice-presidents (N=7,419), herein called Executives.

Central to our discussion is this thesis: though intense cultural differences exist, commonalities in Asian communication practices and

goals parallel many communication procedures in U.S. businesses. Our discussion (1) provides background information of the Asian manager under investigation, (2) presents eight conclusions on Asian managerial communication, and (3) suggests some implications for current communication practitioners and academics.

### **BACKGROUND**

Japan, as a dominant economic force in Asia, continues to receive much attention of scholars (England and Koike, 1970; Hideo, 1975; Sekiguchi, 1979; Ikema, 1980; Lim, 1983; Ballon, 1984; Everett, Krishnan, and Stening, 1984; Miyai, 1985--to cite a few of the many statements focusing on Japanese interrelationships and intercultural problems in south-east Asia). Interest in intercultural and communication relationships are slightly less in Singapore and Hong Kong (Haire, Ghiselli, and Porter, 1966; Yoshino, 1968; England, Dhingra, and Agarwal, 1974; Geiger and Geiger, 1975; Mun and Ho, 1979). Underlying all the investigations, however, is the recognition that economic involvement is closely related to managerial perceptions of cross-cultural problems, even among the countries which make up this study. Hence, the project seeks to bring into sharper focus the Asian manager to potentially decrease the cross cultural problems which are common in multinational companies (Everett, Krishnan, and Stening, 1984, p. 21.)

A 60 item questionnaire, along with an interview, was directed at the 317 Asian managers during the spring and summer of 1985-1987, emphasizing their career path, education, personal life, and lifestyles. While that data were being collected, a similar questionnaire (1983-1987) was being received from the U.S. managers and executives. A

portion of the questionnaires related to communication practices, the basis for this study. All questions were in English and hence there was no problem of translation.

### **Businesses Represented**

Over seventeen different industries are represented in the Asian management group, ranging from the nonmanufacturing area of banking to the manufacturing area of transportation equipment. Such diversity is not unusual inasmuch as the study attempted to obtain a wide sweep of industries. Those micro classifications are subsumed under seven macro business categories<sup>1</sup> wherein nearly one-third (27.0 percent) came from professional services, followed by durable goods, manufacturing (18.9 percent). Relative frequencies for the other major business categories are in Table 1.

Table 1

#### Major Asian Business Groups Represented

<u>Business Group</u>	<u>Total</u>
Durable Goods, Manufacturing	18.9
Nondurable Goods, Manufacturing	16.7
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	13.8
Regulated Industries	12.5
Professional Services	27.0
Retail and Wholesale trade	5.1
Other Industries	<u>5.7</u>
	100%*

\*Rounding will sometimes result in percentages greater or less than 100%.

No matter how prolific cottage industries are in Asia, companies with most visibility--consciously or unconsciously--are large and have

greater opportunity for international exchange, no different than the industrial structure in the U.S. Over 49 percent of the Asian companies in the study have an annual gross operating revenue in excess of \$500 million. Approximately one-third exceed \$2 billion, and over 26 percent have a gross operating revenue in excess of \$10 billion a year.

At the other end of the spectrum are companies whose gross operating revenue is less than \$100 million; 42.3 percent of the study participants came from that category. Clearly, one must bear in mind, regardless of the large cottage industry in Asia, that the data represents managers from the larger multinational firms.

Table 2

Gross Operating Revenue

<u>Revenues</u>	<u>Total</u>
Under \$100 million	42.3
\$100 million to less than \$500 million	7.7
\$500 million to less than \$1 billion	7.3
\$1 billion to less than \$2 billion	3.5
\$2 billion to less than \$10 billion	12.0
Over \$10 billion	<u>26.8</u>
	100%

**Managers Represented**

As further background to understanding the managers involved in the study, it is necessary to position them in the organization hierarchy. Job titles themselves give little clue as to relative positioning. A way to circumvent this problem is to look at the span of control, the number of persons for whom a manager has supervisory responsibilities and in turn how many tiers separate him or her from the top position within the company.

**--Direct control**

Influence, to a degree, can be measured by the number of people reporting to a manager, which in turn suggests the degree of potential effect he or she can bring about. Among the Asians, over 50 percent reported they had fewer than four people directly reporting to them. Less than 19 percent of them had no direct reports while 15.5 percent reported they had between six to ten employees directly reporting.

These latter statistics are not out of sync with their American counterparts where 17.7 percent had no direct reports. A major difference occurs between the two groups where 63.1 percent of the American managers had over five employees reporting to them.

**--Indirect control**

An organization's span of control can be likened to a series of cocentric circles. At the core would be subordinates reporting directly to a manger; at the periphery would be those persons indirectly reporting to a manager. Not unexpected, the number of persons indirectly reporting to the Asian managers was larger than the number reporting directly, with over 30 percent having over six employees indirectly reporting to them.

What the above classifications suggest is that the Asian managers in the study are approximately in the lower middle range of the management hierarchy. Over 50 percent indicated there were fewer than three levels of management separating them from the CEO. In contrast, most reported there were slightly fewer than two levels of management below their current management position.

While top level executives are predominantly promoted from within (Hildebrandt, Miller, Edington, 1987a), that conclusion is not lost on

either Asian or U.S. managers. A review of Table 3 suggests most Asians have been with their present employer between one year through five years, major clustering occurring within that range (52.9 percent). In fact--and this is certainly a factor due to their relative young age--most Asians have been in their present position for ten years or less, compared with their U.S. counterparts of whom 61.5 percent have spent ten years or less with their present employer.

Table 3

Time with Present Employer

<u>Years with Company</u>	<u>Total</u>
Less than 1	9.9
1-5	52.9
6-10	18.6
11-15	11.2
16-20	4.1
21-25	1.9
Over 25	<u>.9</u>
	100%

As additional foundation for later Asian manager suggestions concerning communication, one must look at their career paths: from first job to what they would do differently. In other words, major areas of responsibility suggest the degree of authority they possess, and the influence related thereto.

**--First job position**

Savvy MBA's or BBA's know about but occasionally try to avoid the most frequent kind of entry level position, namely, Marketing/Sales, 20.9 percent of the Asians began in that area, quite comparable to their American counterparts, 19 percent of whom started there. One of the



reasons for beginning in Marketing/Sales is the visibility and immediate feedback to the employee.

**--Current job position**

Asians slowly shift from one functional area to another, 17.2 percent at the time of completing this study were still in Marketing/Sales, the area in which they began their careers. American managers, by contrast, had already moved to positions in such areas as Personnel/Industrial Relations (20.1 percent).

**--Most time in job position**

Specifically the question of the managers was, "In which area of responsibility have you spent the most time?" Again, just over a quarter (28.8 percent) spent more time in Marketing/Sales than the other eight areas of choice. Production/Operations was second (17.1 percent) followed by Computer/Information Systems (14.8 percent). Less time was spent in Research and Development or Personnel/Industrial Relations.

**--Fastest route to the top**

Earlier we implied that Marketing/Sales gave increased visibility and feedback on job capability; that inference is supported by the Asians: they suggest the fastest route to the top is via that route, as do their American counterparts, 31.7 percent and 41.6 percent respectively.

**--If starting career over**

Unhesitatingly, Asian and U.S. managers, and U.S. top level executives are parallel: the best functional area in which to begin a career in business is in Marketing/Sales, 37.9 percent, 25.8 percent, and 27.9 percent respectively. Asians then follow up that initial

positioning with Computer/Information Systems (15.3 percent) and Finance/Accounting, 12.5 percent.

A firm conclusion is that an area of highly visible communication as Marketing/Sales plays a significant role early in one's career. Indeed, data collected on CEO's, presidents, and vice-presidents for several years (Bond, Hildebrandt, Edington, Miller, 1983-86) show unvarying executive dependence on the same career path to positions of importance.

Table 4  
Areas of Responsibility

Major Area of Responsibility	First Job	Current Job	Most Time	Fastest Route Up	If Starting Over
Production/Operations	19.2	5.3	17.1	12.1	8.6
Marketing/Sales	20.9	17.2	28.8	41.6	37.9
Finance/Accounting/Taxes	13.5	5.7	11.7	11.6	12.5
Personnel/Industrial Relations	3.2	2.8	2.7	5.0	3.8
Research and Development	6.0	1.1	2.7	.5	3.8
Law	--	--	--	.5	3.3
General Management/ Administration	12.0	5.7	10.3	8.6	8.6
Computer/Information Systems	12.0	8.0	14.8	12.6	15.3
Other	12.8	4.5	11.7	7.1	5.2

Finally, in rounding off backgrounds of the Asian manager, a series of capsule statements give further insight into the individuals who give a dominant position to communication in their work and in their recommendations:

--Their salaries are considerably lower in comparison to U.S. managers, a mean of \$27,772 vis a vis \$46,501 for U.S. males.

--They work at a mean 49.9 hours per week, or 1.2 hours a week more than their U.S. counterparts.

- Nearly two-thirds of the Asian managers attained an undergraduate degree (65.4 percent), a bit higher than the 51 percent of ASEAN country managers. (Everett, Krishnan, and Stening, 1984, p. 32). And while that is less than American managers (Hildebrandt, Miller, Edington, 1987b) (81.6 percent), it can be said that Asian managers are primarily college educated. Adding the category "some college," to those who completed college increases the percentage to eight out of ten who went beyond high school. For further comparisons, 82 percent of the Japanese managers in ASEAN countries also possessed an undergraduate degree (Everett, Krishnan, and Stening, 1984, p. 29).
- In 1987 the mean age of newly promoted executives was 47.1 (Hildebrandt, Miller, Edington, 1987a); for U.S. managers in the Managerial Profile for U.S. Managers (Hildebrandt, Miller, Edington, 1987b) the mean age was 38.3. The foreign managers in this study had a mean age of 32.6--younger than the mean of 37 for ASEAN countries (Everett, Krishnan, and Stening, 1984, p. 31)--nearly six years younger than their U.S. colleagues, and considerably younger than the Japanese manager in ASEAN countries, age 40 (Everett, Krishnan, and Stening, 1984, p. 28).
- The studies of Asian and U.S. managers have identical percentages regarding the number of males and females in the workplace, 80 percent male, 20 percent female, not too dissimilar from the Bureau of Labor statistics (1987) suggesting that 24.1 percent were women in managerial and professional speciality positions.
- Both Asian and U.S. managers come from middle income homes; data for executives are similar, suggesting that all three groups had their beginnings in relatively modest surroundings, and further suggesting that financial help was available in order to obtain a higher education.
- Asian managers' fathers were predominantly officials and managers (30 percent) followed by professionals (13.1 percent), and office/clerical (9.7 percent).
- Dual incomes are not unusual in the Asian managers' household: 65.9 percent of their spouses work full-time, compared with the figure of 43.3 percent of U.S. managers.

#### **CONCLUSIONS ON ASIAN MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION**

Not mentioned above but worthy of note is that whereas two-thirds of the Asian managers attained an undergraduate degree, 32.2 percent of them obtained it in Business Administration, followed by Engineering (26.1 percent), and Science and Mathematics (22.7 percent). Precisely a

quarter of the Asian managers have obtained an advanced degree, and among them 49.3 percent acquired it in Business Administration. Asian managers thus through case work in classroom activities, through contact in functional business areas, in addition to pragmatic experiences, are professionally oriented and qualified to make informed judgments on the importance of communication in organizational contexts.

**1. Support is given to formal business communication.**

A bane of any employee is the voiced unhappiness with the number of structured environments wherein communication must occur, as opposed to some free wheeling entrepreneurial companies where casualness dominates. Formal communication was defined as: written reports, either problem solving or periodic progress statements; staff meetings, to inform or argue for a proposition; and formal gatherings, group and staff meetings to either listen to or present informative or persuasive statements.

Preference for formal communication is not unexpected. In Asia--and particularly in mainland China--the British influence on formality in writing and oral communication (Zhu, 1979; English Business Letters, 1982; Macintosh, 1982; Zhu, 1982; Business Dialogues, 1983; English Business Communications, 1983;) still is reflected in large Far East multinational business enterprises, particularly in Hong Kong and Singapore, with only slow inroads being made by American business communication (Hildebrandt and Zong, 1985). Thus 55 percent of the Asian respondents gave strong support to formal communication as being "very important" in their corporation. However, the size of the enterprise may be as important as the culture because 53.6 percent of

the U.S. managers--also from large multinational companies--also accord formal communication practices a high position.

**2. Informal communication is practiced but is less important than formal communication.**

Informal communication is defined as phone conversations, impromptu and unplanned meetings, and casual meetings occurring during a business day. Less stress in these situations is on written and oral transmissions, subplanting the formality associated with memorandums and reports.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that size of the corporation is a factor, particularly when a subsidiary's mother company is located in another country. Managers seek more informal oral transmissions, but telexes, memorandums, and reports become written verification for the oral, forcing managers into a more formal pattern. Comparatively, over two-thirds (70.6 percent) of the U.S. CEO's--more so than presidents and vice-presidents--feel informal communication is important. Indeed, the highest executive in an organization is a strong supporter of the informal.

Just over two thirds (67.3 percent) of the Asian managers have worked for another company, implying that some may have come from smaller and less formal organizations.

Table 5

Formal/Informal Communication

Company Activity	Very Important		4	Very Unimportant	
	1	2		5	
Formal Communication	55.0	43.3	--	1.7	
Informal Communication	40.6	45.0	--	1.4	

### **3. Corporate rituals contribute to a corporate culture**

Bylaws and strategic goal statements are overt evidence that someone gave thought to the formal internal and external business environment. Not so visible are the verbal and nonverbal ceremonies which contribute to an overall corporate communication culture, here defined as recognition dinners, awarding of citations, internal promotion festivities, service anniversaries, retirement acknowledgments, or festivities connected with departmental moves or religious celebrations.

Asian business and for that matter European business, have far more holiday observances that impact upon the routine of the business environment. The ritual of a day off for a religious celebration or civic observance is inviolate, creating a feeling of oneness in observing the event. What celebrations do is collapse managerial differences on a common day, as all ritually interact in the outside environment.

While U.S. executives consider rituals not "very important," such is not the case with the Asian managers where 40 percent consider them "very important;" when noting the second category of "important" the total is 90.5 percent. In other words, verbal and nonverbal rituals permit some communication to occur with a degree of regularity.

### **4. Corporate cultures are relatively important**

Somewhat surprising, Asian managers do not give a high ranking on a 5-point scale to the importance of a corporate culture. The definition of culture was explicit: carrying forward often in unspoken forms of conduct an expected pattern of human behavior within and

without the organization. Clarifying examples included strict/casual lines of authority; formal/informal modes of dress; tenseness/relaxation; and others.

Only 14 percent felt a corporate culture was "very important" while 35 percent said it was "important." Even adding those two figures together does not result in a majority; 18 percent consider a corporate culture "not important" or "very unimportant."

Contrastingly, over half of the U.S. CEO's (52.9 percent); over one-third of the Presidents (34.6 percent); and over a quarter of the Vice-Presidents (29.6 percent) feel a corporate culture is "very important."

There is no doubt that the Asians sense the presence of a culture; they just don't feel it is as important as do their U.S. counterparts. An open-ended question, for example, showed that areas as employee relationships, interpersonal communication skills were valued within the organization. Examples included networking within and without organizations; goal setting sessions in functional areas; and performance assessment.

Beliefs or company values also receive their attention, even to the extent of some of them carrying a card whereon was embossed some ethical values as loyalty, honesty, and customer satisfaction.

A short list of cultural/ritual behaviors, in no specific order, suggests the presence of accepted Asian managerial behavior:

Sense of urgency	Dress code
Hard work and long hours	Formal use of names
International competence	Emphasis on training for improvement

Table 6

Corporate Rituals/Culture

Company Activity	Very Important				Very Unimportant
	1	2	3	4	5
Corporate Rituals	40	50.5	9.5	--	--
Corporate Culture	14	35	33	11	7

**5. Forms of communication about equal in usage**

There is little doubt that communication consumes a significant portion of an Asian manager's time: gathering information, disseminating information, and using information to make decisions. Questions in the survey asked what percentage of time they communicated in a typical business day. None of the four traditional forms of communication (listening, reading, speaking, writing) firmly dominates. However, the managers reported that speaking and writing were the most frequently used forms of communication, and among the four those two forms represented over 50 percent of the total. Then came listening and reading.

Clearly, listening has fallen from its plus 40 percent of importance (Nichols, 1948) to equality with the other forms. The fact that oral communication (speaking 28.7 percent) is first does not surprise us, for the majority of communications in Asia remain oral, as we will later see when discussing modes of communication.

**6. Oral communication to receive more emphasis**

When Asian managers were asked what stress the four forms of communication should receive in an Asian business communication course,



a slight shift in emphasis occurs: give more emphasis to oral communication, slightly more emphasis to writing than listening, and a decreased emphasis to reading.

When the U.S. executives were asked the same question, they felt more time should be devoted to written communication, writing and speaking, and lastly reading.

Specific data for the preceding conclusions are in the following table.

Table 7  
Forms of Communication

<u>Communication in Typical Business Day</u>	<u>Typical Day</u>	<u>Recommended</u>
Speaking	28.7	32.5
Listening	25.3	24.7
Writing	24.4	26.8
Reading	21.4	17.6

**7. The telephone the most important mode of communication**

Of eight choices regarding the four most important modes of communication used in sending and receiving messages within their business, the dominant mode was the same as in the communication forms mentioned earlier, namely, oral communication. Both the telephone (90 percent) and face-to-face (77.5 percent) communication were used most often, followed by the memorandum and computer mail. Video conferencing as a mode was last.

In other words, oral communication modes ranked higher than written communication, re-emphasizing the suggestion that more stress ought to be on that form of communication. What is significant,

however, is the increasing importance given to computer mail; clearly that mode did not exist when Nichols (1948) made his seminal investigation. Complete tabulations are in the accompanying table.

Table 8  
Modes of Communication

<u>Communication</u>	<u>Percentage of Respondents Listing Modes as 1 of 4 Means of Communication</u>
Telephone	90
Face-to-Face	77.5
Memorandum	55
Computer Mail	30
Letter	29
Electronic Blackboard	5
Teleconferencing	5
Video Conferencing	5

**8. Communication the most important preparation for a career in general management**

No perceptible shift to the above assertion occurs in previous studies done by this writer, namely, that out of 14 courses business communication (oral and written) is the preeminent managerial/executive recommendation for preparing young people for a career in general management.

That conclusion crosses all managerial lines and is consistent for U.S. managers and executives, for Hong Kong managers, for Singapore managers, and for Taiwanese managers. Incomplete tabulations for mainland China managers suggest they give less importance to communication.

Following communication courses as managerial preparation come the functional areas as Business Policy/Planning (48.2 percent); Marketing

(40.2 percent); Finance (38.5 percent); and then Personnel/Industrial Relations (36.1 percent). Intermediate support was given areas as Business Economics/Public Policy; Accounting; Computer/Information Systems; and International Business. Less support was given Business Law; Production Operations; and Statistics.

What the managers are suggesting is that although functional areas are the core in preparing for a business career, the communication tools become the vehicles whereby that functional information, and evidence of competence, is communicated.

Table 9  
Courses for Managerial Preparation

Course	Very Important		Very Unimportant	
	1	2	4	5
Business Communication--Oral	71.8	25.0	--	--
Business Communication--Written	69.7	26.0	--	--
Business Policy/Planning	48.2	42.3	1.7	--
Marketing	40.2	41.6	2.4	--
Finance	38.5	47.2	1.7	--
Personnel/Industrial Relations	36.1	38.6	1.7	.1
Business Economics/Public Policy	34.2	43.8	2.1	--
Accounting	30.2	54.9	1.3	--
Computer/Information Systems	27.0	51.7	3.4	--
International Business	21.5	48.2	2.7	--
Advertising/Sales Promotion	19.3	48.0	6.2	--
Business Law	19.1	48.9	4.6	--
Production/Operations	11.7	43.6	6.7	1.4
Statistics	10.8	45.4	8.3	.7

#### Implications for International Communication

With the increased focus in business schools upon internationalizing the curriculum, the preceding data has implications for those who teach in U.S. business schools, those who work in

multinational corporations, and those who teach communication generally.

A review of selected recent business communication texts (Bielawski, Parks, 1987; Bowman, Branchaw, 1987; Murphy, Hildebrandt, 1988; Huseman, Lahiff, Penrose, 1988) indicates that more emphasis is being given to oral communication as well as to group meetings and the act of listening. In addition to the conclusions already stated, we add the following:

1. A common theme arises in Asia: formality in communication is an important cultural attribute. Accepting that inference leads one to affirm the idea that formality in communication is important when dealing with the Asian manager.
2. Added emphasis in classroom teaching must be given to oral communication, not only for the Asian student who is a participant in those classes, but for American students who potentially can work for a multinational corporation. Written reports continue to be important in the Asian world; subsumed under that generalization is the idea that executives must make an oral statement based on that written report. Hence, instructors could focus more on oral communication.
3. While listening appears to have lost some classroom importance since the Nichols' study, in no way should there be a complete erasure of that communication form from the communication course. One third of the Asian respondents indicated listening was important, suggesting that each text now written, in business communication or communication in general, should have a section devoted to and a discussion of the principles of good listening. We hypothesize that U.S. managers will have similar conclusions.

4. We cannot underestimate the importance of good telephone communication. Telephone etiquette and telephone communication along with the organization of ideas in using that medium are important for the student who intends to become a business executive. One cannot overlook the over 90 percent of Asian respondents giving importance to oral communication via the telephone.
5. Interpersonal communication skills should also be stressed in the classroom. That conclusion is not surprising because most organizational theory and business communication texts do include a discussion of interpersonal communication as seen through face-to-face communication and its importance, particularly for Asians.
6. Practitioners working in multinational companies should realize that while overall cultural differences exist between the Far East and the West, commonality in communication practices are predictably parallel with U.S. businesses.

\* \* \* \* \*

The above data are introductory because the Asian data base is small. At the moment, however, one can safely conclude that we in the U.S. are aware of the importance of communication; it is reassuring that those conclusions are reaffirmed overseas.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The specific industry groups are classified as follows:

Durable goods manufacturing: Aerospace; Automotive; Building Products including Glass, Stone, Clay; Electrical Machinery; Electronics and Electrical Products; Fabricated Metals; Nonelectrical Machinery; Primary Metals; Transportation Equipment; Other -- Manufacturing.

Nondurable goods, manufacturing: Apparel; Chemicals; Food; Packaging; Paper; Petroleum; Pharmaceuticals; Plastic and Rubber; Printing, Publishing; Textiles.

Retail and wholesale trade: Retail Trade; Wholesale Trade.

Business services: Advertising, Public Relations; Data Processing; Entertainment, Leisure; Professional Services.

Finance, insurance, real estate: Banking; Finance/credit; Insurance; Investment Banking and Securities; Real Estate, Land Development.

Regulated industries: Communications; Public Utilities; Transportation, all kinds.

Other industries: Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries; Construction; Mining; Other -- Nonmanufacturing.

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