

The Japanese: highly emotional?

Readings from "The New Japan. Debunking Seven Cultural Stereotypes" by David Matsumoto

By Sebastien Henry, Executive Coach & Trainer
Emotional Intelligence Expert for Progress-U Ltd.



Are the Japanese highly emotional? As a leader, if you work with Japanese on a regular basis, this question may sound quite provoking.

Last month, I wrote an article about my experience taking a coaching training in Japanese with a group of 24 Japanese. I mentioned that I was absolutely amazed at the way participants in the group would share about their emotions, and open up on a very personal level.

I received several comments from people who said that it was inspiring and opened the field of possibilities for them. At the same time, they were wondering how this was possible, considering their own experience with Japanese colleagues. They pointed that perhaps there were special conditions during this training that made this possible.

Of course, this experience was created under special conditions:

- The conversations were all in Japanese, so there was no language barrier, which is often a major one for the Japanese when dealing with foreign people.
- People who had come to this training were probably more open than the average on sharing their emotions. They were here to become professional coaches in the future, after all.

Still, I kept thinking that our Japanese colleagues are much more open to sharing their emotions and to opening up on a personal level than we think they are.

Comments from these readers prompted me into doing some more research on this topic (thank you again to them). And I found an interesting book called "The New Japan. Debunking Seven Cultural Stereotypes", by David Matsumoto. Although Mr Matsumoto is an academic in the US, his book is easily readable, while remaining rigorous.

Mr Matsumoto, whose name indicates Japanese origin, writes that “the Japanese are highly emotional and value their own feelings and those of others.” Well, pretty obvious, you would think. At the same time, considering the many stereotypes around Japanese people in the workplace, this is a pretty strong statement.

When it comes to emotional expression, David Matsumoto challenges a classic study conducted by Ekman and Friesen in the 60s that concluded that the Japanese had a display rule that prevented them from displaying their true feelings in the presence of the experimenter.

According to his own studies, the Japanese express negative emotions less toward in-group members – family, friends, work colleagues, and peers – than do the Americans.

But they express positive emotions more frequently than do the Americans toward the same groups. There would then be a significant difference in emotional expression depending on whom they are talking to, whereas for Americans it would be more uniform.

There would be much more to say about Matsumoto’s findings, but I am going to focus on this particular point today (for more insights, please read pages 57-67 in “The New Japan”.)

Matsumoto’s conclusions say that if you are a leader and have Japanese team members, it is very unlikely that you will see negative emotions surface spontaneously. Emotions like resentment, anger, jealousy, sadness and hopelessness are very likely to stay underground, where they tend to accumulate and grow in intensity.

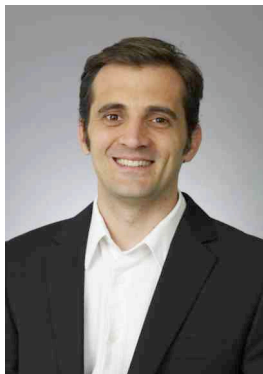
My own conclusions are in line with the main message from last month’s

newsletter. It is your job as a leader to uncover these emotions before they create serious trouble. By spending time regularly to inquire about the “emotional landscape” of your Japanese team members, you will definitely increase your chances.

I fully agree that it is challenging. The language and the cultural differences won't make your life easy. You are likely to face setbacks at the beginning. At the same time, I am fully convinced that you will obtain results if your inquiries are done with a spirit of care, and wanting the best for your people. Don't give up! And write to me if I can be of any help. It would be my pleasure to assist you if I can.

Warmly

Sebastien



Sebastien Henry is **Progress-U's expert for Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and stress management**. He works with executives who want to:

- avoid feeling exhausted and uprooted as their career takes them to the top;
- become more inspiring leaders by developing their Emotional Intelligence (EQ) at work; and, as a consequence
- be able to motivate their people more and retain the best.

Having worked in an Asia-Pacific regional position at a multinational company, Sebastien has experimented extensively on how to develop Emotional Intelligence in his daily work life. He is currently writing a book on this topic. His articles on Emotional Intelligence in Leadership have been published in Human Resources and South China Morning Post.

He firmly believes in action, and the tools he uses and shares are derived from several areas of his life: his business experience as a corporate executive, of course, but also his intensive practice of mountaineering and rock climbing (7a on-sight and more than 50 alpine routes), his commitment to teach and coach prisoners, and his daily meditations for more than six years.

Positions of his clients as a one-to-one coach are: Asia/Pacific General Manager, Country General Manager, Department Head, etc.

Languages: Spoken and written Mandarin, Japanese, English, French (native language)

Credentials:

- MBA, BA in Psychology, BA in Philosophy
- Certified NLP Practitioner and Master Practitioner
- Certified NLP Trainer (NLPU, USA)
- Certified Coach (ICC)
- More than 40 days of training with the Gestalt approach at the Paris School of Gestalt
- Certified Trainer of the "EQ Impact Learning" program (Talentsmart, USA)

Services offered: 1:1 Executive Coaching, Group Seminars and Workshops, Key Note Speeches