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## **Traveling in Japan and Denmark**

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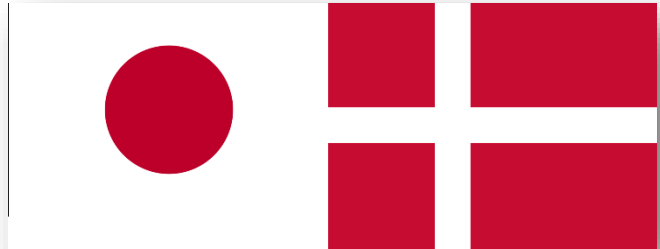
# Traveling in Japan and Denmark: A guide to navigate the two cultures



By Johan Vork Steffensen  
&  
Birthe Dinesen

## JD TeleTech Culture Guide for Japan and Denmark

Travelling to a country that is not your own for work is often difficult. Whether it is trying to conclude deals, set up research or simply represent the company or organization you work for, you will encounter traditions, customs, habits and ways of communicating that are simply not what you are accustomed to.



This is certainly the case when travelling between Japan and Denmark. These are two countries with both profound and subtle cultural differences, each of which may cause unexpected difficulties in conducting business or communicating your message. This guide aims to explain some of the more important differences between Denmark and Japan, as an aid to professionals travelling from one country to the other. It is written for both Danes traveling to Japan for work or research related activities, and for Japanese traveling to Denmark.

Although this guide will list some general do's and don'ts in communicating between Japanese and Danes, it should be emphasized there is no single Danish or Japanese 'behavior'. Every person is different, and so is every situation. These guidelines should not be seen as a fixed set of rules, but rather as useful tips and information. As in all professional communication situations, the key to success is to be patient and flexible.

### Tips for dealing with a new culture

- **Be Aware** – People in the country you visit will nearly always communicate differently from people in your home country. Be aware when discussing certain topics with your counterpart, because they may not always be saying what you think they are.
- **Be Clear** – Because people communicate differently, your foreign partner may have some of the same difficulties as you trying to figure out what is going on. Be clear when you are discussing key topics with your counterpart, because they may not understand you as well as you think they do.
- **Be Patient** – Whenever people from different backgrounds meet, misunderstandings are inevitable. Do not get frustrated or lose patience with your counterpart. Take your time to figure out the problem or discover the hidden assumptions that may have been operating.



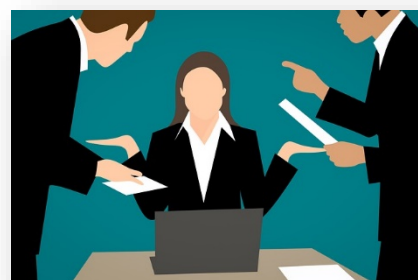
- **Be Open** – Culture shocks occur when behavior that seems strange to you is considered normal by the other. Be open to identifying these cultural differences and be willing to learn more about them. Your way of doing things is not the only way, and it may not even be the best way in the given situation.
- **Be Interested** – Treat the encounter as an opportunity to learn. Act interested in the culture you are meeting and ask questions. Hearing people explain their culture is a good way to gain understanding, even if it is the standard, 'That's the way we do things here'.

The most important thing to remember is that while intercultural encounters can be awkward, or even unexpectedly difficult, they do not have to be. The task is to prevent misunderstandings from becoming major problems. Communication across cultures can be confusing and frustrating. But you should think of it as a difficulty for both sides. It is a joint project to be solved. If you feel lost or confused, never be afraid to ask for an explanation. And don't be afraid to give an explanation if you are asked. Recapitulating what it is you are trying to do and why you are doing it this way may sound like a waste of time, but in the end, it is *always* worth it. What may take five extra minutes can easily save you wasted hours or days in the future. More importantly, any kind of communication that reduces misunderstandings enables you and your foreign counterpart to work more effectively.

### Things to avoid

Of course, there are also a few things anyone should avoid when interacting with people from from another culture. A few of the more useful things to avoid are listed here:

- **Don't speak loudly** – When people feel they are having trouble communicating, they will try to speak very loudly and very slowly. While slowing down is a good idea, loudness does not necessarily make your message any clearer. It may even send the wrong signal. Speak with your normal voice.
- **Don't forget the Interpreter** – If an interpreter is present at the meeting, presentation or conference, it is important to speak in brief phrases and allow pauses in your presentation. This will enable the interpreter to give a precise translation of what you're saying. No interpreter can recall a three-minute rambling sentence. If you forget about the interpreter, you risk losing understanding.
- **Don't use metaphors, slang, jargon or imagery** – Exaggerated metaphors, imagery and slang expressions are usually distinct within a culture, a sub-culture or a language. Using irony, double meanings, sports metaphors, military imagery and similar speech devices may appear cute or amusing, but they also may cause unnecessary misunderstandings when used out of context. Such words and phrases may also be difficult to understand in translation without an explanation. Unless you want to spend time explaining, they should be avoided. Your counterpart may not know about the same pop culture expressions, films, TV celebrities, sports, political figures that you do.



## When in Japan

When you are travelling to Japan as a Dane, there are a great many things that you might find strange or different. Japan and Denmark have vastly different cultural and historical backgrounds, so differences in everyday communication are hardly surprising. Nevertheless, travelling to Japan with little knowledge about the country can still be overwhelming. This section gives tips on how to respond to some possible culturally awkward situations you might encounter.



- **Greetings** – The handshake is common in Japan, and it is sufficient in nearly all situations. However, you might still encounter people who prefer bowing as a greeting. In such cases, the appropriate response is to bow about as deeply as they do. You can also add a little bow to your own greeting if you want.



- **Business Cards** – When one is given a business card in Japan, the normal etiquette is to receive it with both hands and briefly read the name and information on the card, before placing it with other cards you have received. Doing this will help get your meeting off to a good start. Similarly, giving your own business card with both hands also gives a good impression.
- **Punctuality** – In Japan, if you have a meeting or an event scheduled to start at 10:00, it will start at 10:00. Most Japanese are punctual and being late without prior notice is considered somewhat impolite. If you are running late, you should contact those whom you are meeting and let them know why. Traffic or other transport issues are the most accepted excuses, but do not say you overslept or have a hangover.
- **Indirectness** – The Japanese mostly prefer being indirect when talking. In Japan, this is done to show politeness and respect, to soften direct criticism and to temper any expectations. In Danish eyes, this kind of communicating may appear to be overly cautious and may be hard to decipher. At times, you will likely feel that people are not being honest with you or refusing to give you a straight answer. If you find yourself in doubt as to what your counterpart is thinking, or if you simply do not understand them, the best course of action is to ask for clarification. Clarification always makes for effective cooperation and successful negotiations.
- **Gifts** – Bringing a small gift for those whom you are meeting is a good idea. Usually some kind of souvenir from Denmark is fine. However, if you are intending to do business with someone, or if they have done you a big favor, the gift should be appropriately bigger. The gift should generally match the size of whatever favor or service a business connection has

done for you. Some kind of sweet food specialty or a small piece of handicraft are usually good gifts. Gifts should ideally be wrapped.

- **Negotiating a deal** – In Japan, it is often the case that the agreement is not finalized at the actual meeting. Instead, the final agreement will be fixed through a combination of documents sent after the meeting and further meetings. In Japan, your counterpart may avoid agreeing on something until they have consulted with their superiors; hence the delay in finalizing agreements. It can thus be difficult to determine whether the actual meeting has been successful. However, if your counterpart asks for additional meetings and document exchanges, this can be considered a sign of a successful negotiation.



- **Relations** – It is very important when in Japan to maintain personal relations. You cannot expect to become best friends after the first meeting, nor should you expect that your negotiation can be completed in a single meeting. Staying in contact is important, and taking initiative to maintain relations is highly advisable. Arranging small status meetings over the phone or keeping in touch via email is very important for successful business relations. Informal relationships are just as important as formal ones.
- **Conversation** – Japanese who speak with each other indicate that they're listening by making small noises or short, concurring words while listening. You might encounter Japanese who do this when speaking English. This might sound like they are trying to interrupt you, but this is not the intention. The Japanese utter these conversational noises to indicate that they are listening to you and paying attention.
- **Networking** – When meeting someone in Japan, you may be invited out for a drink or for dinner. You will often find that the Japanese are somewhat more relaxed on these occasions. If alcohol is involved, it is advised that you participate, but not to drink in excessive amounts. Japanese alcohol can be strong and getting drunk is a bad idea. You can however expect more open conversation, and these dinners are ideal for building informal relations.
- **Humor** – Danish humor can be heavily loaded with subtle critique, irony and sarcasm. This is not the case in Japan. If you reply to something with irony or sarcasm, it might be taken literally. Avoid sarcastic or ironic remarks, as you may be misunderstood.
- **Conversation topics** – Conversation topics that you can bring up are food and the weather. Talking about family and hobbies is acceptable but avoid asking about family and hobbies if they do not broach the subject. Asking about Japanese culture is also a good conversation starter.



Bear in mind that you might encounter none of the above situations, or all of them. While they are all typical situations than could happen when you are in Japan, this does not necessarily mean they you will be confronted with these situations each and every time, or even at all. What is important is to remain open and attentive at all times.

## When in Denmark

Coming to Denmark from Japan, you will meet many differences. Danes act very differently from what you yourself are used to, and it can be confusing to figure out what certain types of behavior and communication means. Quite often, Danish people are said to be rude. In fact, Danish concepts of politeness, with its emphasis on directness and 'getting down to business' is a quite a contrast from the elaborate rituals of politeness in other countries. Differences like these can make meetings and business difficult if you do not know what can happen. This section will seek to prepare you for some of the situations you might encounter when conducting business in Denmark.



- **Greetings** – In Denmark, greetings are usually done with a handshake. Denmark has no custom of bowing. Bowing as a greeting may be viewed as surprising to most Danes, but it will not be considered improper. So if you prefer to bow when meeting your counterparts, you may certainly do so. But be aware that most Danes will return your bow with a handshake and a greeting.
- **Business Cards** – In Denmark, there is no specific etiquette for exchanging business cards. Danes will exchange business cards when meeting for the first time, but most do not use both hands, and they might just only look at the card briefly. This may seem impolite to you, but in Denmark, the business card exchange is simply not that important. You can still follow Japanese custom, of course, but again, do not expect the same level of protocol from your Danish counterpart.
- **Punctuality** – Like the Japanese, the Danes also like being on time for meetings and events. Many Danes will even arrive slightly ahead of time. If you are late for some reason, contact the people you are meeting and let them know you will be late. It is considered impolite to be late without informing those who are waiting for you. This is viewed as wasting people's time, and Danes do not like wasting time.

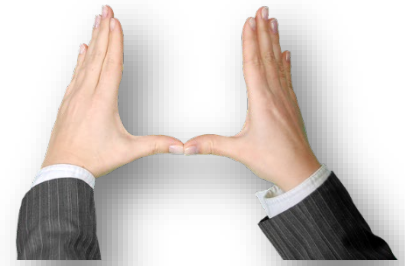


- **Directness** – The Danish people tend to speak their minds and ‘get down to business’ without too much small talk or rituals of respect. The concepts of *honne* and *tatemae* have no counterpart in Danish. If your Danish counterpart does not like your idea or proposal, they will tell you, sometimes in very direct terms. For Danes, directness is considered a sign of honesty, whereas in other countries it may be perceived as rude. Being honest with your opinion is considered a sign of politeness. Not saying what you really and truly believe is thus considered dishonest and hypocritical. In both professional and social situations, Danes will express their direct opinion, even towards a superior. As a Japanese in Denmark, this level of directness may be viewed as a sign of disrespect toward a superior. But again, the direct expression of honest, even critical opinions is viewed by Danish employees as a show of respect. Danish culture places a lot of emphasis on reaching a consensus, and reaching a consensus begins with everyone saying what they mean.
- **Privacy** – Despite their directness in business and negotiation situations, Danes are also very private. Most Danish people do not like sharing personal information or discussing their private life with people they do not know well. Danes are very comfortable with silence, and many are not fans of small talk. Danes do not necessarily find this awkward, nor does it mean that something bad has happened. For Danes, intervals of silence might even be a sign of the Danish ‘hygge’, which denotes a feeling of well-being and comfort in the situation. As in Japan, Danes also feel more comfortable and talkative when food and drink are on the table.
- **Informality** – Compared to Japanese, Danish people are very informal both in dress, mannerisms and language. Although the Danish language has formal forms of address (De/Dem) for talking to elders, strangers or superiors, most Danes do not use these forms any more. The use of titles or honorifics is also very uncommon compared to other European countries. Danish employees will address their superiors by their first names, and even schoolchildren and university students call their teachers by their first names. In meetings, most Danes will introduce themselves by their first name, and they will also want to call you by your first name as well. Most Danes also prefer if you call them by their first name. During conversations or negotiations, do not be surprised if you are occasionally interrupted. This kind of informal give and take may seem unfamiliar at first, but Danes consider this a sign of their involvement in the conversation. They do not interrupt in order to be rude to you.
- **Humor** – Because they are so direct and informal most of the time, Danish humor contains a lot of irony and sarcasm. Danes are not always aware that this kind of subtle humor may be misunderstood by people from other countries. For example, you might ask them about carrying out a long-term project, and they might reply in an ironic way, that ‘Everything will be finished by tomorrow.’ If you find yourself in doubt because you received a response that was opposite of what you expected, it might just be a form of Danish sarcastic humor. If you ask about it, most Danes will clear things up.
- **Eye contact** – Danes show that they are paying attention to the speaker by maintaining direct eye contact, and simply nodding in agreement occasionally. You should be aware that it might be considered impolite if you do not try to make at least a minimum of eye contact.



Making eye contact with the speaker may seem a bit intimidating at first, but it is something you will have to get used to.

- **Gestures** – When talking, Danish people like to move their hands or make faces to emphasize points. This is also another reason why Danes like eye contact. If you do not look at the person who is speaking, you might miss some of the meaning. It is best to keep your eyes on the speaker at most times so as not to lose any of their meaning.
- **Informal relations** – As in Japan, making informal relations is important in Denmark, and visiting businesspeople will often be offered dinner. However, you might occasionally be invited for dinner at your partner's home rather than at a restaurant. This is common in Denmark, where most people enjoy having friends and family come visit them. Being invited home is a good sign that your trip is going very well.



- **Hygge** – A key part of Danish culture, and understanding the way Danes make relations, is understanding "hygge", a Danish term meaning roughly "a cozy feeling of well-being". It is a feeling or an atmosphere to a place. It can take many forms, but often involves lit candles, food and drink, and being with friends or family. It is something Danes always try to create, and they believe it helps people get closer to each other and have a good time.
- **Conversation topics** – In casual conversation Danes like to talk about travelling, food, the weather and the sea. You can also ask about *hygge*. They may also talk about certain hobbies or about pets. Many Danes do not talk a lot about family, and it is best not to ask about family if they do not talk about family first. Asking about places to see in Denmark is also a good conversation starter.

Bear in mind that you might encounter none of the above situations, or all of them. While such situations are typical for foreign businesspeople visiting Denmark, this does not mean they will always happen. What is important is to remain open and attentive at all times.

## About JD TeleTech

The Japanese & Danish Research Network on telehealth, and telerehabilitation and welfare technologies, or **JD TeleTech**, is working to promote cooperation between Danish and Japanese institutions, companies and researchers in the fields of new technology within health, welfare and digitalization.

Our aims are:

- To increase the quality of life for patients suffering from chronic illnesses;
- To ease the workflow of health professionals working with patients suffering from chronic illnesses;
- To collaborate on the development, testing and evaluation of advanced solutions for these groups;
- To facilitate the development of new products and partnerships between public, private and research sectors in both Japan and Denmark.

You can find us at [www.jdteletech.com](http://www.jdteletech.com) and read more about our events and accomplishments.

