

Coaching at Work

“Letter from Japan p18”

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Japanese culture has a bewildering array of rules, but its many gestures of respect could prove a powerful addition to coaching

WHEN HAI MEANS NO

MAREN DONATA URSCHEL



Japan will always hold a special place in my heart. I spent my honeymoon there this March and I'm completely and utterly fascinated by its culture and people. I'd like to share some of the stories that most intrigued me and which I found to be relevant to my coaching practice.

● **Respect can be shown visibly and invisibly to a person. In both cases it makes a positive difference**

In Japan, ticket clerks bow in front of all passengers when entering a carriage and to their backs before they leave. Likewise, sales assistants bow towards their customers – even to their backs. Why bow to people if they cannot see it? Constantly seeing gestures of respect towards others inspired me and made me feel respected too. How transformational could it be for an organisation's staff to show each other respect visibly and invisibly? How often do we show respect to our clients outside of sessions? What might the equivalent be of bowing?

● **Selflessly investing into human encounters**

When looking for a coffee shop we accidentally walked into a small family wholesale coffee business. The owner signalled to us that he didn't usually serve coffee, but nevertheless invited us for a coffee together. We drank the most delicious coffee accompanied by Japanese sweets and had a lovely 'conversation' without words.

Why did the owner treat two strangers he was unlikely to meet again with such kindness? I realised that he probably did receive something in return for his acts of kindness – he saw sheer delight on the faces of two strangers who were reminded of what it is like to be on the receiving end of kindness – and the openness to approach every new encounter freshly and selflessly.

● **Drawing strength from all those who make – and made – you into who you are today**

We witnessed a holiday towards the end of March in which Japanese people visit the tombs of their ancestors. Temples were packed with families reflecting on how they became who they are and on how they would not be here without their ancestors. In a recent training session on systemic coaching I experienced the power of drawing on the resources, skills and talents that come from the people who shaped us, and I thank the Japanese people for reminding me of the power of such a simple ritual.

● **Not taking words at face value; considering the cultural context**

In Japan the word 'no' is hardly ever used. People learn from an early age how to interpret the many 'yesses' they hear. For example, we were given a smoking room at a hotel in Osaka. I asked the concierge whether we could have a non-smoking room. I interpreted his 'Yes' as 'Yes, you can have a non-smoking room', yet despite several confirmations, he took no action. Instead, he looked uncomfortable, his shoulders were pulled up and his voice had become very quiet.

Suddenly, I remembered that Japanese people do not feel comfortable saying 'No.' My 'So you do not have a non-smoking room available?' resulted in a 'Yes' with a big smile from a man whose body language showed that he had gotten his dignity back. I had taken the concierge's words at face value and forgotten to interpret them in a cultural context.

I bow to the Japanese people. They have inspired me and I look forward to more learning when I return to this fascinating country. ■

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