Quick Tips for Effectively Navigating Meetings with Japanese Clients

❒ **Typically you will defer to using Japanese people's surname**. You can say "*May I call you XX-san* (pronounced "sun") such as "*May I call you Tanaka san*? They will tell you if you can call them by their first name but don't immediately jump to using their first name. You can of course start a conversation with "*how would you like me to refer to you? Is XX-san OK or do you prefer another way of saying your name*?" They will feel respected that you cared to ask them rather than be too familiar too soon in the relationship, by using their first name or assuming how you think they like to be called. Also let them know how to refer to you. "*You can call me Catherine*" is fine. Otherwise, they will most likely call you by your last name. For last names that are a little tricky, like my own surname, (!) they may start calling you "*Miss Catherine*" "or "*Mr. John*" so just make it easy by saying "*Please just call me Catherine (John). No need to add Mr.*"

❒ **Use short sentences to explain when speaking and speak slowly.** Speak at 40-50% of your usual speed and pause often. Try to give a summary first then the details. "*The overall answer to your question is XX. Let me now explain a bit more of the detail for you. Is that OK?*"

❒ **Expect Pauses and give time to answer.** Depending on how comfortable they are with English, and even if they are already quite comfortable with English, expect pauses from them after you have explained or asked a question while they are thinking and catching up with your words. Resist jumping in to fill the pause. Allow them time to answer. Just wait.

❒ **Ask questions to the group rather than individually.** Japanese people don't like being singled out or put on the spot. As you build your relationship and get to know them you can start asking them for their own opinion but at the first stages, asking both - "*XX and YY what do you think?*" "*XX YY how does your team approach this?*" – works better. Always be aware who is more senior as others will defer to them.

❒ **The answer "It's difficult" usually means "No".** "*That's difficult*" from a Japanese person doesn't usually mean literally that something is difficult. More often than not, it means "no" to what you have asked, but it is an indirect way of saying no. Japan is a very contextual society and this type of indirect expression is not uncommon. The same goes for the expression "*We'll think about it*" usually means they are not interested. There are exceptions when these phrases mean as they do in English but be aware that more often than not, they have a different meaning to when said in English.

❒ **If you are asking for approvals, then verify what their approval steps and timeline.** Often the decision maker is not in the meeting, and with a subsidiary of a Japan-based company, they will always need to discuss back with someone in HQ and revert to you later. Without asking them if they have approval authority, asking them to explain the approval steps will reveal who decides.

❒ **When writing emails, be careful to write short emails.** If the email is a long explanation, then break it up into an executive summary at the top and then bullet points of the details below. Explain that layout as it gives necessary signposts to what is coming and that will put the person at ease. "*I'll set out the executive summary and then explain the details.* That way they can capture the essence of your email without having to search for the points.

❒ **When presenting, pause and give time to catch up.** It's easy to get carried away with your pitch deck and presentation and forget to make sure your Japanese audience is following along with you. Start with an overall break down of what you will talk about. As with emails, this gives the necessary signposts to what is coming and will put the person at ease. If there is a key point to take away, mention it up front as an executive summary and then go into the details. My default is often like this: "*Today I will speak about XX. First, I'll set out the agenda topics and give you the main point. Then I will explain the details. After that we will have Q&A but as I don't mind being interrupted please ask questions at any time. I will also pause after each section for you to ask any questions then or for me to repeat/clarify anything I have talked about. Is this format OK for you?"*

❒ **Always share the agenda before a meeting, 3-5 days in advance**. Give them time to prepare and have any internal chats they need to have. Set out who is attending and their title, and who is speaking on which topic. If they must prepare anything then notify them of that. Japanese people almost always like to be given time to digest materials in advance and prepare so they show up mentally prepared so providing materials on the day is generally not good practice unless unavoidable.

❒ **Japanese generally like meeting minutes ("*gijiroku*").** Be sure to identify who will prepare the meeting minutes at the start of the meeting and then repeat it at the end when you do the list of homework items.

❒ **It is customary to follow up with a quick thank you note after a meeting.** Even if you said thank you on leaving the meeting it is good protocol to follow up with a quick written note thanking them for their hospitality. Here's a sample: "*It was a pleasure to meet you both today. We look forward to our next discussion. As discussed, we will prepare the minutes and send through to you/we look forward to receiving the minutes from you when they are ready*."

❒ **Be aware that there are certain seating positions for in person meetings:** If you are meeting in person, at their offices, usually they will seat on the side nearest the door and you will sit on the opposite side of the table. The most senior person typically sits in the middle if there are three people. It is always best to wait and be guided where to sit rather than just take a seat anywhere.

❒ **Exchange business cards at the beginning of the meeting.** The most senior person will usually be the person who starts off the round of business card exchanges and you can let the most senior in your group go first as well. Typically, business cards are not put away but are arranged in front of the person on the meeting table in the order of the seating arrangement across the table. It's good business etiquette to mirror that protocol. At the end of the meeting, you can collect these up when they collect up yours. Never write on a business card or stick it straight into your pocket or flick it over the meeting table. Always present with two hands with your name facing them as you pass your card. Electronic business cards, or QR codes are becoming popular but having a paper business card will never be wrong.