

# Group Mentality Versus Individualism in Japanese Society



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Group mentality is valued over individuality in Japanese society as it provides both benefits and protection to the individual and the Japanese system. In Western societies where individuality is highly valued, group mentality is seen as inimical to creativity and progress. It is commonly perceived as a constraining attitude, keeping people from expressing their feelings and thoughts. A famous Japanese proverb – “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down” – illustrates the concept that strong individuality might be more dangerous than group mentality as it may create divisions among people.

Working with a group in a company taught me the importance of group mentality in creating a better environment for everyone to understand the goals and objectives of the company, and to express one’s feelings and thoughts more easily. Working in a group not only makes you a good communicator, but also makes you think more consciously than impulsively, leading to a more positive and productive life. I would like to use my own experiences of overcoming the dilemma of balancing individuality and group mentality to suggest the importance and implications of the latter.

## My Working Experience

Since my graduation from university, I have been working for three months in a company handling office supplies. I have come to realize that the goals and objectives of a company can only be understood through working within a group. General goals and objectives can easily be understood as concepts, but incorporating them into day-to-day work can best be done when communicating with colleagues on-site.

Japanese civilization has a long history and in the development of social communication in the country a great emphasis has been laid on understanding the implicit rules of a group community, as well as the language used in the group in accordance with these rules. Thus group-oriented behavior has acquired a greater importance over individualism. The way individuals think and behave is mostly based on personal experience and the values that an individual might prioritize may often not match the aspirations or goals of a group. While working in a company we have to align our personal interests to the goals and objectives of our workplace. When seniors and colleagues teach us these implicit rules in a group, we start to

understand how we should behave in keeping consistency with the company’s goals and pursuing our own individual goals in the company. New knowledge and experience can be acquired through communicating with other people and that can also inspire in us a greater willingness to learn.

Here are three examples from my own experience in which I learned about the importance of communication in the company.

## Communication in a Group

Communicating and sharing what you understand and do not understand about the company with your seniors and colleagues as soon as possible is the key to creating a good environment at work. When I joined my company, I thought that it would be unnecessary to speak to my seniors about topics that are not related to work. This idea came to me from the thought that the office should not be a place to express myself and it made me feel a bit ill at ease about my workplace. In fact, I started to feel stressed about talking to my seniors about my work as well. After working for a month, I made a mistake on my given task, but the first thing that came to my mind was that I did not want my seniors to realize my mistake. I stayed silent until it started to affect my other work. After that I talked honestly to my seniors about my mistake and the problem was solved in a second. They advised me then to talk to them if I had any issues or problems emerging.

This incident made me realize that it is important to talk to my superiors about my work. It should be important to talk to your seniors honestly, and to share thoughts with them to create a better working environment for everyone. From that day onwards, I started to talk to my seniors more often about work and eventually about myself. They were very generous and always helped me improve my skills. This created a comfortable atmosphere in the office. Moreover, as time went by they started to sense my issues even without speaking to me but by reading my mind, and advised me how to respond to them, which helped me improve my efficiency as well as my skills. From this experience, I realized that it is always important to talk with one’s seniors about anything, as it can lead to better mutual understanding, stronger bonding, and efficiency through cooperation.

## Heart-to-Heart Communication Most Important

As many may know, in Japanese society people use different styles of “*keigo*” (polite language) to show consideration and respect to people who are older than them. When I started to work, I was not confident about using *keigo*, which frustrated me very much in communicating within the company. I felt I could not communicate smoothly with my seniors due to the different usage of *keigo* but at the same time thought that I was able to make myself understood somehow. However, one of my seniors told me that he could not understand what I was really trying to say. I was very shocked, but it made me realize for the first time that I was too conscious about trying to make myself seem like a very polite person, and failed to convey my exact meaning. From that day onwards, I concentrated on speaking more clearly about what I really wanted them to know. This made me realize that even if you forget to use polite words, others can feel the appreciation and respect you have for them through actions or the way you communicate. In other words, having respect at heart for others is important if you want a heart-to-heart communication.

## Communication at *Izakaya*

In sharing thoughts and creating a better understanding with your seniors, it is also important to listen and to know about your seniors as well as talking with them about yourself. An *Izakaya*, a Japanese-style pub, is a great place to share your thoughts more freely in an informal and relaxed gathering while drinking beer or sake. *Izakaya* are known as places to enjoy drinking and spontaneous conversation with your friends and colleagues to relieve stress from work. But young people today in Japan often say they do not want to join such gatherings or go out with their seniors to any other place to eat or drink. When I was looking for a job in my senior year at university, my fellow students usually asked in Q&A sessions with assessment officials about how often these informal gatherings are held in companies. Many young people looking for jobs are concerned about the role of such informal gatherings in a company’s social communication culture, and perhaps they are not confident about their communication skills at such gatherings. So some companies may now think that fewer such gatherings for drinks would be more effective in recruiting people.

However, I believe these gatherings are a great opportunity to gain new ideas and skills from your seniors. Whether you understand

them well or not, it could change the working environment and your degree of stress. You could feel more secure and concentrate more on your work, as well as gain insights from those who have more experience than you. It is a great opportunity to learn about people in the workplace and create better harmony with others, as well as a great opportunity to think about your future career and avoid making huge mistakes or wrong decisions.

## My Conclusion

When we start working, we realize how important it is to be friendly with our colleagues. I joined the company that was my first choice. However, after the training period, they posted me in a department which I was not expecting and to an office located in a rural area where I had no connections. I could not state my preference about the posting and had to comply with it. But after working there for a week, I began to think that starting my first career in a new location as a salesperson was a great opportunity for me to gain knowledge and skills. I realized that if we strengthen our ability to communicate, it will help us gain new points of view from others and find new perspectives on life and work.

The joy of life increases as awareness of ourselves and our surroundings increases, and we can achieve this only when we try to gain it consciously. Without communication with others, we will just drift in subjective thoughts and selfishness, and we will fail in life and in the workplace. If we stop insisting on our own views and are ready to be open to others’ thoughts, we can create a comfort zone within a group. Often, we would tend to stick to only one way, which may differ from the ways of our colleagues or seniors. But if we stop doing so, we may find a new understanding.

In most situations, living happily is based on communication. It is possible to say that group communication can be developed better in a society where group mentality is valued over individuality. In such a society, happiness or wealth can be achieved by being a part of a group. So I think it is possible to say that the valuing of group mentality over individuality in Japanese society provides both benefits and protection to the individual, and ultimately to the Japanese economic and social system.

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