
Visual communications – the Japanese experience

Michel Mestre

Alan Stainer

Lorice Stainer and

Bill Strom

The authors

Michel Mestre is Professor of Business and Economics, Trinity Western University, Canada.

Alan Stainer is Professor of Productivity and Performance Management and Head of Engineering Management, Middlesex University Business School, UK.

Lorice Stainer is a Business Ethics Consultant and Visiting Fellow, Leicester University Management Centre, UK.

Bill Strom is Professor of Communications, Trinity Western University, Canada.

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Abstract

Visual communications are defined and illustrated in their contemporary operations management setting. They manifest four distinct advantages: assimilation, exposure, evoking and unifying. In Japan, they are related to underlying inherent values and ensure employee involvement. The Japanese experience itself, with its consequent relative success in the field of visual communications, is both investigated and analysed as to type, functions and associated purposes. Visual communications are perceived as galvanising into company plans. Their potential and transferability to Western corporate cultures are explored with a view to their power to deliver information through the hierarchical organisational structure. The underlying thrust is towards achieving continuous improvement in communication, the impact of which would provide a better quality of work life for the employee and improve performance.

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Introduction

The main features of Japanese management, according to Stainer (1995), are its philosophy, which is culturally inherent, its major concept, which is continuous improvement, its focus, which relates to quality and satisfaction, its target setting, which is top management oriented, as well as its technological approach, which is allied to long-term investment. He cites Takeo Fujisawa, co-founder of Honda Motors, as stating that Japanese and Western management systems are 95 per cent the same yet differ in all important respects – especially in communication. In fact, Ouchi (1981) believes that it is not technology that accounts for Japan's success, but that it is the Japanese corporation's special way of managing employees, by involving them in every phase of corporate life, that is the vital key to increased productivity and improved quality of work life – this view still holds true today.

Every organisation can only exist through the inputs of individuals, that is to work with and through people. As such, interdependence requires both trust and open communication. In this respect, the complexities of communication can be considered both as requiring technology and the art of leadership. It is essential to achieve effective basic management processes and continually enhance performance. As far as Parker (1998) is concerned, information is becoming a critical factor of production. It is a known fact that people talk without speaking, hear without listening and write with vulnerability of intended meaning, but communicating is the ability to encapsulate, often quite complicated issues, in simple and effortless ways which can be readily understood. Communication, though intricate, should be made simple and clear as, if deficient, it can prove costly economically and socially. According to Bradford and Cohen (1997), most managers are reluctant to comment on ineffective or inappropriate interpersonal behaviour in relation to communication. Schermerhorn (1999) points out that communication should be both effective and efficient: effectiveness means that the intended message of the sender and the interpreted meaning of the receiver are identical and efficiency means to minimise resources expended to deliver that message. Visual communications would seem to provide both these attributes.

Time pressures as well as formalistic and impersonal approaches are frequently perceived as major obstacles to effectual communication. In the pursuit of total organisational excellence and achieving world-class performance, Oakland (1999) believes that people's attitudes and behaviour can be influenced by communication and that the essence of changing these is to gain acceptance through outstanding communication processes. After all, communication means getting the desired results. Stainer and Stainer (1997) purport that the ability to communicate is at the core of all shared endeavours and thus should be comprehensive and transparent. Mann (1998) suggests that the most important action top management can take to improve the quality of work life for those who work for them is to improve communication and consultation both upwards and downwards. In a world of global competition, it is imperative for businesses to integrate the effort of their employees, develop congruent goals and motivate their entire workforce. These imperatives are all the more daunting in the face of cultural values such as individualism, independence and, in some cases, counter-purposes of employees and management.

Whilst some may ignore the need to develop a corporate ethos, others recognise its importance. Japanese corporate practices are such an example where, particularly, the visual process is involved in securing and maintaining corporate identity and is an integral part of the management process. Practices like these are not limited to such cultures. One would be hard pressed to find a scout group without a highly decorated meeting place, established rituals and badge-enriched uniforms. Similarly, one cannot find a football team that sports no insignia, mascot or colours. In contrast, it is not difficult to envisage the drab workplace environment of a typical office or factory. Except for the company logo, which sits prominently on the front lawn, and artefacts which can be found in reception areas, few other visual cues convey anything about the company or the individuals working in it. Most Western corporations generally underestimate the impact and effectiveness of visual communication forms. Such is not the case in Japan where signs, banners, buttons, name tags, charts, information boards, insignias, colour schemes and even architectural

features affirm a different way of communication. Whilst their approach may be perceived by some as new or simply true of the Japanese, their universality extends to ancient times and peoples, such as the cave-men and the Egyptians. Indeed, Greif (1991) states that the ancient invention of graphic representation is spreading through the factories of the world like a trail of gunpowder.

Visual communications in context

Greif (1991) argues that visual communications, fundamentally an expression of visibility, are developing to the extent that, within a few years, people who visit factories that lack the visual message may feel that they are entering facilities darker than others. Rather than prescribe the imposition of visual communications – sometimes termed as “visual control” – on an unsuspecting workforce, their benefits should be perceived in terms of reinforcing existing values. They provide a tool to focus individuals around joint purposes, reinforce existing practices and provide a context in which people operate. They are also the practice of world-class organisations for conveying important corporate messages and are an integral part of the management process.

In the broadest sense, visual communications relate to the process by which corporate messages are created and conveyed through visual means. Whilst they include verbal material, such as words, whether printed or electronically presented, they primarily comprise non-verbal or non-linguistic images and practices. Oakland (1999) shows that it is estimated that the five senses contribute to the learning process:

- (1) sight (visible) 75 per cent;
- (2) hearing (audible) 13 per cent;
- (3) feeling (tactile) 6 per cent;
- (4) smell (olfactory) 3 per cent; and
- (5) taste (gustatory) 3 per cent.

This underlines the power of visual communications in both delivery and receipt of information. Therefore, it can be argued that visual messages are much better than words at capturing and conveying contextual as well as emotional meanings. In fact, the design of the workplace is also a major tool in visual communications. An open work space, free from partitions or private offices, enhances

team identity and a sense of unity. Profer (1998) quotes a recent survey by the American Society of Interior Designers which shows that the top design factor that boosts productivity is employees' access to each other. Such findings relate that office design is a key factor to improved productivity and, hence, overall corporate performance.

Visual communications should be used liberally. They can be adorned with, at least, four fundamental adjectives:

- (1) universal;
- (2) meaning-rich;
- (3) subliminal; and
- (4) accessible.

They are universal and meaning-rich in that they portray the same image and, therefore, the same message is conveyed to all and they are subliminal because the message is readily accessible to all. They are ever-present without being interruptive or intrusive and certainly nurture over time. Greif (1991) illustrates the power of displayed information, shifting the decision-making process from supervisors to the employees directly involved; they, in turn, would figure out what to do. The value for shared information at every level of the organisation is implicit: a visitor to a factory may conclude that the organisation cares for the safety of its workers; they, in turn, are reminded to operate safely; and managers recognise the need for continual diligence. An important aspect is that, with such open communication, the overall expectation when employees complete their quota of work is to stay and help others towards achieving the group's goal; such empowerment ensures that tasks are completed. Thus, it should be remembered that visual communications manifest four distinct advantages:

- (1) *Assimilation* – this is made easier because clear and creative imagery, graphs or slogans require little brainpower to understand and act upon *vis-à-vis* verbal data.
- (2) *Exposure* – this reinforces themes; the “mere exposure effect”, according to Matlin (1992), is the tendency for receivers of stimulus to like something more or find it less distasteful after repeated exposure.
- (3) *Evoking* – this triggers emotions and responses, resulting in motivation and

commitment, from the heart of the matter to the heart of the worker.

- (4) *Unifying* – this ensures that members of the organisation, through accessibility of knowledge and information, know what they are about and where they are heading.

Swann and Miller (1982) and, later, Fredrickson and Kahneman (1993), maintain that individuals are more likely to remember pictures and picture-evoking words than abstract concepts; consequently, they would remember better the message being relayed. Miikkulainen and Sirosh (1995) explain this principle by suggesting that visual communications directly affect the interconnections between neurons in the visual cortex of the brain; the more often the message is looked at, the more profound the relay of the content. Argyris (1993) believes that it is important to recycle the underlying organisational values, especially when implementing change (Table I).

For example, regarding the issue risk taking, the organisation should encourage employees to query rather than just conform to existing operations. Similar to the continuous improvement (*kaizen*) philosophy, the values should put a premium on improving existing operations. In other words, the focus should relate to future requirements rather than be satisfied with past levels of performance. As, in the norm, changes affect more than one area, the different people potentially affected should be able to provide inputs and share their concerns in an open environment which is free of negative reactions. Thus, the process of change would foster exchange of ideas. The use of visual information involves process dynamics in a proactive way as many techniques embody a visual element. For

Table I Comparison of underlying values

Issue	Existing conditions	Desired need
Risk taking	Conformity	Query
View of existing operations	Status quo	Transformation
Basis for accountability	Past performance	Future requirements
Level of interaction	Individual	Community
Forum for change	Secrecy	Openness
Process of change	Privacy	Exchange of ideas

instance, it is hard to think about quality control and quality circles without utilising such visual aids as control charts and story boards. Also, a major component of ergonomics relates to using visual information processes. The necessary strength is the ability to draw, such as flow diagrams; once these are put down on paper, the procedures are observed to ascertain how systems work and what further steps need to be taken. This creates a “spaghetti” chart, the main purpose of which is to reflect the waste in motion and to challenge individuals to seek alternative modes of operation.

Visual communications in Japan

What are the secrets of the Japanese approach to visual communications? Ruch (1984) notes that Japanese corporations communicate both upwards and downwards through the hierarchy. Upward communication occurs by way of personal contact, meetings, *ringi* (group decision), voluntary reporting systems, suggestion schemes, joint councils, *habatsu* (small social groupings) and quality circles. In addition to interpersonal contact, downward communication tends to be more mediated through such vehicles as magazines, newsletters, newspapers and information boards, the latter being less popular in the West. When investigating Japanese corporations, Mestre and Strom (1998) categorise visual communications into four distinct types, with their associated purposes (Table II).

Table II Visual communication types and associated purposes

Visual communications types	Associated purposes
Workplace artefacts	to develop group identity, as well as inform, motivate and remind
Personal artefacts	to signify personal association and commitment
Proxemic cues	to convey lines of authority and demarcate territorial boundaries
Personal and corporate rituals	to regulate internal dynamics, establish group solidarity and provide social support

- (1) *Workplace artefacts* include such objects as pictorial, graphical and colour-based signs, story boards, flip charts, banners, television monitors, posters, billboards, information boards, murals and cartoon-filled manuals. These perform a host of functions, including forming group identity, informing and motivating employees towards achievement of goals as well reminding them of corporate values and safety guidelines.
- (2) *Personal artefacts* include uniforms, arm bands, buttons, lapel pins, protective eye wear, caps, jackets, jewellery and other features appertaining to clothing and personal appearance such as items which reflect the individual contribution or attributes like employee photographs and certificates of competency. These perform many of the same functions as workplace artefacts as well as confirming employee role, status and recognition by superiors.
- (3) *Proxemic cues*, or the use of space to communicate, include the layout of the company’s external grounds, such as roads, buildings and their design, as well as arrangement of furniture, especially in offices, meeting rooms, reception areas and lounges. These function particularly as visual reminders of authority – who sits where? Which building is centrally located? Where do paths lead? They also distinguish territorial demarcation, role clarification and group/unit identity.
- (4) *Personal and corporate rituals* are habitual individual behaviours such as eye contact, facial expression, eating, drinking, smoking, and group activities such as corporate meetings, problem-solving sessions and group meals/leisure activities off-site for employees and families. These are deemed visual because the individuals are observed by others; they serve the objective of conveying social support and solidarity.

These types of communication are employed not only for their own merit but also in conjunction with each other as well as with diverse additional activities taking place within the organisation. In Japanese industry, Fukuyama (1995) displays visual facets to highlight the importance of using various avenues in order to effectively communicate the company’s plan (Table III).

Table III Visual communication tools to implement the company plan

General communications	Employee participation	Evaluation tools
Public announcement news	Idea contests and suggestions	Evaluation and action plan
Poster	Company plan time – one hour once a month	Top management involvement
Slogans	Benchmark other locations	Scorecard
Personal identity and association	Time shots and recording progress	Recognition and awards

As it can be seen, the process of communication should be multidimensional and integrated. For example, there may be a picture board in a glass factory that depicts an individual working in the plant, followed by two possible scenarios: the first shows the individual lying on a stretcher in hospital and the second enjoying a family outing in the park. The conclusion is obvious: safety in the workplace leads to a happy family life. Such a board is often designed by the employees themselves for the benefit of visitors. However, the lesson taught is also caught; employees are in no doubt to become more mindful of safety precautions. The “Business Manner Passport” is another illustration, which employees receive when hired by a major manufacturer in Japan. The pocket-sized easy-reference booklet charts over 100 pages of dress codes, bow codes, seating arrangements for dinner or limousine service, tea service instructions and posture suggestions, among other manners. Of note, the “Passport” consists largely of cartoon figures in various states of social stress or peace, depending on whether or not they adhere to corporate codes. This is exemplified through two pictures in relation to meeting a visitor: one shows the employee who is unable to locate his business card sweating nervously as the visitor promptly offers his own, and the other reflects the calm of the prepared employee who locates and exchanges cards appropriately. Instructional pictures found in Japanese employee handbooks are invaluable and “worth a thousand words”. This is because they capture the ideas of rank, respect, embarrassment and other intangible, yet crucial, factors for smooth interaction and role expectation.

In Japan, visual communications seem to work well, mainly due to the prevailing culture; however, similar practices are found,

for example, in the USA (Saturn) and France (Renault), which suggest that whilst visual communication practices may vary from country to country, the principles are global. While these need to be contextualised, even between organisations within the same culture, they can be applied in a variety of cultures with success. Hence, in the Japanese context, the seven functions performed by visual communications are identified (Table IV):

- (1) *To signal group membership* – it is particularly important that each individual knows a person’s group membership, hence also ascertaining rank; this provides the key to choosing the appropriate honorific terms. For instance, subordinates are required to bow deeper and longer as well as maintain less frequent eye contact than superiors. Especially in the business world, calling cards are commonplace and so are uniforms; this is because they signal an individual’s profession.
- (2) *To acquaint members with corporate vision and culture* – what Western managers might call orientation or even propagandisation, the Japanese corporate head would call *kokorogamae*, the conditioning of the heart: *kokoro* (heart) the seat of one’s attitudes, values and emotions and *gamae* (position, positioning) the sense of readiness for any eventuality, be it responding to requests from superiors or to demands of market fluctuations. The “conditioning of the heart”, combined with orientation procedures, train new employees into the company’s desired behaviour. All new employees are hired at the same time, on 1 April, and are exposed to corporate values and philosophy in a systematic manner, participating in group activities and mingling at the same social events. According to Mestre *et al.* (1997), this should not be underestimated as the bonds established at that period become the foundation lasting throughout the employee’s career.
- (3) *To maintain corporate vision – kokorogamae* is ever present. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) make a distinction between knowledge and information whereby the latter is mere data and the former is power. They believe that, first, knowledge is about beliefs and commitment; second, it relates to a function of a particular

Table IV Visual communications' functions and their definitions

Visual communications' functions	Definition of function
(1) To signal group membership	Defining the uniqueness and differences of a company from others, demarcating sub-groups within a company from other sub-groups, as well as answering the question "who are we?"
(2) To acquaint members with corporate vision and culture	Developing a unified mental model of values, beliefs, emotional attachments and goals, as well as answering the question "why are we here?"
(3) To maintain corporate vision	Performing the ongoing role of informing, reminding, affirming and motivating corporate members of their identity, purposes and values, as well as answering the question "why should we keep being and doing as we are?"
(4) To alert members to changes in the work environment	Informing corporate members of changes in job requirements, market fluctuations, staffing and production goals, as well as answering the question "what requires our attention to be successful?"
(5) To manage human relations	Assisting in managing complex people and groups by providing the appropriate flair or subtlety in pre-conflict and conflict situations as well as answering the question "how can we get along?"
(6) To provide avenues for expression	Allowing every sector of the corporation, from top to bottom, the opportunity to express emotions and visions, involving employees wherever possible, as well as answering the question "how do we feel?"
(7) To transform the corporate paradigm	Assisting in making the quantum leap to think or do business in radically different ways as well as answering the question "how do we get from here to there?"

stance or intention, and, unlike information, is about action veering "to some end"; and, third, like information, it is about meaning, being context-specific and relational. In strategic terms, they also advocate that visual

communications do not lead to an information glut – though a *laissez-faire* attitude may well result in a collage of dated memos that pollute walls and halls – and aid both employees and clients to come to a shared mental model of the corporation.

- (4) *To alert members to changes in the work environment* – in a sense, visual communications are the environment of the organisation. As such, they are adept at conveying expectations from employees, which might be regarded as abstract wishes of a manager. Changes to these also alert people to new demands as well as procedures. For example, in the workplace, forms of presentation should be selected to suit each situation with continual revised information being posted for easy reference.
- (5) *To manage human relations* – visual communications, possibly an expression of the employees who created them, are a passive reminder used in a corporation – primarily to evade loss of face. Especially on a daily basis, they play an important role in that they respect the Japanese preference, as purported by Ting-Toomey *et al.* (1991), for non-confrontational approaches when conflicting with management.
- (6) *To provide avenues for expression* – the Japanese are generally perceived as reserved and formal people. The issue of *shusin koyo* (lifetime employment) inevitably leads to strong personal bonds and emotional sharing, and visual communication, according to Strom (1998), is a vehicle for these emotions. Van Willegen and Stoffle (1986), in comparing management styles between the Japanese and the Americans, state that the latter is *dorai* (dry), with low levels of emotional attachment between workers and organisation, whilst the former is more *uetto* (wet) with a high degree of emotion.
- (7) *To transform the corporate paradigm* – imposing new corporate visions on an unsuspecting workforce may lead to cynicism and resentment. If employees are given the opportunity to make inputs to new paradigms, then the visual expression of that vision by "wise" management becomes the confirming seal on new sentiments and motivations. Rather than take radical decisions which

may be buried in lengthy reports, the organisation would be advised to use visual communications to symbolise and convey those decisions.

Competence in visual communications goes beyond the content of the message being displayed, the medium used and the behaviour evidenced, the latter being claimed as the context. Instead of tackling issues in an office or at a conference, the Japanese conduct their business on the factory floor, graphically sketching out on large sheets of paper the specifics of the process under scrutiny. All associated, whether directly or remotely, can provide inputs, listen in, interject, agree or disagree and, hence, different perceptions and viewpoints provide valuable insights as to sources of problems, counter-productive practices, and so on. Everyone's participation is highly valued and, consequently, the ultimate benefits are much broader and enhanced. Consistency between each and all is an important element in the successful implementation of a policy or change. Each employee needs to adapt to the work environment conditions, and the changes thereof. Though it may seem simple and obvious, graphic identification and demonstration actually improve circumstances. A potent visual tool is the "*kaizen* newspaper", different in that it is written by the employees on the factory floor; it is unconventional, multidirectional and meets the needs of both day-to-day operations and strategic management. If and when a problem arises, the employee writes the situation on a flip chart which is located in the team's area and is available for all to see. Hence, plans of action are established, providing the name of the responsible individual as well as the completion date. Such a philosophy engenders commitment and personal enthusiasm, both founded on visual communications.

Conclusion

Communication is an unresolved phenomenon and, to improve it, continues to be a major age-old need which is widespread and frequently unrecognised. Hussey (1998) states that the modern company has a vital need to communicate and some do so in a less focused way. Therefore, communication should be used not only to relate accurate

information but also to enhance personal relationships, thus creating a climate of trust and openness. Management should facilitate communication in order to improve motivation, the impact of which, inevitably, will also enhance the overall productivity and performance.

The management of human resources seems to be at the acme of organisational issues in order to maintain a competitive advantage. According to Leahey (1993), quality products and services depend upon the communication between members of the producing unit, capturing their individual capabilities. He believes that to educate, instruct and motivate employees, organisations must concentrate on "quality" communication, setting effective strategies to that end. Moseley (1996) advocates that a business performance cycle can only be conceived and developed by engendering a dialogue, which evolves into the focal strategic point and crosses the organisational divide. In other words, as demonstrated by the Japanese, communication can be the essential lubricant required for business success.

Whatever type of business, visual communications have demonstrated their effectiveness at the local, national and global levels. In the West, they have been under-utilised whilst their prevalence in Japan might reflect particular Eastern values and culture. However, their transfer and adaptation may not be assumed as beyond the scope of Western organisations. Nelson and Coxhead (1997) debate that efficacious internal communication is fundamental to create change but is often overlooked. In reality, what is required is a stronger sense of affiliation for employees to work in unison. Management devotes an overwhelming proportion of time to communication activities, often missing its targets. In the West, in order to overcome poor communication, it would seem beneficial to combine visual communications with other methods, striking the right balance. This is because, although the visual communication ingredient reduces the volume of information as well as stress and conflict by overcoming language barriers and eliminating noise, it should not be perceived as trivialising.

In business today, nobody has all the answers. The way forward, according to Kepner (1998), is to tap the thinking skills of the team. Meaningful communication is an

asset to be shared. Varey (1998) points out that it has never been easier to communicate but, without competence in communication skills, people will be as effective as the denizens of the Tower of Babel. As Schermerhorn (1999) pleads, when in doubt, communicate, emphasising visibility. The advantage of the visual impact, as the Japanese have demonstrated, is that “it goes without saying”. The underlying thrust, therefore, is towards achieving continuous improvement in communication, the impact of which would provide a better quality of work life for the employee and hence enhance performance. That would be the challenge for contemporary operations management.

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