**Interview with Mr. Koichi Iwasawa**

**December 15, 2024**

**1. Introduction to Mr. Koichi Iwasawa**

After working at the TBS Washington branch, Mr. Iwasawa served as a public relations and cultural attaché at the Embassy of Japan in Syria, a field officer in charge of the Western Equatoria State for the International Committee of the Red Cross in South Sudan, and as a director of public relations at the Japan Institute of International Affairs. After working in multiple languages ​​in the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, he gained experience in documentary production and videography, and is a communications expert with experience in digital and global PR at domestic and foreign firms (in the United States and Sweden).

Mr. Iwasawa holds a Certificate in “AI Essentials for Business” from Harvard Business School Online, a master's degree in international peace and conflict resolution from American University and a master's degree in journalism from Waseda University. He is a licensed guide-interpreter as well as a PR planner (PRSJ certified). He works in Japanese, English and French, and has conducted numerous seminars and training sessions nationwide.

Mr. Iwasawa is the Director of the Japan Society for Corporate Communication Studies and the Vice-Chair of the IPRN Asia-Pacific region. He is a visiting lecturer at Hirosaki University (teaching “Fundamentals of Media and Public Relations”) and a Visiting lecturer at the Professional University of Information and Management for Innovation (teaching “Multicultural Understanding”). He is a researcher at B Lab. Mr. Iwasawa is a supervisor for the Tokyo International Film Festival. He is an entrepreneur, working on revitalizing the local community in Atsuma-cho, Hokkaido. In addition, he is a PR advisor for Daito city, in Osaka Prefecture, for the Tokyo Session of the [Hiroshima Business Forum for Global Peace](https://events.nikkei.co.jp/72480/), and for Meltwater. Mr. Iwasawa is a mentor for Sci-Fi Prototyping Design (SFP Design). Moreover, he is a public relations strategy advisor for Kagoshima Prefecture, a public relations strategy formulation advisor for Iga - “Ninja City” - in Mie Prefecture. Formerly, he served as a public relations advisor for Fujisawa, in Kanagawa Prefecture, among other positions. He is a member of the Japan Association for Corporate Communication Studies, the Japan Association for Media, Journalism and Communication Studies, the Peace Studies Association of Japan, the Communication Association of Japan, and SIETAR Japan. He also serves as the chair of the research group on armed conflict, of the Japan Society for Corporate Communication Studies. Mr. Iwasawa is the chair of the research project on communication using science fiction. He is a member of the 7th Genron Science Fiction Writers’ Workshop.

**Hofmeyr:** Prior to your international experience, did you spend any time abroad? For instance, did you travel or study abroad during your school and/or university years?

**Iwasawa:** The first time I was on a plane was when I left Japan to enter graduate school after graduating from university. So I had absolutely no experience. Of course, I studied English before going to the US and got approval to study at a graduate school. I spoke English at an English conversation school and listened to English news. But I had never actually traveled abroad. I think it’s not common, but rather a rare case.

**2. In broad terms, how much time have you spent working with Japanese organizations and with international organizations?**

**Iwasawa:** As for international work, I worked at the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) Washington branch for 1.5 years, and at the same atime, at Nonviolence International (Washington DC office) for 6 months. I spent 6 months at the Tokyo office of the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), 2 months at the Egypt office of JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), 2 years at the Japanese Embassy in Syria, and 1 year with the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) South Sudan delegation. I also worked at an American PR company for 1 year, and at a Swedish PR company for 4 years and 4 months, totalling 11 years. In addition, I have been involved in international work for my own company (KMI) for about 5 years, so it adds up to 16 years in total. I worked at a Japanese PR company for 1 year doing non-international work and as a freelance journalist for 1 year, so if you add it all up, it amounts to 18 years.

**3. Throughout your career, you have worked closely with businesses both in Japan and abroad. Could you tell me about any similarities or differences you noticed in team dynamics?**

**Iwasawa:** As to guidelines regarding cultural differences, I think my experiences match the results discussed by Hofstede and in Erin Meyer’s Culture Map. Of course, there are individual differences.

I think that tribal differences had a greater impact on team dynamics than cultural differences. For example, in Syria, Palestinians, Kurds, Lebanese, Syrians (from a clan that has lived in Syria for a long time), and so on, all have different positions. In South Sudan, Acholi, Nuer, Kikuyu, Dinka, and other tribes can often be distinguished by physical characteristics and markings (such as scars made for ritual purposes), and various differences arise within organizations, including the positions held.

In addition, among cultural differences, differences in corporate culture and environment have a great impact on team dynamics. For example, in IT companies in Silicon Valley, when an agenda item first came up during a meeting, in addition to discussion, there were many cases when a decision had to be made on the spot. On the Japanese side, it was often difficult for the person in charge to make a decision there and then, which complicated things. When I worked with a Middle Eastern NPO, even though we had a contract, the other party often acted in ways that did not comply with various agreements. The pattern was to insist on what was more convenient to them and explain that “there is nothing we can do”, which was problematic for the Japanese side.

About 13 years ago, someone from Russia worshipped Putin. It may be a difference in beliefs rather than a cultural difference, but a leader needs to bring a team together while taking into account the particulars of various individuals. It is challenging for a leader to create synergy in cross-cultural, multi-tribal teams. If you look at international politics or the United Nations, you can see how hard it is.

**4. What strategies have you used for effective communication in international teams?**

**Iwasawa:** This is very different between an international team with foreign nationals in an organization where Japanese culture is dominant, being based in Japan (Tokyo), and an organization where Japanese culture is not dominant. Naturally, the former is easier to manage.

To begin with, regarding the first scenario, it is important to address colleagues with the honorific “san”. For example, it is commonplace in many organizations for Japanese people to address each other with the honorific “san” regardless of age, gender, or position. Even if the language used was not Japanese, it was often effective in building good relationships not to call someone by their given name, and to use the honorific “san”, as Japanese people would when addressing other Japanese people. Of course, this is not the case when foreign nationals request to be called by their given name. Also, mixing Japanese from time to time into English conversations, or English into Japanese conversations, often helps with understanding. People who are bilingual (and I think the same is true for people who speak three or more languages) naturally compare and refer to the meaning (distance, etc.) between two languages ​​for understanding. So, if you explain the same thing using two words in different languages, not just one, it is much easier to understand the distance in meaning (if there is one or not). This is a trick.

On the other hand, I think there are some things that Japanese people should be particularly careful about in organizations where Japanese culture is not dominant. In particular, in an organization that prefers American-style, direct, context-free communication, I feel that Japanese people tend to use indirect and context-dependent communication, and that it is necessary to be open and seek the understanding of those around them not only in public situations but also in private (such as during time off). Otherwise, they will remain an eerie presence (although this varies greatly from person to person). Also, there are many different organizations, so while there are some places where you can continue to assert your own culture, there are also other places where it is better to lean towards the dominant culture in that organization. However, although it may sound harsh, I think it is true that the more fluent you are in English, the more effective your communication in English will be, regardless of cultural differences.

**Hofmeyr:** You have talked about communication in English and how improving language skills improves the communication flow. Did you ever had to work in a foreign language other than English? And if so, how was that experience?

**Iwasawa:** When I was in Egypt and Syria, I spoke basic Arabic, and when I worked for the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland), I read, wrote, and sometimes spoke French. Since my Congolese business partners did not understand English, French proved to be a useful language. Contrary to communicating in English, I think that using these other languages ​​(the main language of the country I was posted to or the organization I belonged to) helped me to gain the respect and trust of my colleagues and business partners. Conversely, when it comes to English, it is taken for granted that you have a high level of proficiency, and I got the impression that when you use it as a second language, and leaving aside native speakers, it may be difficult to gain respect and trust if your English skills are lacking. And I think it actually makes a big difference in your ability to negotiate (not only outside the organization but also within it).

**5. Can you think of any examples of very successful communication experiences in an international or intercultural environment?**

**Iwasawa:** When communication goes well, both people are relaxed. Communication goes well because both people are relaxed. It’s like the chicken and the egg, but it’s true. When you use a language that is not your native language or that you are not fluent in, it inevitably creates tension. I think this is an obstacle to comfortable communication. It can’t be helped, but there are times when we can have a very relaxed conversation. Communication goes very well, for example, over a quiet drink, when work is winding down, or when we appreciate each other.

For example, after we completed a big project in South Sudan, we all sat around a TV in the dim light and ate our fill of mangoes (wild mango trees are everywhere in South Sudan), and we were able to have very close, friendly communication.

**6. Have you faced any challenges working with and leading diverse national and international teams?**

**Iwasawa:** When I was in South Sudan, I led a local team of about 20 people. One day, at a meeting after lunch, a female assistant suddenly started giving a speech about all the things she could think of that she thought were wrong with me. It went on for about 10 minutes. A female staff member who had come from Japan for training was also there. I calmed her down in English without arguing, and continued working, but when I asked her later, “Why did you suddenly do that?”, I didn’t really understand the reason.

Another time, when the team ran into difficulties, the local staff who I had been on good terms with until suddenly said, “It's all Koichi’s (my) fault, isn’t it? That’s the end of the story.” I still don’t understand what kind of cultural differences caused this.

However, in my analysis of the situation, first of all, in South Sudan, even if I as a Japanese was in a leadership position, I think it is possible that I may have been perceived as being at the bottom of the local hierarchy. What I mean is, it is normal for a white person from Europe who is fluent in English to be the boss (this is often the case in international cooperation sites in Africa), and for the people of their own country to be in a subordinate position and receive support. I think it must have been very strange for them to be in a situation where a Japanese person who is less fluent in English than Europeans, who is not white in appearance, and who has no work experience in the local area was in a top position. For those who feel that they are usually subject to class discrimination, wouldn’t it cause an extreme reaction if someone who they perceive as being in a lower position is in fact in a higher position?

In addition, I think that the scars left on people’s minds by armed conflicts make them more likely to display aggressive and violent behaviour. I think that these are cases where serious historical and social issues emerge, rather than issues due to cultural differences. In the past, many tragic events occurred between missionaries from Europe and the colonies. I think the same is true today.

**7. Did you face any challenges returning to Japan after spending significant time abroad?**

**Iwasawa:** I haven’t really experienced many problems since returning to Japan. Rather, I felt nostalgic about the reality of Japan, and I can appreciate it more objectively than before, which makes me feel happier. Maybe it’s because Japan is a country blessed in many ways (or so I feel).

**8. What kind of competencies do you think are necessary for students who are considering living and working across cultures in the future?**

**Iwasawa:** I teach a class on “multicultural understanding” at undergraduate level, but I only teach one or two classes myself. The rest of the time, I invite Japanese and foreign people who are active in various industries as guest speakers to explain their careers and expertise from the perspective of multicultural understanding. In this field, there are certainly guiding materials such as culture maps, but I think it is important to look at various differences, such as individual differences, social differences, language differences, gender differences, and job position differences, in a complex and comprehensive manner.

There are various differences, and those differences may manifest all the time or only at one point in time. But we must consider both individual differences and commonalities to achieve goals and objectives to the maximum extent possible as a team and as an organization with limited resources (people, goods, time, money, information, etc.). Striving to sustain optimal growth is the mission given to each individual, and I believe that the knowledge, experience, and skills required to achieve this are the competencies we need.

**9. Can you think of any strategies that you have acquired through your experiences that can help prepare students in Japan for future careers in journalism and PR?**

**Iwasawa:** Both the expressive activities of journalists and writers, who embody journalism, and PR activities are work related to communication.

My area of expertise is communication, and my motto is “fun, playful, and moderate.” Communication with humor is appreciated wherever you go. Also, communication without playfulness is exhausting. And absolute, constant, perfect communication is also exhausting, and you tend to end up pushing extreme conclusions on the other party. So, I think it’s important to be moderate rather than extreme.

As for the key to effective communication, I think it’s good to aim for “communication that spreads empathy, is accurate, and is surprising.” I think it’s important not to forget to be empathetic, not only with reason but also with feelings. In other words, the key to reaching an agreement is understanding, empathy, and practicality. The idea of ​​non-violence should be used as a reference.

Also, asking what is right not only for yourself but also for your team, organization, society, and the world is something that is relevant to journalism, but also that I think is important for good communication.

Finally, I want to mention not only the past and the present, but also the future. I think it’s important to have a “sense of wonder” like that seen in sci-fi, where reality suddenly changes, and the future suddenly appears bright.

It is important for journalists and PR professionals to be aware that they are sending and receiving information in units of “messages” rather than in units of data, information, knowledge, etc. A message is a mixture of various values ​​and considerations, as I mentioned above, that elicits action from people and calls for changes in attitudes and behaviors.

These are the reasons why I named my company “Key Message International (KMI)”.