

Melanie Brock

The leadership conversation John Eales

Melanie Brock has her own consulting company, Melanie Brock Advisory. Her clients include Crown Resorts Limited and John Wylie's business, Tanarra. She is Chair Emeritus of the Australian and New Zealand Chamber of Commerce in Japan following more than six years as chair.

Brock is based in Japan, where she has worked as a consultant across corporate, political and diplomatic sectors. I wanted to interview her to gain an insight into the way Australians do business, and don't do business, with and in Japan. It has been one of our major trading partners for generations, yet while our trade continues to grow, we seem to be focusing more on China. Australians also tend to look at Asia as one region rather than as a collective of separate countries, each requiring a subtle cultural sensibility. Here Brock gives her view on what it takes to lead in a different culture with different practices.

How long have you been in Japan?

I first went in 1982, when I was 17, and I'm now 53, but I've spent about 25 years there during that period. I had absolutely no Japanese language to start with. I pushed myself really hard, [and] I did my bachelor in Japanese and my masters in Japanese, so I've done six years of formal Japanese language studies.

What made you go over there?

I actually didn't want to go. My family had always had Rotary exchange students and I begged Dad to let me go from about 12. They said next year, next year, next year. I was really keen to travel. Finally, I was 16 and Dad said you're up, you can apply. Japan just never even featured for me; I literally never thought of it until a letter arrived and it said you've been chosen to go to Japan, and I was actually devastated. I burst into tears and I couldn't believe it. Now I can't imagine not being part of Japan.

So tell us what you're doing now.

I work with Australian companies looking to base themselves or gain traction with their businesses in Japan. I also help some Japanese companies looking outward, and a lot of that's been happening in recent times with M&A investment by Japanese companies. I think I probably just put people together. And I've managed, thanks to a lot of support from some very kind Japanese, to find myself with a great bunch of Japanese business people who teach me a lot about what their requirements are. I've been very lucky to meet a lot of Japanese politicians, and that gives me another sense of where Japan is and what it wants to be.

What have you been doing with Crown in Japan?

Japan's looking to create better infrastructure for tourists and so there is a piece of legislation to allow for integrated resorts to be developed. My role with Crown is to gain a sense of how that might happen and when, and to report back. I also work for AIG in Japan and that role is quite interesting. It's guiding them for the Rugby World Cup as they are the main sponsor for the All Blacks. They've got an interesting time ahead of them. But we're looking at things along the lines of diversity, LGBTI, doing some work with [New Zealand women's rugby team] the Black Ferns. And then I work for Tanarra, for John Wylie – they've got a terrific team of people in Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia, and now I'm the man in Japan.

How can an expat be successful in Japan?

You have to give away everything that is the Australian part of you. You can't be impatient; you can't be short term; you have to turn up on time. You have to be quite old school, to say thank you to someone for something. Take a long-term view, and understand that it could entirely drive you crazy on the way. The extremely drawn-out decision-making process can be extremely frustrating for Westerners, but the rewards are also there.

The Japanese are renowned for their loyalty. Is loyalty part of that reward?

Definitely. I've literally been in Japan for all of the time Japan has suffered economic difficulties, but

I've stayed there through thick and thin ... I would like to think that the loyalty they now show me is because they know I'm serious about it and they know that I take Japan very seriously.

Can loyalty be a weakness – persisting with people and strategies for too long, even when they are not working?

Sometimes... The Japanese would rather take a lesser deal with a company they've dealt with for some time than take a higher return potentially for shareholders. Japan sometimes isn't well versed in pitching itself. You've been to Japan and you know how fantastic it is, but do you ever hear that from a Japanese person? That reticence or that understated nature of the people has probably played out in terms of how their public diplomacy and how their own marketing has gone. And so it's sometimes hard to imagine why in these past 20 years there has been this big shift away from Japan to China and other countries. Those countries are also extremely important, but it's partly Japan's issue. We need to keep that focus on Japan so that we can see the results of that long-term strategy.

What's the best leadership advice you've heard?

People have said to me "find a spot at the table". It's really, really valuable advice, because a lot of people are not listened to because they're not at the table. I heard someone the other day say "I've asked to be included in the major table discussion", and I thought, sweet pea, that's not how it goes. It's hard-slog commitment, preparation, a lot of networking, making sure you're in the right spot at the right time. Something I heard recently was that you've just got to read more to know more, and I thought that was really interesting, because we're so busy and everyone's flapping around.

Who are some of the people you look up to?

Sam Mostyn [director on several boards], whom I've become friends with through Twitter, has taught me a lot about commitment and staying the distance. She's taught me a lot about being true to your own views and your own beliefs, and I think she's a great role model. Ann Sherry [executive chairman, Carnival Australia] taught me that sometimes action is the way to go. She's quick on her feet. She's got incredible judgment. In Japan, Mr [Akio] Mimura, the chair of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry is a fascinating fellow and I've been

very, very lucky to work with him for the past 10 or 15 years. And he's got incredible judgement and everything people say about the Japanese being decision based, slow to act, lots of processes and steps – he's the opposite. I've seen him just make some calls on things, and he's constantly called on by the prime minister.

What are your tips for an Australian going to live in Japan now?

Listen, shoosh up. A lot of Australian business people come to Japan with too little time – they're limited in how much they can give of themselves and so they're absolutely busting to tell the story of their business or who they are, and they go really, really fast at it. But sometimes the very pregnant pause that the Japanese take in those discussions and in a negotiation ... leads to the answer. I don't know that we as a culture are comfortable with silence – I'm not, I love a chat. But we don't understand that that [silence] is actually driving it forward. I'm often sitting there going, no, you've got to stop; you nearly had it and it's gone. Read and research as much as you can to find out about what you are doing. Are you meeting Panasonic? Find everything out you possibly can about their new businesses, their offshoot businesses, their recent M&A activity. And then the follow up. That letter afterwards and that information you promised them or the connection to a person you said you would help out with ... they're very boring tasks but they're very old school.

Whose responsibility is it to keep Australia's focus on Japan?

A lot of people would say it's the government's and I don't think that's entirely the case. It's partly their responsibility, and that plays out in things such as Asian language learning, kids going on school trips. [But] we've only got one [news] bureau in Japan, one Australian bureau, for our third-largest export nation and a major trading partner and security partner, and we only sort of understand each other – [we're] rivals in soccer and possibly rugby now. But we only have the ABC, and I would love to see more focus on Japan from within, because there are very good stories about how Japan is reforming itself and very good stories about what possibilities and potential business opportunities there are for Australian business, but we can't get to them.

So do you think we get Japanese culture?

I think a lot of people do. There are a terrific number of Australians who understand Japan and that's what you want, but I think we'd understand more if we learnt more about contemporary Japan. I think we'd learn more about Japan if we listened more, because they will give us a guide as to where they want us to engage with them. For example, one of the major topics for the Japanese Prime Minister at the moment is workplace reforms. There are so many stereotypes we have about Japan, about them working very long hours and women not working, but the shift that Japan's trying to bring about, to actually effect change for its people, they're good stories because they present us with ideas about what we might need to do as a post-industrialised nation ourselves.

What do you think Japan wants from Australia?

Twenty years ago, if the US had pulled out of a major trade negotiation on the Trans-Pacific Partnership I think the Australia/Japanese connection wouldn't have been able to push it over the line. In this instance it's very clear that Japan and Australia have been the driving forces in keeping the TPP-II together. Twenty years ago that possibly wasn't the case because we simply didn't have the engagement with Japan. I think now Japan's looking to us more for that collaboration. I think the Japanese would look for more people-to-people exchange as well. Australians are well regarded for just being who they are. I do think Japan is very open to more exchange, more people-to-people, kids coming here, kids going there, but we have to listen to what that means. Not just jumping on a plane and coming to Sydney, but being prepared to listen and being a part of trade and connection. **D**



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