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MANAGEMENT RELATIONS IN THE WORK CULTURE IN JAPAN AS COMPARED TO THAT OF THE WEST

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ABSTRACT

This article will discuss the Japanese work culture, its advantages and shortcomings. Emphasis is placed on the unique and productive industrial relations in the country, which are the fruits of an ancient tradition that views work as a privilege and not only an obligation. The article presents unique outlooks on business conduct in Japan, including reasons having to do with human capital, which are unique to this culture. Such conduct can serve as a living example for other economies. Even in this country one hears about mistakes made in business conduct but there is no doubt that the special human relations in this work culture are part of the reason for the economy's success, strength and uniqueness.

This article will, therefore, explain the work culture that existed in Japan prior to its most recent fall into an economic recession.

One of the important principles in Japan is the virtue of work. Japan's approach to work involves paying attention to the needs of the employee. A company owner or manager in Japan generally sees himself as responsible for his employee not only at the limited work level, but overall he is also concerned for his employee's personal and familial welfare. This is in contrast to the American outlook, for example, which holds great consideration for the interests of the company's shareholders in order to maximize their profits.

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HUMAN RELATIONS IN THE WORK CULTURE IN JAPAN AS COMPARED TO THAT OF THE WEST

The customary work culture of Japan's economic companies differs from that of the West, and many have written about its uniqueness (Albegglen & Stalk, 1985; Batyko, 2012; Huang, 2011; Wokutch & Shepard, 1999; Wolf, 2004, 2008). It seems impossible to separate the value of a company's lifestyle, norms and principles in general from its ethical behavior, because its ethics imbibe cultural messages and reflect the norms and values of the culture from which it stems. The purpose of this article is to explain the work culture in Japan as well as its consequences on the ethical behavior of its employees.

It should be noted that the work culture to be discussed in this article was customary in Japan up until the last 15 years or so. Today's work system differs greatly from the past¹. Nevertheless, managers have the potential to contribute wisdom to their jobs through their familiarity with this work culture.

Japan's economic recession that took place in the past few years brought about a great change in its work

culture. Manpower in Japan is now divided into "core workers": those who are equipped with advanced abilities and knowledge, and who usually work in stable companies; on the other side exist a large group of temporary workers who can be fired at any given moment. This situation did not exist a number of years ago and attests to Japan's difficulty in recovering from the long recession that it has encountered.

In 1990, Professor Masahiro Yamada from Gakugei University in Tokyo founded the concept of "parasite singles". This concept characterizes groups of young people who, after completing their studies, live with their parents and work in odd jobs as part-time employees. Their numbers have recently been growing. This phenomenon emphasizes the change that has begun to take place in Japan's work culture. This article will, therefore, explain the work culture that existed in Japan prior to its most recent fall into an economic recession.

The evaluation of ethical damage in companies is related to two fields: 1) behavior that damages production – poor work, slow work, inferior quality, etc. 2) damage to company property – theft, vandalizing property, using company supplies, etc. Trevino's (1986) research noted that intentional damage caused by employees in the

¹ There are currently an estimated five million temporary workers in Japan employed in part-time jobs. They are nicknamed 'freeters'. Until approximately four years ago, the count was four million.

company is generally the product of low motivation on the part of the employee.

These types of transgressions, which are common in the West, are not yet widespread in Japan. Economic crimes in Japan are mostly focused on other areas. In the 1990's, Taka and Foglia (1994) hypothesized that in Japan there are very few instances of employees stealing from the companies in which they work. Exploitation of one's workplace for personal goals and attempts to harm one's company from within are usually more common and frequent in the West and less common in Japanese companies.

Employees in Japan are generally known for their loyalty to their places of work and for having clear ambitions to see the companies they work for succeed and prosper. The personal responsibility of the Japanese employee is great and, in most cases, reflects his desire to lead his company to success (Imai, 1986). This work outlook is not common in the West and warrants the question – why not?

Perception of work in Japan compared to its perception in the West

Gestalt theory assumes that the “whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. A central principle of this theory is that one must look at the causes of things from a holistic perspective (Perls, 1969, 1973). Therefore, when examining the ethical behavior of companies and organizations one must refer to nationwide cultural factors and factors related to human relations, and not focus solely on the business-economic realm. It is important to regard work culture as part of the general culture of the country.

Taka and Foglia (1994) point out that the difference between the type of ethics that exist in Japan and that which exist in the United States derives mainly from the different nature of the Japanese management style and from different social norms. It seems that the Japanese succeeded in implementing Western outlooks when it comes to project and technology advancement but tailored them to their own culture and way of life.

Group Perspectives in Japan

An important principle in Japan is the virtue of work. Work is not regarded as an obligation in terms of “with the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”. Work is a benefit for man and, as such, a central value. For the Japanese, the substantive meaning of the word ‘work’ is to get pleasure from it. The word does not reflect the person performing the work, but rather the content of the action itself – ‘giving rest to others’. This principle, as a general theme and a national norm, is instilled in an individual from a young age.

The Western outlook seems to view results achieved with minimum effort and work as an accomplishment. A person who is capable of achieving this relatively easily is considered a truly successful person. In contrast, success at work according to the Japanese outlook requires effort, is difficult, and cannot be achieved easily. This outlook emphasizes work value in terms of hard work. Teaching the value of hard work is part of the ceremonies that many companies organize for their new trainees.

Daily, Whatley, Ash and Steiner (1996) claim that problematic interactions between a group of employees at work cause of decreased efficiency at work. On the contrary, positive relations at work benefit the workplace (Wolf, 2013). Therefore, the type of work group is of great importance and emphasis is placed on the work culture in

Japan, where closeness and friendship between employees is more important.

The perception of the group in Japan and its ramifications in the workplace

One of the important principles of Japanese culture is integration with the group. Group harmony, a pleasant atmosphere, and a sense of belonging to the group are basic values in this society. In contrast to the West, where the individual is taught independence and individualism, in Japan the power of the group is great and it grants prestige, status and strength to the individual.

A person without group support lacks power. This outlook usually leads those in the Japanese culture to take an active group role; a trait that requires the individual to relinquish part of his desire for the sake of the group's standing and success, in which consensus and general agreement with the group are the most important. Group belonging provides the Japanese worker with many advantages both as a person and an employee, and serves as a source of support, increasing his power (Wolf, 2003, 2008).

Group cohesion is also expressed through the transmission of legends, stories and ideas that are adopted by companies in Japan in order to unite their employees. They organize group outings and vacations for employees, make an effort to forge a feeling of unification amongst their workers, and invest great effort in developing ‘company spirit’. This reflects the company's character and primary goals, and embodies a special philosophy and orientation meant to unite employees into one entity. This outlook supports the employee's loyalty to his employer and to the hierarchy above him, and fulfills an important function in his way of thinking (Batyko, 2012; Huang, 2011; Wolf, 2003, 2008).

In general, the work group supplies the employee with support. The common perception in Japan is that one learns a lesson from mistakes made at work, and that this phenomenon applies to everyone. The custom is to give the worker another chance after making a mistake. Mistakes are a way of opening up possibilities for action, and the approach of business organizations is to learn lessons from them both as an employee and as a work group. This approach, in effect, corresponds to the outlook of the Swiss educator, Oser (1996), who maintained that the proper way to learn morality is to understand the lesson to be learned from one's mistakes².

The Japanese outlook views workers' mistakes as part of the learning process, which has proven itself to be an effective approach. It is unclear what is more efficient - the employee's feeling of embarrassment when his mistake is brought up for public discussion and learning, which is liable to prevent him and his friends from repeating the mistake in the future; or the focus on negative results and ethical mistakes, which can affect the interpersonal work arena by emphasizing the employee's obligation to an ethical orientation and behavior, and by indirectly contributing to the company spirit and honorable character.

Japanese Management as Advanced Ethics

Taka and Foglia (1994) noted that corporations in Japan generally exist for long periods of time and tend to place their employees' welfare first, as opposed to

² It should be noted that Socrates also referred to learning from mistakes as a method of teaching. See the dialogue ‘Gorgias’ (Plato, Gorgias, a458).

corporations in the United States, which are concerned first and foremost with shareholders and emphasize short-term goals. Furthermore, the management style in Japan does not usually empower the manager as the source of exclusive information, who is responsible for solving every problem in the company. Every employee, even the most junior among them, is invited to voice his opinion and ideas, and to take part in improving the management and production of the company. The manager does not keep his knowledge to himself. He involves others and expects everyone to contribute their knowledge and wisdom to the project or company. The advantage of this approach is in the message of appreciation that it transmits to the employee. The employee is imbued with the feeling that he is valuable, that he can be useful, that he has what to contribute, and that his contribution is expected.

Japan's approach to work involves paying attention to the needs of the employee (Taka & Foglia, 1994). A company owner or manager in Japan generally sees himself as responsible for his employee not only at the limited work level, but overall he is also concerned for his employee's personal and familial welfare. This is in contrast to the American outlook, for example, which holds great consideration for the interests of the company's shareholders in order to maximize their profits (Friedman, 1970; Freeman, 1977).

Most permanent employees in Japan are entitled to many benefits related to their personal and familial standing, such as: different insurances – medical and material, assistance with children's education, assistance with purchasing a house, loans and grants for family weddings, and so on. The Japanese worker can receive financial support for many life events, not only for those having to do with his job. Therefore, he usually feels a sense of belonging to the company, is fostered by it, and is able to repay in kind with loyalty, responsibility and devotion on his part. The message usually carried throughout organizations in Japan is that the employee should show thanks to his benefactor, and is therefore required to demonstrate much devotion and loyalty.

This ability for appreciation elevates the employee both as a man and a worker, and enables him to utilize his skills. Indeed, I have already mentioned that the participation of employees in economic factories and companies holds tremendous importance and indirectly assists in fostering a more responsible outlook of employees towards their company (Wolf, R. 2003: 2008).

The common social approach of most institutes and companies in Japan views employees as one family unit. This approach can contribute to an employee's ethical behavior. The workplace generally serves as a social framework for the individual, enabling close friendships, and give-and-take relationships. A person is able to satisfy his need to love and to be loved. This support provides the employee with psychological resilience and is reminiscent of the theory of humanistic philosophers and psychologists, such as Fromm (1941, 1970), Rogers (1961), Maslow (1968, 1970, 1971), Frankl (1969), and others.

The logic follows that in an atmosphere of acceptance and respect for others, the individual is able to give back. He is not busy solely with maintaining his work position, he is free to deal with the main issues at work, most of his spiritual and social needs are met, and this makes it easier for him to cope with the work system and its components.

Advantages and Achievements of the Japanese Work System

The advantages to the Japanese approach to work are also its shortcomings. The Japanese worker is generally subject to the company's traditions and norms. His lack of independence stems from the essential nature of this subjugation. Social stratification can influence a person's sense of personal freedom, which is limited as a result of the high conformity common in Japanese companies. For the sake of harmony and group unity, the Japanese individual does not usually emphasize his uniqueness as a worker or as a person. He tries to blend into the group framework. Fromm³ (1941) emphasized that a social structure and economic stressors are liable to instill a sense of insecurity or lack of worth in a person, despite his virtues.

It seems to me that such a situation, in which the needs of the employee clash with the needs of the company, can hamper the development of 'individuation' in the employee. Man is subjected to the demand for achievement while, at the same time, his personal sense of freedom is limited. It is reasonable to assume that with the accelerated technological development of the modern era, the employee will feel more frustration in the face of the great power held by companies and corporations. However, the Japanese work system, which promotes the group, seems capable of suppressing the frustration and the sense of isolation that is expected to be the fate of the modern man. Therefore, it follows that Japan's economic outlook imposes much responsibility on the employee and demands ambitiousness even though this seems to present a unique type of suppression. This approach offers the employee a high semblance of responsibility at work. The Japanese worker can view the company's advancement and gains as his personal mission and achievement.

In Japan, until approximately 15 years ago, there were few instances of employees being fired from jobs. Japanese companies would usually find alternative ways to help save a failing company, and they do not care for the typical Western solution of firing employees as a means of organizational cutbacks. Japanese organizations do not easily abandon workers, as do companies in the West (Aoki, 1984; Tachibanaki, 1984).

The Japanese worker's need to belong is generally realized. The employee's relationship to the group and his view of himself as part of a comprehensive system can give him a sense of power and security. This even extends to his work, as the Japanese culture considers all work to be honorable if performed in a responsible and satisfying way. In this manner, it is a comfort to the employee as well as a source of power. The social belonging, as mentioned above, fulfills the Japanese worker's need for love and through this system he can receive acceptance and love from his colleagues. Great emphasis is placed on the solid work relationship between employees, as well as between employees and their supervisors. Courtesy, harmony and cohesion are important principles in Japanese companies.

Taka and Foglia (1994) point out that in Japan there is emphasis on the value of diverse work roles for each employee. It is understood that employees will be

³ Eric Fromm, a German psychologist, moved to the United States. His first book, 'Escape from Freedom', distanced him from the international psychoanalytic community. He relied heavily on his interviews with Freud and was influenced by the theories of Karl Marx regarding man's subjugation to social institutions and their pressures.

shown respect in any place of work and in any job role as long as they make an honest effort to move ahead. The employee's value encourages him to advance and to offer his utmost ability for the sake of the corporation.

The main problem with the Japanese method, as was mentioned, is the conformist behavior of Japanese workers. The need to support the group's harmony and positive atmosphere demands that the worker not stand out as an individual in the group, and not deviate from its outlook. This approach, which promotes positive human relations, group solidarity, can present an ethical risk. Indeed, Durkheim (1933, 1964) praised the power of solidarity, but in modern society, in a world after Nazism, it has already been shown that solidarity can diminish a person's humanity. The following section will discuss the dangers of such solidarity.

The Merits of the Japanese Work and Approach to Human Relations According to Psychological Theories

Maslow was one of the first theorists to deal with the topic of work in the framework of Industrial Psychology. He often discussed work relations and how the employee views himself. Regarding the worker he claimed "If you are not satisfied with your work, you have lost one of the most meaningful ways to self-actualization" (Maslow, 1971, p.185). Maslow's viewpoint was applied to, and examined at, different companies and organizations. Ewen added to this by positing that an organization's success in satisfying the needs of employees is not reflected by the number of employee complaints but rather by the type of complaints – those having to do with needs that are higher in Maslow's hierarchy indicate a greater dissatisfaction at work (Ewen, 1988).

It should be noted that Maslow's theory has not been subject to scientific examination. For instance, it is impossible to examine higher level needs, which are the developmental factor in this theory. According to Maslow, self-actualization and higher level needs, are only fulfilled after lower needs are met, such as the need for security, love, value, and so on. It is difficult to examine the history of people who reached self-actualization according to Maslow's approach. However, one cannot ignore Maslow's contribution to the field of business. He shared ideas related to humanistic psychology in the work arena, praised the functioning man, the working man and the "healthy" man, and dealt with the growing needs of the human race.

Maslow (1970) focused on the healthy aspect of human existence. According to him, the main source of psychopathology in man is our failure to meet our basic needs, the most important of which are physiological needs, followed by (in order of priority): safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. The order of needs important to man's emotional well-being are ranked by Maslow according to the above hierarchy. According to him, one who reaches complete fulfillment of his needs is healthier than one who only satisfies some of his needs (Ewen, 1988).

An attempt to reinforce Maslow's assumptions regarding the existence of a hierarchy of needs was made by Graham and Ballouin (1973). They found that man's physiological needs were met the most, followed by safety needs, then social needs, and finally self-actualization needs, which are generally satisfied the least.

It is interesting to point out that most of the needs noted by Maslow are actually related to one's

surroundings, and in order to meet them a person needs a supportive environment. This makes the environment, workplace and peer group important to an employee's satisfaction. Maslow discussed the importance of interpersonal behavior to the creation of a healthy company. His critique is directed at Western companies that, according to him, place great emphasis on material needs, ambitiousness and materialism, and repress man's aspiration for justice, beauty and wisdom.

There is no doubt that these aspirations are realized in a company that treats its employees in a supportive, serious and dependable manner. The Japanese work approach presents a company that is certainly demanding, but one that also emphasizes a pleasant relationship with its employees, security and sense of belonging, and esteem and love for workers, beyond emphasizing material profits alone.

Maslow stressed the power of the environment in designing man's behavior. He stated that we are affected by many factors and powers, even the seemingly small (Maslow, 1974). Maslow's discussion of ethical behavior is an important part of his contribution to the business sector and human relations. He emphasized the influence of the environment on an individual's behavior, and discussed meeting man's needs through external sources – in this case, work. It is expected that the combination of satisfying both the external and internal needs unique to people will produce a humanistic approach, more humane and ethical when it comes to interpersonal relations in general, and to work relations in particular.

According to our evaluation, a significant part of the intellectual, social, physical and material needs of the Japanese employee is realized through the Japanese work approach. The physical needs are realized when the worker is free to deal with work issues without constantly worrying that his livelihood is secure. Until recently, there was hardly any turnover in companies in Japan, and an employee's position was stable.

Ethical Disadvantages of the Japanese Work Approach

The Japanese approach to work promotes the power of the group and generally prevents individual expression. The individual is part of the group as a whole. This approach may engender behavior that is not sufficiently ethical when assimilated into the general behavior, as in 'herd' behavior, and does not represent autonomic ethical conduct.

It should be noted that supporters of the developmental-structural-cognitive approach to ethics (Bull, 1969; Kohlberg, 1969, 1970, 1976; Nisan, 1987; Piaget, 1932; Rest, 1984) presented one of the stages of ethical development as a stage in which a person's judgment is based on compliance. This stems from a desire to avoid punishment or receive reward. This level of judgment is presented by the above researchers as a low level of judgment. The individual is motivated to operate from an egotistical perspective by preserving his own interests.

The ethical-conformist approach entails a process of company consensus of what is customary and accepted behavior. This is not perceived by the above-mentioned researchers as great ethical judgment since it represents behavior that is in line with the behavior of the general public, and because its purpose is to find favor in the eyes of others and to be accepted as part of a general group. A highly ethical approach is expressed in man's ability to

draw ethical guidelines from it, and in his ability to act according to ideals of justice in an objective manner.

Seashore (1954) presented an example of a group whose members behaved in a conformist manner motivated by other factors, such as identification and a desire to model themselves after others. These motives also seem to represent an insufficient level of ethical judgment. The employee will want to feel like part of the group and thus may be motivated by anxiety surrounding the expression of his own outlook. There is also a danger that he will cooperate with the group and submit to its pressure, even when he does not agree with its point of view.

In analyzing Maslow's hierarchy of needs when it comes to the Japanese employee, it is not clear if the worker reaches self-actualization, and fulfills his spiritual needs and general goals. The conformism and the need to preserve group character and harmony, as well as the need to not be different and to support the majority opinion, can suppress creativity and originality, preventing the worker who is different from reaching self-actualization.

Researchers Albeglen and Stalk (1985), Tachibanki (1984), and Taka and Foglia (1994) claim that this situation, in which an employee is liable to become frustrated, can lead to violence and anti-social behavior (Dollard, Miller, Mowrer, Sears et al., 1939). It should be noted that, despite the above, the picture in Japan is quite optimistic in regards to the social-ethical behavior of the employee (even though there are also many instances of suicide in Japan, which may stem from the fact that individual diversity and uniqueness are sometimes met with impatience).

What Japan Can Learn from the West Regarding Human Resources in the Company

In order to be subject to the rules of what is, and what is not, permitted in each organization and company, Japanese companies are advised to invest in writing a code of ethics, as is customary in the West. Indeed there is a great demand for a code of ethics in the global business community (Hayashibara, 1988; Gottlieb & Sanzgiri, 1996; Oliverio, 1989; Phillips & Margolis, 1999, Wolf, 2008). These researchers referred to the importance of an ethical code in every economic organization. Many companies today try to develop a code of ethics that will formulate all of the ethical principles that guide their companies regarding client/employee relations, employee/manager relations, and relations between employees themselves.

It is, therefore, recommended that Japanese companies propose this goal of writing a shared code of ethics to all of their employees. The act of writing the shared code will itself empower the company, insofar as it will represent the shared initiative and decision of all employees. The writing and consolidation of comprehensive ethical practices in and of itself helps them to be accepted by everyone. The moment that such a code is created, it stands to reason that it will be implemented.

Since the Japanese company is bound to the idea of consensus in its general perception of the company, it is befitting that business organizations and companies formulate clear ethical positions, outlooks and regulations, to be expressed through the 'company spirit', objectives and goals. It is advised that ethical rules be written in these companies, which will then become norms that cannot be violated. They will serve as a type of 'basic rule' to prevent unethical decisions.

The customary humanistic approach in the economic work systems in Japan, which are entwined in the ancient culture of this nation, helps in applying ethical behavior and in reducing the ethical violations that exist in Western countries. Japan carries the wisdom of generations. It is the job of the tradition to turn knowledge into wisdom, and to transmit it to as many individuals as possible. The company cannot amass the wisdom of generations through personal attempts alone. Rather, it must preserve and promote this tradition.

Summary

The Japanese work principles presented here, most of which are actually humanistic principles, are part of the Japanese employee's way of life. Koehn (1994) presents the influence of 'Eastern philosophy', such as the contribution of Confucius and Watsuji-Tetsuro, on the Japanese work and business culture. She also notes the importance of trust in this culture (Koehn, 1996). The building of long-term relationships and the humane treatment of others are important principles in Japan. These guarantee ethical behavior in the context of economics and business. This way of life built on ancient tradition leads the Japanese employee to utilize ethical thinking and behavior, and it is appropriate to implement this in Western work customs as well.

The Japanese work outlook, which provides the employee with respect and appreciation, also concerns itself with the employee's feelings. It gives him a sense of value, worth, usefulness and the belief that he has something to contribute. This approach seeks to advance the implementation of ethical knowledge that already exists in the worker.

Nonetheless, unconditional acceptance of tradition is no less dangerous than blind rejection. The world is constantly changing and calls for a fresh look at its values. Therefore, it is best to preserve the wisdom of past generations without accepting it as absolute truth. Many scenarios in the work arena did not exist a few generations ago because of the society's structure and character. Values need to be in line with advancing human knowledge, situational changes, and technological and social development. Universal values do exist but new work situations require new consideration and a renewed ethical outlook among both ancient and new cultures.

Both Western and Japanese societies have what to learn. It would benefit Western companies and organizations to adopt the background and outlook of Japanese companies, especially that which relates to the treatment of employees in providing them with a sense of belonging, value and acceptance. And perhaps Japanese companies would benefit from getting rid of the dangerous barriers of the consensus and the power of the group, which prevents individuals from explaining things in a different way. Western companies have contributed greatly by encouraging employees to rely on their internal roots, and there is no doubt that the Japanese can learn from this work approach and enable their employees to express themselves as individuals, to take initiative and utilize creativity in a personal framework.

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