

Is Culture the Primary Driver of Business Success or Failure?

Introduction

In working for an American located company owned by a Japanese corporation, our distinctly different cultures come into daily conflict. On both sides of the Pacific there is a tendency for both sides to feel that the culture they were raised in is naturally the best.

Thesis Statement

The purpose of this study is to draw contrast between the culturally ingrained norms followed by Japanese and American employees and then answer a basic question, "Does the culture in which one employee is raised necessarily result in better (Product) outcomes that the other?"

Methods

Research for this project was conducted with a combination of published works on Japanese and Japanese/American business culture along with to ten years of participant observation within an American/Japanese hybrid company.

Data-Japanese workplace culture

In the Japanese culture a premium is placed on the success of the group over the success of the individual and so it is in the workplaces of Japan. The slowly waning practice of lifetime employment (Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Joel et al 89) reflects the paternalistic attitude of the larger Japanese society applied to the company attitude toward employees and of a manager for his subordinates: "Managers ranging from "kacho" (section managers) ... up to the president are all expected to demonstrate some degree of paternalism." (Sai 35). In return employees are expected to reciprocate in much the same way as children would to their parents, by way of hard work and obedience. The family-like model of the working life is also reflected in the way in which the Japanese office is arranged: The most favored employee is situated closest to his manager, i.e. closer to the family core. In the Japanese workplace, a window office far from the group core is considered a punishment as it allows those on the outside to look in and see your shame. So it is at Kyocera-Japan.



Dress indicates position in hierarchy

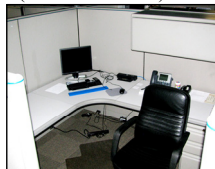


Japanese office layout, managers at block ends⁵

A salient aspect of the importance of the group in the Japanese workplace is the uniformity of dress and the lack of personalization of the workspace. Collective exercise, study and frequent meetings of the members serve to reinforce group cohesion while marginalizing individual impulses. Conformity is further enhanced when the company hires freshly graduated students in favor of employees trained by other firms (Bamber et al 282).



Reading of the company philosophy in Japan²



Japanese office in San Diego at 2 months⁶

Data-American workplace culture

In sharp contrast to Japan, American employees strive for personal achievement and recognition. Individuality, fostered from childhood, is immediately apparent in the typical American office where this extends to the desire

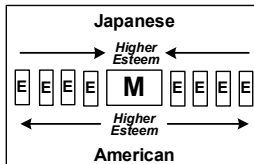


Personal space: American "Cube farm"⁴

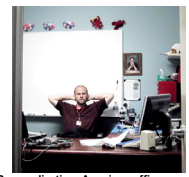


Personalization: American office space⁵

desire for a "space of my own". Unlike Japan, proximity to your manager is not a measure of esteem but instead a mechanism of control where the window office is the ultimate expression of status: *You are so far from the controlling gaze of your manager (the core), you are practically outside!* So it is at Kyocera-America.



Employee status versus the distance from his manager



Personalization: American office space⁵

Results

Which is better, the Japanese culture or the American?

In the case of the hybridized Kyocera, there is no clear winner. Neither side of the Pacific enjoys clear technical dominance over the other even when the tools, i.e. software, technology and material resources are exactly the same (Thanks to the current state of globalization). Even Toyota which also operates as a cross cultural hybrid and strove for zero defects and perfect communication (Liker 290) fell well short of its goal and is currently embroiled in lawsuits over the same type of quality issues of purely Japanese companies at its American factories while the Japanese chairman of Toyota admittedly had no idea there was a problem until after it became public knowledge (Toyoda, 1:10:00). A typical American approach to try



"5S" poster, San Diego⁷

to solve our quality and market issues over the years generally promoted aggressiveness where problems were chased down and subdued whereas the Japanese culture would pursue ideas as embodied in the poster at the left where problems were to be organized out of existence. In the end however, pure Japanese, pure American and mixed Japanese-American culture all appear to yield the same result.

Discussion/Conclusion

Beginning this project, I had thought there would be some basic cultural defense at work that would make one group more or less susceptible to the times but it seems that what makes us the same in human nature makes us the same in business, and is stronger that our different cultures. On the surface of our respective cultures lies the same narrative for success, if arrived at by different means but just below that lies basic human motivation: "Hana Yori Dango - Self preservation is nature's first law" (Sai 93) works equally well here and abroad. Recent first hand experience has demonstrated the need of my Japanese counterparts to maintain their positions near the core of their respective groups as when they join a misplaced consensus to avoid personal responsibility and is the same self defeating course followed by so many of my American colleagues: Better a bad group decision than a good lone voice of reason with too much risk of being wrong.

¹ Sai, Yuzuki, *The Right Care X Japan of the Japanese Businessman: toward an Understanding of Japanese Management* (Binghamton, N.Y.: International Business, 1995: 170)
² Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Joel et al. Knowledge-driven work: unexpected lessons from Japanese and United States work practices. New York: Oxford U.P., 1998.
³ Liker, Jeffrey K., and Michael Hesse. *Toyota culture: the heart and soul of the Toyota way*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.
⁴ Bamber, Craig, Russell D. Lansbury, and Vicki W. Lutz. *International and comparative employment relations: globalization and the devalued market economies*. London: Sage Publications, 2004.
⁵ John Taylor. *Photos from San Diego*, 2010.
⁶ John Taylor. *Photos from San Diego*, 2010.
⁷ Taylor, John. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jtaylor/2910322410/>. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2010