

2 Pages on Japan



Introduction

I recently went to Japan on a business trip. Something that I really wanted to learn more about was the cultural differences in organizations. The Japanese are supposedly working very long hours inside very strict hierarchies and protocol is as important as it once was for the samurai. The only thing I knew for certain was the fantastic success many Japanese companies are enjoying. Would I be able to swim in the undercurrents of these mental waters?

Before We Begin

Everyone who goes to Japan will return with their own truth of what the Japanese culture is like. The reason is that the country and people offer a fantastic variety. Times are also changing very quickly, and the west and the east are always looking to borrow the best ideas and philosophies from each other. This means that my true story might not be your true story. It also means that there is more to learn than can be understood from a few visits.

My polarization when talking about the east and the west like they are different things is not because of prejudice; it helps make my points clear. It's in the differences – whether they are real or not – that the lessons live.

The Long Hours

Yes, the Japanese do work long hours. It's normal to come to the office around 9 am and go home at 9 pm. If you are working in Tokyo, the expensive living suggests that you'll add an hour going to and from work, which doesn't leave you many hours for being with the family. Especially since a trip to the pub after work is not uncommon.

But are the long hours the key to the Japanese success? I don't think so. From what I've seen, staying so long in the office makes it impossible to stay focused throughout a full day. However, it's probably one of the reasons why the workplace becomes such an integrated part of your life – **the organization is part of the family**. And such a close relationship will make you work very hard for things in the best interest of that family.

The Strict Hierarchy

At first, I didn't think that the hierarchies were as strict as I'd thought before leaving for Japan. I soon realized that I was wrong. The good part of these hierarchies is that there are always clear paths of communication, and everyone is left to do their job – this makes for an efficient organization. However, the downside is that when your manager is in the same room as you, he answers the questions. He takes the lead. In fact, he will most likely be the only one speaking. That quickly becomes a problem when the subject matter is better known by a subordinate. Even if the manager gets it wrong, no one will correct him.

And speaking of “no”, that's a word that you'll very seldom hear in Japan.

Slow Acceptance, Full Speed Ahead

One of the many nice people I met in Japan told me that the Japanese are very reluctant to accept changes. “We take a long time to think about changes. When we finally decide, we push ahead with full speed.” Those words rang true to me. That is probably the biggest single difference between the way we do business in east and west. In the west, new ideas are quickly tried, and might be just as quickly discarded.

It's an algorithm that somewhat resembles breadth-first search – we seek the best solutions by expanding the closest nodes. In the east, the more careful thinking is similar to depth-first search, if you provide some leeway for my train of thought that considers child nodes to contain more detailed information about the solutions¹.

The Westerners Reluctance to Surrender

One thing that I realized when I noticed how easy the Japanese were able to work inside these strict hierarchies is that they do not view the hierarchy as a ladder that must be climbed. You just take pride in doing the work you are assigned to, are good at, and like doing (hopefully). There's nothing wrong in doing that your whole career. A higher place in the hierarchy does not imply that you are better in any way. That way of thinking avoids some really boring power struggles in western organizations.

In the west, we seem to hate being controlled by someone else, including our managers. But it dawned on me that in some situations we willingly do just that – for example by paying a personal trainer to tell you how to exercise and what to eat. We surrender because we think the results will be better than if we keep eating what we want. We exercise until throwing up since we think the personal trainer knows what's best for us.

So why don't you surrender control to your manager? Because you think you know better. Well, if you're right, maybe *you* should be the manager. That is, if you can muster the courage to make your voice heard, not caring about any hierarchies, or climbing of ladders. That sure sounds like a nice fusion of east and west to me.

Arigato gozaimasu for reading,

Bjorn Karlsson

¹ I know that this sounds wacky. But it's the only example of my quirky thoughts in the text, so give me a break.