The Applicability of Japanese Management Techniques in the American Public Sector: Some Cultural Considerations

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Much controversy presently exists regarding the extent to which cultural dissimilarities between Japan and the United States might prevent the effective incorporation of selected Japanese management techniques within the United States. In studying contemporary Japanese society, three cultural traits can be identified as significantly contributing to the effectiveness of management techniques used in that country. These are, in the order in which they will be examined: 1) life encompassing spiritualism, 2) national homogeneity, and 3) individual performance perceived as a reflection of group honor.¹

Once these facets of Japanese culture have been discussed and evaluated within the context of contemporary American society (and more specifically, the American public sector), it will be possible to reach some tentative conclusions concerning the ap-

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¹ Although a great number of additional cultural traits have been identified by recent scholars as uniquely characteristic of Japanese society, it is the author's contention that these three traits are the most relevant to the question of transferability of Japanese management techniques to the U.S. public sector.

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Life Encompassing Spiritualism

The notion that spiritual beliefs and behavior apply not only to one's "religious life" and "family life," but also equally to one's "work life," is a central principle of Japanese culture. This point is stressed by the eminent Japanese scholar, Yamamoto Shichihei, in citing the work of the Zen monk, Suzuki Shosan. Shosan emphasized this fundamental belief when reflecting on the divine purpose of work:

"...The all-encompassing Buddha-nature in us all works for the world's good: without artisans, such as the blacksmith, there would be no tools; without officials there would be no order in the world; without farmers there would be no food; without merchants we would suffer inconvenience. All the other occupations as well are for the good of the world. ...All reveal the blessing of the Buddha."

Although this was written over three centuries ago, when applied to the technologically advanced Japanese society of the 1980s, it explains much of the fervor of the Japanese worker to perform in a manner that will maximize his contribution to the organization—a contribution which is perceived as benefiting modern Japanese society and, ultimately, even the world community. In contrast, there is no evidence to support the view that widespread work-related spiritual fervor can be assumed to exist in America (see Table 1). In fact, while it might be observed that American culture socializes its members to accept the notion of religious or spiritual tolerance, it could also be reasoned that government employees have been further socialized—to the extent of accepting the concept of separating out governmental functions from spiritual functions. This, of course is embodied in the United States Constitution, which requires that there be a

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Japanese Society</th>
<th>American Society</th>
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<tr>
<td>Life-encompassing spiritualism: includes &quot;religious life,&quot; &quot;family life,&quot; and &quot;work life&quot;</td>
<td>Spiritualism not usually perceived as being work-related*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population extremely homogeneous</td>
<td>Population extremely heterogeneous</td>
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<td>Individual's job performance a direct reflection of group honor</td>
<td>Individual's job performance <em>primarily</em> a reflection of individual honor</td>
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*Author's contention.

Table 1: Comparison of three cultural traits in Japanese and American Society.

"wall of separation" between the affairs of church and those of government. Consequently, one may logically deduce that, at some point in their lives, American civil servants learn that religious beliefs should not influence the discharge of their official duties. If this is so, then the perception of work as fulfilling a divine or spiritual mission must be substantially lacking in the American public sector. If one follows this reasoning, it is then possible to conclude that the American civil servant may lack a major motivating force that exists in his Japanese counterpart—the notion that a productive work life is a *necessary* component of spiritual fulfillment. Unfortunately, at this point in time, empirical data to support (or refute) this contention is lacking.

Homogeneity and a Heightened Sense of Group Identity

In contrasting Japanese and American culture, one of the most obvious and fundamental differences is the significantly greater degree of homogeneity that exists within the Japanese population with respect to such characteristics as ancestry, religion, race, and language.  

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ulation in general, there has been scant research focusing upon the impact of homogeneity within the Japanese public bureaucracy. Recently, however, Ferrel Heady synthesized most of the prior research that was conducted and discovered that most of it was limited to the highest levels of Japanese bureaucracy.\(^5\) One such study, for example, examined promotion criteria used at the upper levels of the Japanese civil service. Aside from the primary observation that promotion of upper-level bureaucrats was based almost exclusively on 1) university attended, 2) field of specialization, 3) years of government service, it was also discovered that the vast majority (80 percent) of the upper 1 percent of the Japanese bureaucracy consisted of individuals who graduated from the same educational institution, the University of Tokyo.\(^6\) In addition, most of these individuals had been educated by the University's Law School Faculty.\(^7\) Although this study was conducted in the late sixties, the same phenomenon appears to hold true today with respect to the upper 1 percent of Japan's public bureaucracy: most of them have attended the University of Tokyo, where they were educated in the Law School.\(^8\) Consequently, there is an added dimension of homogeneity among upper-level government bureaucrats that transcends even the unusually high level that already exists throughout the rest of Japanese society. As we shall see, some of those who have studied Japan's organizational success now attribute much of it to the intense identification of the individual with the work group. This heightened sense of identification with the group is perceived as arising from the high degree of worker homogeneity.

In the American public sector there is, of course, a greater mix of educational, ethnic, racial, and religious characteristics, and women are more commonly employed in permanent, full-time positions than is the case in Japan.\(^9\) As a result, we are forced to

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\(^7\) Ibid.


focus our attention on the Japanese in order to understand the unique social phenomenon that has arisen from the unusual level of worker homogeneity.

A common thread in the many recent case studies of performance/productivity in Japanese organizations is the comprehensive and extremely complex "commonality of understanding" that exists among employees. As a consequence of the great similarity among Japanese workers with respect to personal, physical and cultural characteristics, it has been observed that they (as opposed to their American counterparts) experience a heightened sense of mutual understanding and intimacy. This is thought to make possible a more intense identification of the individual with the immediate work group and with the organization as a whole. Accompanying this increased sense of group identity is an employee’s perception of his or her performance as directly reflecting upon the honor or integrity of the group and even the entire organization. This means that poor job performance and even aberrant off-the-job behavior causes the whole group to experience a loss of honor.\textsuperscript{10} In a discussion of the impact on a Japanese work group of a group member arrested for deviant sexual behavior, Yamamoto Shichihei points out that the entire group (as well as the entire organization) feels a profound sense of embarrassment and shame. This is in spite of the fact that the individual’s deviant behavior was not directly related to the group’s discharging of its formal responsibilities.\textsuperscript{11} What emerges, then, is another powerful intrinsic motivating factor for the Japanese worker — the need to maintain the integrity of the group by continuously demonstrating a high level of job performance and even acceptable off-the-job behavior. This point is reinforced by the work of Akira Kubota, in his study of the educational backgrounds and career patterns of upper-level Japanese civil servants. Kubota found that one of the most powerful forces controlling the behavior of Japanese bureaucrats was the predominance of the attitudes and norms of the primary work group. He also found that acceptable personal behavior and a high level of achievement by


\textsuperscript{11} Yamamoto Shichihei, "Consanguineous and Territorial Societies," 5.
group members was a common group expectation.\textsuperscript{12}

In relating the concepts of individual and group honor to the American public sector, it seems apparent that the American civil servant would not typically experience a profound loss of personal honor should one of his or her coworkers misbehave or perform ineffectively. This can be attributed partly to the fact that American society places great value on the concept of "individualism" — a concept that stresses the notion that an individual should be evaluated on the basis of his or her own behavior, rather than on the basis of someone else's behavior — and partly to the more heterogeneous nature of the American civil service, which precludes the kind of intense identification with the group that the Japanese worker experiences.

Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that, according to an increasing number of scholars and other critics, even if most Japanese management techniques could be successfully implemented throughout the American public sector, the resulting increase in productivity would be far less dramatic than what many "Japanese management enthusiasts" might expect. For one thing, variables having little to do with people-oriented management practices may account for a substantial (although still unknown) portion of increased Japanese productivity. For example, the impact on productivity of such factors as the prevalent use of the six-day work week, the effect of almost 100 percent employment, and the exceptionally high rate of industrial capacity utilization in Japan need to be studied further as part of a multivariate appraisal of Japanese productivity in which people-focused management techniques are only one ingredient.

Of a far more disturbing nature, however, is the charge some critics are now making, namely, that far from being participatory, the Japanese management subculture reflects nothing more than extraordinary conformity and subservience instilled in a working population by an authoritarian and rigid socialization process.\textsuperscript{13} Future research is needed to determine whether or not there is any validity to this contention and, if so, what the implications

\textsuperscript{12} For a critical evaluation of Kubota's research on the Japanese bureaucracy, see Ferrel Heady, \textit{A Comparative Perspective}, 215-33.

\textsuperscript{13} See, for example, James N. Ellenberger, "Japanese Management: Myth or Magic," \textit{AFL-CIO American Federationist} (April/June 1982), 9-12.
would be (moral and otherwise) if we were to pursue the incorporation of management techniques originating from a society so different from our own.

Conclusions
In attempting to reach some conclusions about the applicability of Japanese management techniques in the U.S. public sector, we can begin by deducing that the American civil servant may not be motivated toward optimum job performance by the need for spiritual fulfillment nor by an acute fear of bringing dishonor to the work group. Japanese management techniques such as the use of quality circles, consensus documents, and other forms of consensus based decision making can certainly be copied, to some degree, by U.S. public sector organizations. Yet, however one may view the Japanese experience, until the American public servant experiences the same sense of loyalty, commitment, and communal spirit (with the same intensity of emotion) that is instilled in the Japanese worker through the socialization process that characterizes his or her society, it is strongly suspected that Japanese management techniques will fall far short of their potential for increasing productivity in the U.S. public sector.