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Applying Japanese Management Techniques to American Higher Education

Peter Seldin

Pace University

Japanese techniques for managing organizations have captured corporate America's attention in recent years and for good reason: the techniques seem to work. I am persuaded they can also work in our colleges and universities. The real secret of Japan's postwar economic success, according to Ouchi (1981), is effective management, especially in making personnel policy. Briefly, Japanese management devotes special attention to four areas: 1) fostering decision-making by consensus; 2) creating mutual trust between management and employees; 3) treating employees with respect and dignity; and 4) looking to the future. All four approaches have bearing on college and university management. Adapting them requires thought, sensitivity, and the capacity to absorb frustration, but ultimate success would be worth all the effort.

DECISION-MAKING BY CONSENSUS

Actually, decision-making by consensus is gaining favor in institutions of higher learning. Even if true consensus is

not achieved, more people are involved in discussing problems whose resolution affects them. Budget committees consisting of administrators, faculty, and students function at many institutions. Curriculum improvement committees include many faculty members. Administrators are discovering that open communication not only clears the air but also acts to rally faculty, student, and alumni support. It produces better planning and sounder decisions. A growing number of institutions encourage open meetings where proposed cuts, personnel changes, financial priorities, and other campus issues are freely discussed.

Group decision-making sparks new ideas, brings collective experience and expertise together, heightens an understanding of a decision in the process of making it, and clothes the decision with acceptability because a respected group made it. The group must possess, of course, all the necessary facts to come up with the decision.

MUTUAL TRUST AND LOYALTY

Japanese management makes a point of trusting its employees, including supervisors and workers. Because management's trust is genuine, the employees respond with loyalty. Management is as conscious of employee concerns as the employees are of management's. The result is a bonding of management and employees.

How is the Japanese approach to be applied to colleges and universities? Today, on many campuses, trust and loyalty are in short supply. A stranger could be forgiven if he erroneously concluded that administrators and faculty are adversaries, as are departments and even faculty members in the same department. The challenge to college and university managements, therefore, is to gain mutual trust and loyalty. The road is rocky but not impassable.

RESPECT FOR EMPLOYEES

Japanese organizations traditionally treat all employees with respect and dignity. In American business and industry and in our colleges and universities, we lack this

tradition. We operate more on the principle that the common good is an achievement of individualistic efforts. It is worth noting, however, that the need for respect and dignity in organizations has not gone completely unnoticed. It was cited by Peters and Waterman (1982) as characteristic of excellent, innovative organizations. In my view, colleges and universities stand to gain greater productivity and efficiency from administrators, faculty, clericals and other personnel when all employees are treated with respect and dignity. A word of caution: by respect and dignity is meant the real thing, not a catchword or slogan. All employees must be treated as partners in the common academic enterprise.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

How can colleges and universities adapt the Japanese concept of looking to the future? They might open discussions on what they expect to be in the next ten years, in the next twenty. They must recognize that today's glory will not endure unless it is steadily renewed. What kinds of problems might they face in the future? How can they be anticipated and dealt with? Looking to the future, many colleges and universities are engaged in sizeable fund-raising programs. Yet, the building of war chests in itself is no guarantee. Fund-raising must be in harmony with a vision of the institution in the future. Breneman (1983) suggests that some of the key questions to be answered are:

1. Is the institution's present planning adequate for the future?
2. What effect would a ten or fifteen percent enrolment decline over the next five years have on costs and revenues?
3. Should the institution seek to attract new client groups to maintain enrollment?
4. Are there alternative uses for campus buildings (including dormitories)?
5. How can surplus physical assets be converted into revenue producers?

Until now, I have approached the problem of adapting Japanese management techniques to American colleges and universities broadly. Do these techniques apply on a smaller scale to the classroom? To the professor? To the students? Do the techniques have implications for faculty developers?

Again, a word of caution. We assume at our peril that the Japanese have the answer to the problems of institutions in the U.S. What works well in one culture is not necessarily transferable to another. But to study the Japanese success is to suggest that its postulates can be reshaped to meet our needs.

Examples of ideas holding promise include: 1) using quality circles in the classroom; 2) developing an extensive induction program for new professors; 3) moving to less specialized faculty careers.

USING QUALITY CIRCLES IN THE CLASSROOM

Applied for more than twenty years in Japanese industry, the quality circle is a way to improve job performance by stimulating employees to suggest their ideas on job improvement in their own specific fields. The idea is to get employees to think critically and seriously about their jobs and job relationships. They also show employees that management really cares about their suggestions. The circle, consisting usually of eight to ten employees, spends its time discussing the improvement of the product or the workplace. In an industrial setting, a facilitator organizes and leads the group.

Can quality circles be adapted to our colleges and universities? Kogut (1984) says yes. He reports that such circles have already been successfully introduced in several undergraduate courses in general chemistry and Asian history at The Pennsylvania State University.

Before a quality circle is created in a classroom, the function of the circle must be discussed with the students. Student volunteers are then recruited to attend weekly meetings over the semester. At Penn State, the professor serves as facilitator.

The circle zeros in on what takes place in the classroom, the teaching and the learning, and how each can be improved. No relevant classroom issue is off limits for discussion, although the professor retains the right to determine grades and academic standards.

Kogut found that his students offered valuable suggestions which helped him to fine-tune his instruction. The suggestions ranged from depositing a copy of his lecture notes in the library to ways to make more effective use of the blackboard. But he also stumbled into several problems. Overcoming initial student anxiety was one. Another was inducing enough students to volunteer for the circle. He also discovered the key importance of the facilitator for the group's effectiveness. He often needed the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job.

Faculty developers have a key role to play. They can help individual faculty members learn the required techniques of an effective group facilitator. They can teach professors how to develop the supportive climate necessary to replace the anxiety of students in the circle with trust and candor. They can help faculty learn how to develop a discussion and not dominate it. They can work with them on team-building and effective group process.

SYSTEMATIC ORIENTATION OF NEW PROFESSORS

Another facet of Japanese management readily adaptable to colleges and universities is the carefully organized orientation of new employees. They receive a thorough grounding in the product or service sold by the company. By the time they complete their orientation, they really know the formal and informal procedures to be followed in their daily work. Career developers employed by the company conduct the orientation sessions.

Professors newly hired by colleges and universities can benefit from a similar orientation program. Such a program's focus can be on enhancing interest in teaching and effectiveness in the classroom. Eble (1972) suggests the following items as essential in the induction of new professors: 1) communicating in tangible ways the school's

interest in teaching; 2) explaining and clarifying the reward system; 3) discussing in specific terms how to gain knowledge and skill in classroom instruction; 4) acquainting the novitiates with their own and other departments and colleges; 5) taking steps to offset any academic experience which threatens the development of a teacher; 6) providing relevant and factual information about the student body; 7) describing the resources available in the audio-visual center.

Faculty developers should be especially well equipped to handle the orientation of new professors. They enjoy an advantageous position due to their background and knowledge. They can enlist the aid of gifted teachers to talk about the teaching craft and share classroom experiences. They can impart important information about special teaching opportunities, teaching supports, and awards. They can also be helpful in career guidance.

While a few colleges and universities offer organized orientation sessions to new professors, the number is small. Even fewer are the follow-up discussions with new teachers a few months later. For all practical purposes, they are left to learn as best they can.

NONSPECIALIZED CAREERS

Another adaptable approach by Japanese management is an emphasis on a nonspecialized career. The Japanese executive deliberately avoids specializing in one area of company business, such as sales or finance, but moves regularly from one department to another. The result is an intimate understanding of the inner workings of the entire business enterprise. This approach runs counter to traditional academic demands for the high order of expertise that comes only from specialization. But it suggests an avenue worthy of serious discussion and careful experimentation if only to avoid the not uncommon problems of debilitating faculty stress and burnout. Indeed, what can be done to maintain the commitment and effectiveness of teachers?

First, provision might be made at colleges and

universities to discuss with midcareer teachers what they have been doing and to consider change. Several institutions have accomplished this by adopting a 4-1-4 calendar plan which permits new teaching contexts. Others, such as the University of California at Berkeley, transfer faculty members for a limited time from one department to another. A few institutions appoint "university" professors whose primary identification is not with any specialized department but with the broader at-large role of teacher and educator. This freshening of a teaching role and career can benefit the university, the teacher, and the students.

Second, the number of exchange programs might be stepped up. One-year exchanges of teaching assignments by professors in community colleges and universities could be encouraged. Urban and rural colleges could work exchanges to their mutual benefit.

Third, faculty members could be offered more opportunities for administrative experience. In colleges and universities, large numbers of administrative offices—admissions, financial aid, bursar, registrar, residence facilities, buildings and grounds, food service, among others—offer such experience. In addition, there are staff positions in the offices of deans and the vice president for academic affairs. A one-year administrative assignment for faculty members on a rotating basis could provide professors with a useful and broadening experience, and it could scarcely disrupt the institution. At the same time, it could have the added benefit of increasing the value of that faculty member to the institution.

Who should serve as the liaison in coordinating such programs? Faculty developers are in an excellent position to do so. They can serve as valuable clearinghouses of information as they work to help faculty members to improve their performance in the classroom. That performance is quite likely to improve following a year spent teaching at another institution or acting as an administrator. The experience, for some professors, will spell the difference between being bored and burned out and being alive and exciting in the classroom.

Clearly, there are benefits awaiting colleges and

universities that adapt some of the Japanese management techniques to academic use. What is needed now is careful analysis, discussion, and implementation. There will perhaps be more than occasional frustration, but the end product could be well worth the effort.

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