

SECOND YEAR

THE CONSULTANT

One day, Higuchi told me that an engineer from the well-known German consulting firm ATN would be coming to the company to discuss our project. I was confused: why would a German engineer be working with us, privy to proprietary information? Later that day, Erberto raced to my desk, hair over his brow and onto his face. He pulled it back over his shoulders so he could look directly into my eyes and said, almost panting, that Nizumi had hired ATN to design the product. "It's just crazy," he said, "ATN is going to be working on the design!"

"What? But we're already designing it!"

"The plan is to have ATN design their own version of the drivetrain while we design it independently."

I couldn't understand why they would go to such trouble. Why spend the extra time and money to design it in-house when the product was being designed by an outside firm?

I went with Erberto to the meeting, eager for the chance to chat freely about the project with a knowledgeable Western engineer. I saw a short bald man sitting at the desk surrounded by a number of Advanced Design engineers: Saiki, Hoshino, Aizawa and a technician. (Genda, however, was conspicuously absent.) The short man had large teeth and a face carved into wrinkles. He had an earthy, gritty personality. In heavily accented English, he introduced himself as Rolf. Westerners in Japan always insist upon being called by their first names.

Saiki and Hoshino presented their designs, laying out CAD drawings of

the assembly showing every bolt, curve, and surface. The level of detail was impressive, but Rolf asked how the parts could work together without major malfunctions. His idea of the product was different from theirs. He presented a fundamental reason why they should design it his way, but they did not agree. Rolf gave another reason, and they argued back and forth. During the discussion, Saiki and Hoshino would always drag Rolf into talking about the details. Rolf, however, would discuss the basics of the design, backing his reasoning with fundamentals. His voice got louder and he began acting agitated. I empathized with him, because for months I had experienced the same frustration. Saiki and Hoshino argued with Rolf, back and forth, for every component in the product.

Then the German began talking about the Advanced XT37 design. He pointed to a part of the design that would dramatically reduce its efficiency, offering logical reasons why it would not work well. Saiki asked, "How do you know it will be inefficient if you don't have any data?"

"I don't need data!" Rolf was getting angry. He explained yet again what was wrong. "You're going to have to pray at the temple for this to work!" he said. He clasped his hands together in the prayer position.

My Japanese colleagues laughed, as they do when chagrined, adding an element of absurdity to the encounter. They were obviously trying to cover up an embarrassing incident. Rolf, too, tried to smooth the situation over, actually touching Saiki and Hoshino on their arms to show he really meant well.

The German turned to me, asking why the XT37 was not well designed. I told him that the fault lay with casting. He proceeded to criticize the entire casting technology at Nizumi and advised how we could improve overall efficiency if we made certain changes. Then he listed all the German companies that would be happy to sell us the products necessary for these essential improvements. Hoshino told him in Japanese, "We can't buy foreign products." Rolf didn't understand a word of this, so one of the managers who spoke English translated for him: "We'll think about it." Management had no interest in buying foreign products, so the proposal to improve our casting plant went nowhere.

I found it significant that a company world-renowned for its products remained dependent on the West for its basic technology. From what I had experienced at Nizumi—the emphasis on secrecy, the lack of creativity, the stifling work environment—I could understand why the company hired the consultants. The managers in Advanced Design needed their expertise. They

did not have the organizational or educational creativity to come up with their own advances, and they knew that the European products were far more innovative than any Japanese products on the market. It was a clever strategy. They were able to obtain key technology for the Japanese market that had already been designed for the European market.

After Rolf's dramatic visit, Higuchi called me to his desk. He said that Genda reported that the results for the chosen design were excellent while Hoshino said they were atrocious. "Well, someone's not telling the truth," I told Higuchi. He agreed. I was vindicated, knowing that the heat would be put on Genda for his apparent dishonesty.

THE GROUP AND SOCIAL MECHANISMS OF CONTROL

After this, my role in the Advanced Design project was over. I was happy to go back to working on the ongoing project in my section. I was making good progress with the automation tools, and this success impressed management and allowed me to go home on time unless I had to fulfill my overtime requirements. The men in my section, however, were not happy that two days a week I was leaving work at five thirty.

One morning I passed Kurasawa's desk and asked how he was doing. He said that the previous evening I had missed a drinking party. When I asked why I hadn't been invited, he merely said, "You went home early." There was a short silence: a hint of his displeasure. I had learned that in Japan, direct confrontation is rare. Instead, the Japanese use silence and body language to convey a message. Colleagues communicated their displeasure with a physical response—a chagrined expression, a bow, a suspended action. I had learned to ignore such signs, so I simply replied to Kurasawa, "That's too bad." Similarly, I did not react at all when my colleagues gave me looks of disbelief and displeasure when I left "early" at the end of the day.

By now I had learned that the importance of the group is deeply embedded in the Japanese character. From their earliest school years, Japanese children learn to work in groups. All classes are divided into groups of five or six students, and each group has a team leader, or *hanchō*. The *hanchō* is responsible for distributing information, making sure the group achieves its daily assignments, and generally managing the group. Although members of the group do not do homework together, they each pressure the others to get

the assignments done on time. Each group receives a performance ranking. If one person is deviant, it may cause the group to sink in its ranking. Hence the children learn to monitor each other for the good of the group.¹

On trips sponsored by the company or the Japanese class, the tour leader would hold a small flag aloft so participants could walk from one site to the other as a group, without getting lost. On these trips, we always sat and ate together, making sure that our conversation was such that everyone could participate. No one was ever left alone, and the group organization made it highly unlikely that anyone would display antisocial behavior.

"The problem is," said Shiina, "Japanese will group up and not share information with members of an outside group. The group becomes extremely tightly knit, creating its own rules, with no one quite sure how or why they were created. But the rules determine how the group behaves." These rules become a way for a group to bond and conform to a distinct pattern of behavior that sets it apart from other groups.

"Groups at the company are defined according to divisions and sections," Shiina went on. "These groups are well known. But there are also other groups that are invisible yet very powerful, and these hidden groups create their own rules. Often you do not know about these groups. It's very complicated. You must observe closely, for that is the only way to find out about these hidden groups."

A few days later, Higuchi silently approached my desk. He told me he was reading a book by a famous Japanese psychoanalyst who was making comparisons between the American and the Japanese. He said the doctor wrote that the American system was better than Japan's because American infants are raised in a very severe environment: they are left all alone in their rooms to sleep at night. Higuchi asked me whether this was true, and I replied that it was. Higuchi seemed confused. "You mean it's like a dormitory? Everyone is separated in their own rooms?" He was puzzled because in Japan, children sleep with their parents from infancy until puberty.

Initially, I thought this explained why Japanese preferred to work in groups rather than as individuals. Later, I came to realize that groups are a way for Japanese companies to get employees to work harder. You are coerced into longer hours by your very colleagues.

Nicholi, a Romanian factory worker, who wore a bandana around his

¹ From an interview with Mr. Yamato Kobayashi, the secretary general of the Research Institute of Democracy and Education, January 2000, Tokyo, Japan.

neck, attested to the importance of the group on the line as a force for social coercion. To his surprise, it was the working group instead of his boss that functioned to control workers. He had left Romania in 1990, thinking he had left his communist past behind, but he told me, "There are a few things I learned in Japan about controlling workers that I could teach the communists back in Eastern Europe!"

Nicholi had had an exciting life. Escaping Romania, he had stowed away on a ship to Toronto, where he had married a Japanese woman of Korean descent. Now they had returned to her native land and had two small children.

Nicholi brought me to the attendance board that stood between the office and the line. A large grid listed the names of each worker in the factory, and the dates of the year. Each box represented a particular workday and held a small outline of a human figure.

"When a worker arrives in the morning," Nicholi explained, "he must fill in the drawing with a colored pencil: green for well, yellow for not so well, white for a little sick, and red for very sick. It is a very efficient way to control workers." It was public way of revealing who was ill or absent so the group, punished by having to work harder, could exert social pressure upon the culprit. I was familiar with social disapproval, as I experienced it every night I left work at a normal hour, but for a Japanese person, social disapproval is much more disturbing than it is to me.

Nicholi's experience on the line mirrored mine in the office. "Workers are always watching each other and looking over each other's shoulders," he said. "I feel like I am at home because people are watching me all the time. The only difference is that in Eastern Europe, it was a dictatorship, so people worked hard because they were forced to. Here, the group makes you work hard: workers on the line are forced to monitor each other for their own self-interest."

If, for example, a quality or safety problem arose, despite the fact that it could be traced to an individual, the entire group would be punished. This created an environment in which members of the group monitored each other's performance to ensure that work ran smoothly and the group as a whole was protected from punishment.²

² Laurie Graham, *On the Line at Subaru-Isuzu* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) and Dorrine Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), also experienced monitoring while working on the line at a Japanese company.

I asked Shiina why groups were so important at Japanese companies. "To be a member of the group is crucial," he said. "Every member of the group is like a part of the body, each has his own role, and those who come in as outsiders are not accepted because they have no role. It's like having an extra arm or leg with nothing to do, for you only need two legs to run, not three."

Shiina pushed up his glasses and continued. When he'd returned from America with a new set of skills, he was looking forward to joining a group of other engineers in his field. Management was interested in using his knowledge to make improvements in technology. However, management disagreements about the details of the new team and the appointment of the supervisor complicated the formation of the group. Some managers thought he was being given special treatment and felt jealous, while other managers wanted the new group in their own sections. A power-struggle ensued, and the formation of the new group was abandoned.

When he returned to the Research Section, his colleagues did not show any interest in him. "They would smile and say something nice but it was not sincere." In spite of his desire to contribute, they didn't want his knowledge. "I had been out of the company for over four years, and they had established a world without me." So he approached a colleague who had helped him in the past and requested a transfer to another department. The colleague was indignant. "What? You want to move without returning anything to this department?" Shiina had been very embarrassed.

As a result of Shiina's alienation, he felt dissatisfied with his work and lagged behind others in his performance. He felt that Uno was patient and he did not blame him for his failures until one day during his evaluation he said, "I didn't want to force my son to study too hard when he entered junior high school but now he doesn't study hard at all. I wonder if my decision was correct." Other managers who wanted Shiina to join their group approached him, but he felt they had no intention of using his knowledge but merely wanted one more subordinate. The upshot was that Shiina ended up working alone, without any group, simply reporting to Uno. This was a great tribulation to Shiina.

One advantage of being a member in good standing of a group is protection. Higuchi told me a story that illustrated this. One day, it became known that a high-level manager from Toyota wanted to talk to Higuchi about a technical issue. Since Uno did not know exactly why the Toyota manager wanted to speak to Higuchi, first he sent Hiraga, who was ignorant about the

issue, to speak with him in the hope of learning more. Hiraga returned from his meeting without any information about the issue—having been humiliated, to boot. Then Uno sent Dr. Zombie to talk with him. He was also scolded and sent back without any relevant information. Uno continued to send one warm body after another to talk with the Toyota manager until there was no one left to send except Higuchi. At this point, Higuchi was terribly worried and had no other choice but to face the fire. As it turned out, the Toyota Manager simply wanted to know why he had spent so much money on an expensive design tool. Higuchi presented him with a satisfactory reason and the issue was resolved. This incident shows how managers protected their subordinates from outsiders.

Typically, an engineer at Nizumi—particularly in the research and design departments—was introduced to the company by his professor or by an alumni connection. If the engineer had a specialty, particularly a graduate degree, he would be assigned to a group that specialized in his field. Those with only undergraduate degrees were assigned to any department. Those joining a work group, it was important for the *kōhai* to establish a smooth and long-lasting relationship with his *senpai* or he could not be taught the skills he would need to be promoted.

It seemed odd that you needed to be accepted by your group to learn important information about your job, and the company did distribute some reports to help engineers obtain needed skills without relying on a *senpai*. These reports, however, often lacked substance or were too specialized for easy understanding. Shiina's problems were twofold: he lacked a *senpai* who could help him develop his skills, and he lacked a group that needed his expertise.

The entire system was dependent on relationships. Although the variety of groups in a section worked on the common goal of increasing the efficiency of the product, little communication existed between groups unless they worked on joint projects, or unless individual members were introduced to one another through their connections.

When new employees entered the section, I watched closely to see what would happen. I saw that other members of the section kept to themselves and were not at all friendly to the newcomers. The new members spent much of their time observing and digesting group behavior so they were better able to learn the rules. Even those who had been at the company for several years did not find it easy to develop friendships within the section. Each employee

at most had only a few good friends at the company with whom he could share his true feelings (the *honno*) as opposed to interacting in the world of day-to-day superficial relationships (the *tatemaie*).

An important characteristic of the group was permanence. Human Resources allowed an employee to transfer to another group, but in general it was very rare. Developing an engineering or technical specialty, particularly if it required years of education and experience, meant you tended to stay with your group. It was common to assign employees to "lend help" to departments that needed more personnel on a short-term basis, but in most cases, employees remained in their initial groups, within the same section, for their entire careers.

Because of the closed nature of the organization, it was very important to maintain close relationships with upper-level managers (*erai hito*) and even to professors (*erai sensei*) outside the company. I remembered when a well-known professor from the Tokyo Institute of Technology visited the company to give a presentation. He was given a royal welcome. When he arrived, he was ushered into a conference room, where office ladies served him green tea. Selected managers (Uno, Scarface, Shiga) chatted respectfully with him. Then a general announcement about the lecture was broadcast over the loudspeaker system, inviting all employees to attend the presentation. After the professor was introduced, everyone bowed deeply in unison. When the professor talked about his research, the managers and employees reacted to every bit of technical information as if it was the word of God—bowing their heads deeply and murmuring, "Oh, is that so." After the lecture, the section manager and two other managers brought the professor to a very expensive five-star restaurant.

THE POWER GROUP AND BULLYING

After I had been at Nizumi a while, I noticed the existence of a tightly knit group that seemed to be a power center. Scarface was extremely close to Uno, the section manager. I frequently saw him attend the high-level meetings sitting beside Uno. Scarface was a skilled engineer, so his input was valuable, but his close personal relationship with Uno determined his position within the hierarchy. Scarface was also close to two other lower-level managers named Shiga and Jimbo. Both were also overweight, spoke in very deep

voices, and were graduates of high-level universities whose professors were *erai sensei*. Scarface was particularly close to Shiga, whose professor was the *erai sensei* from the Tokyo Institute of Technology who had visited Nizami. Scarface and Shiga often enjoyed daily conversation during the smoking break, a ritual that occurred at twelve thirty immediately after they returned from lunch. I would often see them sitting among the others in the smoking room, talking in deep authoritative voices and laughing only with each other.

I asked Shiina why Scarface was so close to Uno, and the answer was simple: "He is the one whom Uno trusts the most." For one thing, both were graduates of Keio University. For another, Uno respected Scarface's technical expertise. So Scarface was Uno's right-hand man, and as an employee who worked alongside the other engineers, he was responsible for making sure the workers were performing their duties while Uno attended to his higher-level job functions.

In Japan, there is no real equality: either someone is above you or they are below you.³ So I wondered how Scarface's relative youth and lower rank affected his relationships with the high-level managers in the section who were not part of the inner circle the way he was. After all, Dr. Zombie and Hiraga were a lot older than Scarface and had a higher ranking. But Scarface had greater decision-making power about product design, and he was a man moving up, while Zombie and Hiraga had reached their highest level.

I asked Erberto about his group, and he said that Oda also had a young subordinate with whom he was close. His name was Matsuki. I began observing his behavior and noticed that Matsuki wore clothes similar clothes to Oda's, talked in a loud voice like Oda, and laughed just like Oda. It was as if he was copying his behavior. No wonder Oda felt at home with him. Superior and subordinate had a shared way of thinking (*kangaekata*) as a result of close personal contact.

What I found upsetting about the power group in my section (Uno, Scarface, Shiga, and Jimbo) were the methods they used to establish discipline. Harassment, or what in Japan is referred to as bullying (*ijime*), was routine, and some unfortunate individuals were bullied on a daily basis.

Ienaga was assigned to work with Uno's power group, and he initially seemed well acclimated. Although he had a quiet, introverted personality, he would often joke and laugh when the others made suggestions or comments

³ See Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

about his work. As the weeks passed, however, these suggestions became pointed, and the criticism was more like harassment. Ienaga became nervous and withdrawn, keeping his head down as he sat at his desk. Once at a drinking party, Ienaga ordered a mixed drink. When Jimbo saw that it came with a bright red cherry, he growled that Ienaga should be drinking beer.

When Scarface or Uno asked Ienaga questions during department meetings, he often seemed shaken. His face would turn bright pink as he stuttered out a reply. Once while we were at a meeting, Uno asked whether certain members of our section would attend a seminar. When his name was called Ienaga hesitated for a few seconds. The room became still as everyone waited for his response. Finally, he replied in a shaky voice, "I plan to take it." This behavior was designed to let Uno know he was unhappy, yet Uno did nothing about it.

It was obvious that Ienaga had the wrong *kokoro* for the group. A person's *kokoro*, how one feels and thinks, was highly important in developing long-term relationships with co-workers.⁴

THE WEEKEND RETREAT

Socializing after work was intended to strengthen bonds among employees. This was why the drinking parties were so important. In our section, at least once a year we also spent a weekend together. This was called the *shain ryoko*, in which all the members of our section spent the weekend at a company hotel. We traveled to the hotel in assigned vehicles, Ienaga riding with Uno. I thought this arrangement curious since it was well known that Ienaga was upset with Uno's bullying. When everyone arrived, we sat down for dinner, but Uno and Ienaga did not appear. We waited a few minutes, then Dr. Zombie decided we should eat without them.

Shiga was the only member of the power group at dinner that night, and I suppose he thought it necessary to strut his stuff. Tonight, the person in his sights was Ishii. Shiga sat at the center of the table and said that Ishii's pre-

⁴ Nakane, in *Japanese Society*, makes an insightful observation about the nature of the relationship between two individuals in a senior and subordinate position in Japanese society. Often referred to as the *oyabun-kobun* relationship, the *oyabun* is the employee who obtains the status of parent and *kobun* of that as the child. "The essential elements in the relationship are that the *kobun* receives benefits or help from his *oyabun*, such as assistance in securing employment or promotion, and advice in the occasion of important decision making." The relationship is one that develops over many years. Within the context of work, the *kobun* also functioned as an *oyabun* to a subordinate whom he can "trust" establishing a line of hierarchy.

sentations during the Friday technical meetings were inferior and that Ishii should learn more from the meetings. Ishii responded in his high-pitched voice, saying that when he'd entered the company he hadn't known anything about the technology, but he'd since learned a lot. His effeminate voice contrasted with Shiga's deep voice. Shiga spoke as if he was god in heaven speaking to a lesser mortal. Dr. Zombie joined Shiga in the attack on Ishii. Ebisawa defended him. Nonetheless, Ishii left the dinner table in anger.

Now it was my turn. Dr. Zombie began talking about patents and said it was important to publish more patents. He turned toward me, "So what's up with your patent Mehri san?" I assured him that I had already developed a patent and that I was in the process of submission.

As we sat at the long table in a dark room, drinking and eating small bits of neatly prepared food served on a myriad of small dishes, the conversation began to lighten up. Dr. Zombie would crack a joke then burst into maniacal laughter. His thick black-rimmed glasses and wiry Einsteinlike hair made him look like an intoxicated professor, and I found him quite amusing.

After dinner we headed upstairs for the *nijikai*, where we waited for Uno and Ienaga. We sat on the tatami mats and began to drink and talk, but they still did not arrive. The person who organized the event was the youngest member of the section, and he poured the drinks and organized the food. Naturally Shiga sat in the center of the room, self-positioned as the leader of the party. It was well known among the guys that he was a heavy drinker and would often drink himself into a stupor. Now he began a monologue about himself and his connections to a famous professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology. We listened without interruption to stories we had often heard before. Although he was a skilled engineer, Shiga's accomplishments were less important than his connection to a high-level, well-respected professor at Japan's number-one technical university.

Finally, Uno and Ienaga arrived, and we were all relieved. The guys immediately poured Uno some beer, but he did not drink much. Ienaga said the reason they were late was that they had had an important meeting with a large company that ran longer than they had expected. Now I speculated that Uno's choosing Ienaga as his traveling companion was an indirect atonement for Ienaga's earlier mistreatment.

Shiga suddenly announced that he wanted to sing some karaoke. A half dozen other men and I joined him. Dr. Zombie sang his favorite song, "Diana"—not once, but several times: "Oh, please, stay with me—Diana!"

I sang, as I often did, Frank Sinatra's version of "My Way." Then the guys begged me to sing a traditional Japanese *enka* song. Japanese country and blues songs (*enka*) are particularly popular during karaoke. I resisted, but finally decided to give it a go. After all, *enka* songs had catchy melodies. Ishii sang along with me, helping me read the Japanese characters on screen. After a few beers, he had relaxed and forgotten his earlier anger at Shiga and Dr. Zombie.

Chiba approached me and said he would like to go on a trip with the International Adventure Club. "I once traveled across Japan in a van by myself," he said, perhaps to establish his credentials as an adventurer. I encouraged him to come, for I thought a day in the mountains with other singles would be healthier than an evening at a whorehouse.

The party continued upstairs. The upper-level managers went off to play mahjong in the other room, while the younger engineers and lower-level managers remained behind. As we continued to drink, Shiga became increasingly boisterous. He turned to me and slurred that famous question "So, Mehri san, do you like Japanese woman?"

The room became quiet as all the men turned to me, anticipating my response. I had been asked this question so many times I knew exactly what to say. Although I found their coy behavior displeasing, I said, as usual, "Oh, yes. Japanese women are so kind-hearted [*yasashii*]."

"Compared to American women, Japanese girls are very sweet," he said.

Then Shiga began to wrestle with Ienaga. He started with a few harmless holds, but gradually became rougher, tossing Ienaga about and making him look like a fool in front of his colleagues. As they continued to wrestle, Uno came in to grab a drink and saw the two men rolling about on the straw mats like a couple of school children. He laughed and went back to playing mahjong. It looked like Ienaga was in for more physical abuse.

I felt bad for Ienaga and angry at Shiga. His bullying made me remember some unhappy times I'd had as a teenager. I was extremely awkward and shy at that time, so I was often the victim of bullying. I eventually grew into a mature and sociable adult but those memories did not fade. A little drunk myself, I suddenly found myself down on the floor wrestling with Shiga. Ienaga rolled away gratefully. Shiga pinned me down pretty quickly. We wrestled again, and he won again. As we continued to wrestle, I began to learn his moves and put up a better defense. We occasionally took short breaks to drink a little more, and then we would continue our brawl. Although the fight

was not serious, I wanted to pin him down to get some payback: if not for Ienaga then for myself. I needed to relieve the frustration that had been building up in me.

Finally, I was able to pin him down. I felt a tremendous sense of victory. Shiga, however, became extremely angry, like a child bully who'd been embarrassed in the schoolyard. He asked if I was fighting for real. I replied that I was just having fun. He said that if he hadn't known me, he would have wanted to kill me. I was surprised at the violence of his emotions, but again I assured him that I wasn't serious. I must confess, however, that I felt satisfied: even elated. Someone had finally humbled the bully.

SERVICE OVERTIME AND COMPANY RULES

I returned to the dorm that Sunday and entered the shoe room. As I placed my shoes into the locker, I heard "Hey man!" I turned around and saw a tall, lanky Japanese man named Fuse. We had met a few months earlier during a dormitory get-together. I should specify that we had not met over green tea, casually saying a few words to each other; rather, we'd been formally introduced to each other by the dorm manager. Fuse had lived in America for a year in high school and now worked as a salesman at Nizumi. He had once invited me to his room, and to impress me, he'd played "Top Gun" on his VCR. When I told him I hadn't seen the movie, he'd been shocked.

Now he asked me if I wanted to join him for dinner, and although I had a slight hangover from the weekend retreat, we headed to a local family restaurant. Family restaurants were popular in Japan and typically featured "Japanized" American food, such as hamburger or chicken cutlet—served, however, with rice and not potatoes.

"I'm learning Spanish now," Fuse said. "The company wants me to work for the sales division in Central America."

"Wow, that's great," I said.

"Yeah, I suppose. But my *senpai* lived there for three years, and he said there was a big problem with violence."

"In what way?" I asked.

"People kill each other just for sport."

I told him there were some problems with violence but that killing for sport was probably just a rumor. Soon, he began complaining about work.¹

hate my job," he said, "I'm so busy and I always have to do service overtime."

"Service overtime? What do you mean?"

"It's a rule at the company," he said, "You've never heard of it? In Japanese it's called *sābisu zangyō*. *Sābisu* is from the English 'service' and *zangyō* means overtime in Japanese. The rule requires you to do overtime work without pay. I hate it, and my boss doesn't like it either, but his boss requires it."

Suddenly, I realized why my leaving work "early" always upset my colleagues. Although I had spent over a year at the company, not a single person had told me about *sābisu zangyō*. I couldn't believe that Higuchi had neglected to tell me about this important part of the Nizumi culture.

"Who told you about this rule?" I asked Fuse.

"Nobody. I followed what my co-workers did. Maintaining harmony related to overtime is important at Japanese companies. If you don't do what others do, the group will punish you."

Sābisu zangyō! When I first started working at Nizumi, I thought employees stayed late because of loyalty. Later, I thought it was because they had too much work to do in too little time. But all along, whether employees had to work on a demanding project or not, *sābisu zangyō* was a company rule. I now knew why my colleagues showed their displeasure when I left before they did. I was supposed to do as they did, but I wasn't following the rule.

Uno was a strong believer in service overtime. As a result, most employees would stay late most nights, whether or not they had fulfilled their required paid overtime. Although for some reason Uno had never reproached me for my hours, I felt angry that the system was cheating the other workers.

Rules play a significant role in controlling the behavior of Japanese people from an early age. "There are hundreds of rules at Japanese schools," said Yamato Kobayashi when I interviewed him later. Some rules include socks of a certain length and hair of a certain style. One function of the rules is to force students to conform to group norms. For example, there is a rule that if your hair is curly, you will need to straighten it to look like other students.⁵

I returned to work on Monday not knowing how Shiga would behave after our heated wrestling bout. To my surprise, he approached me and said he was sorry. I told him there were no hard feelings.

I was curious about what the guys thought of the wrestling match. I told Shiina what had happened, since he hadn't been at the Shain Ryōkō. He

⁵ From an interview with Mr. Yamato Kobayashi, the secretary general of the Research Institute of Democracy and Education, January 2000, Tokyo, Japan.

smiled and said, "I heard all about it." The news had already spread. Since I had humiliated a bully, my colleagues were pleased, which was a great relief to me.

Having only learned the rule about service overtime after a year at Nizumi made me think that perhaps there were other rules I knew nothing about. I walked over to Erberto's area to ask him about rules. He shook his head, and his hair rippled over his shoulders. "There are rules for everything in Japanese society. It's crazy! There is even a rule that tells workers how to urinate."

"Get out of here!"

"If you don't believe me, go take a look."

So I walked into the bathroom and saw a small sign hanging above the urinals that read, "Take one step forward." The bathroom walls held a number of such small postings. One told employees how to behave during an earthquake "Guard yourself from falling objects. If a fire occurs, put it out."

When I returned to Erberto, he said, "Did you hear about the parking rules?"

"No."

"Here, take a look." He handed me a list of instructions about proper use of parking permits. One rule prohibited any employee of Nizumi to park a non-keiretsu car in the company parking lot. I was surprised by this rule since so many people in Japan owned cars not made by Toyota. Later on, I discovered that anyone breaking the parking rules would be punished. What I found most interesting thing about the parking rules was that they were phrased in the language of morality: justice and injustice, good and bad. An employee who uses the parking lot without permission commits "an injustice to the company. From now on if there is a person who does this we will severely punish that person, so please obey the rules on this document (do not be a bad member of the company)."

I asked Shiina about the rules at Nizumi, and he pointed to a thick book lying on my desk that explained many of the company rules. One day I would read portions of it at length, but for now I just asked him to show me the page about service overtime. He shook his head: that was an unwritten rule. I asked him how employees were supposed to learn about these rules if they were unwritten. He fiddled with his glasses for a moment, then said, "At Japanese companies you are supposed to learn by absorbing through your skin." When I asked him what he meant, he confirmed what Fuse had said the night before—one has to observe and copy other employees' behavior.

Shiina said that rules at Nizumi were extremely important, and he told me a personal story about what had happened when he broke a cardinal rule.

Upon returning home from his stay in America, he was eager to publish his research results in an engineering journal. First, he approached his old boss and asked him about submitting a paper for publication. He was told it was a good idea. Then he asked Uno. But when Uno discovered that Shiina had gone to his former boss before talking with him, Uno angrily rejected his request.

The result was that after many years of hard work, Shiina never received the opportunity to publish his paper, which might have contributed to a substantial promotion. He said that after living in America, he had forgotten this important company rule,⁶ a rule that mandated that one must always report to one's direct superior before approaching anyone else. By making an example of Shiina, Uno was telling all the employees in the section to obey the rules, written and unwritten.

I felt sorry for Shiina. Not only was he having a rough time at the company, but his wife was ill. He never told me what sickness she had, and I didn't want to pry, but he often said she wasn't happy with her life in Japan. She was Japanese, but she was having a difficult time acclimating to Japanese society after living in America for ten years.



One day, Erberto came to work and went to his morning meeting. To his surprise, he found that his group had adopted a new rule—you must take off your shoes before entering the section. A line had been drawn on the carpet showing the boundaries of the workspace. When you crossed that line, your shoes had to come off. Japanese custom requires a person to take off his or her shoes before entering a house, a temple, or any place with a straw mat floor. However, before this, no working areas inside the company had been designated shoeless areas. The reasons were obvious. In many sections of Nizumi, there was heavy machinery; indeed, some workers were required to wear steel-tipped shoes.

Erberto was angry at having to take off and put on his shoes when entering and leaving his section. He couldn't understand the purpose of the new

⁶ Japanese often have problems relearning rules of the company on returning from abroad. Some companies provide employees and their families with retraining so that they can relearn social conduct, language, and the rules of how to reassimilate within Japanese society.

rule; he said it wasn't rational. Furthermore, it directly violated safety rules, since large and very heavy parts were located on a table in the section. If a chunk of cast iron fell off the table, it could seriously damage a foot. Erberto's manager, Oda, responded that the rule had been decided—and that was that.

CRUDE BEHAVIOR

One day, during the morning break, Erberto and his colleague Chen asked me to join them for a stroll. Chen was a chubby, mild-mannered Chinese man with a large round face. When he smiled, he bore a striking resemblance to the Pillsbury Dough Boy. Erberto had come to work that day dressed in his company blazer. I thought his irreverence made him an unlikely candidate for the typical company man, but he looked sharp in his attire. Since the office was hot and stuffy from computers that functioned as space heaters, I was happy to take a break in the fresh air.

We strolled in the courtyard, and Chen talked about his group. He said some strange things happened when he went on drinking parties with them. "Tell us!" asked Erberto. Chen gave a smile that consumed most of his face. He told us that during one drinking party, a young technician suddenly removed his sock and put it in the *nabe* that was boiling in the center of the room.⁷ He cooked his sock in front of his group, then poured the sock-cooked stew into a small bowl. Then he asked his immediate boss to drink from the bowl! His boss refused, of course, but the young man was relentless. He sat on his knees, bowed to the ground and screamed over and over again "onagai shimasu, onagai shimasu [please, please, do me a favor]." He seemed to be having a hysterical fit. Embarrassed at this adolescent behavior, the boss caved in and drank from the stew.

"How bizarre!" said Erberto.

Chen told us about even more peculiar evenings. At another drinking party with his colleagues, including one woman engineer with a Ph.D., members of Chen's team became so drunk they stripped down and ran through the bar fully naked. They threw up, made lewd remarks to other patrons, and insulted their boss. When I inquired about the woman, Chen said that she was embarrassed but had not been forced to join in.

⁷ *Nabe* is a traditional Japanese stew of vegetables and meat that is placed on a burner to cook continuously while people freely eat from it using chopsticks.

During yet another party, the men in Chen's group got so zonked they put cigars up their rear ends and began smoking with their butt cheeks. After each took a few puffs, they passed the stogy around to smoke it in their mouths. They ended the party with a macho game that involved pouring hot sake on each other's crotches followed by cold water and a punch in the chest. According to Chen, Oda would usually instigate this crude behavior and cheer on his subordinates. The group members forget their usual social conduct in favor of these new group norms encouraged by their boss.⁸

Never before had Chen experienced such terrible foolishness. Furthermore, he was upset about the cost of such evenings: from about \$80 to \$100 for each person. At the end of the month, it added up to a lot of money, but Oda reveled in the drinking parties and required group members to attend them frequently.

My colleagues continued to resent my early leave-taking. Even though I now knew about *sābisu zangyō*, I pretended I did not. So I continued to defy the group. This led to some odd results. Once while I was talking to Shiina about joining foreign organizations, I jokingly commented, "Yeah, and there are lots of pretty, single women."

He responded, "Just don't rape any of them."

I initially regarded this as a joke, but then I felt something more serious was going on. So I asked Shiina why he had made this crude remark. He said, "In Japan, if you do not do what others do, they will look upon you with suspicion. Be careful—that's all." Apparently, the lunchroom talk was that I spent the evening hours (while they were still at work) chasing down young women in an unsavory part of town. My colleagues wanted to modify my aberrant behavior by spreading rumors and making me feel guilty. I was angry at their scurrilous talk, but I refused to give in to them.

A few months later, Erberto told me that Chen was being bullied by Oda and his group.

I asked, "For what?"

"Because he's not attending drinking parties anymore, and you know how Oda is about that."

I could well imagine. It's all right to refuse the occasional drinking party, but to refuse twice in a row will worry your group members, and a third re-

⁸ The scholar Takie Lebra refers to this behavior as "social nudity," where a participant's self is "stripped of all face or social mask." Takie Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), 116.

fusal signals that something is definitely wrong. When an individual rejects the rules, he or she will experience the displeasure of the group as well as the wrath of his boss.

My sympathies were entirely with Chen. He simply did not want to spend his rare free time and hard-earned money with a group of raucous, drunken fools. Oda saw things differently and interpreted Chen's actions as a refusal to bond with the group and to obey his own authority. Oda tried to bully him into attending the drinking parties, but Chen held his ground and refused to attend. Soon, Chen discovered that one of his colleagues was reporting his daily behavior to Oda. Chen's determination had made his own group—as well as management—deeply suspicious of him. Chen just hoped the whole thing would blow over and he would again gain the favor of the group.

CONTRACT WORKERS IN THE FACTORY

During the day, Erberto and I often got restless. We sat long hours at our computer screens, and our backs, necks, and eyes felt the strain of our fixed positions.

One day a little before three, Erberto suggested that we visit Kofi in the factory. That would be a welcome change of scene. I hesitated at first, thinking management might not like foreigners poking their noses into the production area, but Erberto assured me it wouldn't be a problem.

Kofi worked from 8:00 A.M. to 4:55 P.M. with a fifty minute lunch break at noon and two ten-minute breaks at 10 A.M. and 3 P.M. All factory workers had a similar schedule. If Kofi did not finish the day's quota, or if there was a quality problem or an accident, he had to work overtime. The three o'clock break, however, was sacrosanct, and no one worked through it.

Erberto and I strolled through the courtyard toward the factory. He had taken to wearing the company blazer, and today he also wore the soft-brimmed company hat, pulled down to his eyebrows, his long black hair fanning out beneath it. We walked along, talking and cracking jokes. Kofi worked on the second floor of the factory, so we walked up a tiny steel stairway and into the factory clamor. Erberto and I both loved the loud sounds of the machinery. Since it was still before three, we waited for Kofi near a small room where men could watch television or break for a cigarette. For some un-

known reason, there were always one or two guys sitting there while the others were busy working.

I could see Kofi working on the line. He was dressed in typical factory clothes: a greasy jumpsuit and a cap. Kofi was not large, but he was all muscle. He moved quickly from one portion of the vehicle to the other, welding each component. I enjoyed the irony. Here I was, ten thousand miles from my home, and an African was making the Japanese vehicles so many Americans loved.

Finally, the three o'clock bell sounded, and Kofi came over and greeted us. There was a big smile on his dark, leathery face. This brief opportunity with us allowed him to vent some of his grievances, and he spoke freely of his work on the line. He said that one product after the other came through while he welded them. He showed me the numbering system on the wall, which indicated the amount of products made per day. Kofi said, "When a worker makes a mistake, the line stops, and we find a solution."

The worker pushes one of three lights to signal the danger level: a green light means no danger, a gold light means the worker needs mild assistance, and a red light means that the worker is in danger and needs help right away. When the gold light goes on, maybe one person comes to help, but many more rush over if the light is red. If the *andon* cord (which stops the line) is pulled for quality problems, a team pulls the vehicle over to work on it while the line starts up again. After the problem has been fixed, a top quality-control (QC) supervisor goes to the floor to inspect the vehicle.

As we continued to talk, Kofi walked over to a large sink where the men were cleaning their hands. He introduced me to Romone, a Peruvian of Japanese descent. We had been in the Japanese language class together, but had never spoken to each other. Now we said hello as if we were old friends. Romone had worked at Isuzu before coming to Nizumi, so I asked him how the two compared. He told me that what immediately struck him when he arrived at Nizumi was its policy of hiring workers of different races and nationalities. At Isuzu, the policy was totally discriminatory. Romone said, "You will not be hired if you're black or if you're white, and the only foreigners they hire are of Japanese descent." Isuzu had been recruiting labor from Japanese communities in Peru, and Romone went to the Japanese Embassy and applied for a position. After an extended interview, he was one of the few Peruvians to be offered a job. In the past, many companies in Japan, including Nizumi, refused to hire whites or blacks, but today most Japanese companies

have a more enlightened policy. Nizumi became more inclusive in its hiring when the demand for workers in Japan increased during the bubble of the late 1980s, and they had to tap alternative sources of labor.

I brought up the issue of *kaizen* with Kofi. "Improvement meetings are vital to the way Japanese work," he said. "It's like communism, everyone shares their views."⁹ He said it was a job requirement for all workers in his group to meet every Tuesday after work to discuss improving safety and production. Management would ask for suggestions, but since Kofi was only a contract, or temporary, worker, they never gave him credit for his ideas, even when they implemented them.¹⁰ It was rare for temporary workers at the company to become permanent employees. According to Kofi, all foreigners in the factory were contract workers, even if they were married to Japanese women, as he was, and had permanent residences in Japan.

He went on to talk about unequal workloads between Japanese and foreigners. He said that the Japanese would work in groups that were fully staffed, while foreigners were often required to do the same job with fewer people. For example, if a job required a working group of three people, the Japanese workers would get three people for the job, while the foreigners would have to do the same job with only two people in their group. According to Kofi, the company was "testing" the foreigners to see what they would endure. Not only did foreigners receive less training than Japanese workers, they continually suffered from discrimination related to job assignments. "Lazy Japanese workers at the company are always trying to push work onto foreigners because they feel they can get away with it," Kofi said. "They said to me 'You're a foreigner, so you don't get overtime.'" Overtime work at Japanese companies accounts for 30 to 40 percent of a workman's total pay, so it's hard to earn a decent living without it. According to Kofi, Nizumi is very afraid of losing permanent, Japanese workers to other companies so they give the permanent employees the more pleasant and less dangerous tasks. Nat-

⁹ On the line, safety *kaizen* meetings were called KYT, in Japanese *kikken yochin* training, meaning danger awareness training.

¹⁰ In her study on the Subaru-Isuzu plant in Indiana, Laurie Graham also observes a tension between the permanent and temporary workers. Although they did not have job security or full benefits, temp workers were an integral part of the work system, even though they were considered as second-tier workers who could obtain a full-time position as an "associate." "Temps are part of the psychological tension created by the Japanese model because they represent both a threat and a promise to the Associates." Although psychological tension existed between the temp and permanent workers at the company, it manifested itself in the form of discrimination related to race and compensation. See Graham, *On the Line*.

urally, this leads to some friction between the two groups, with the foreign workers of Japanese descent occupying the middle ground.

Then Kofi told me about the hierarchy of favoritism among foreigners. "The Japanese Brazilians are on top. They're considered the closest to the Japanese so they're treated best." The Japanese Peruvians are ranked lower, since they've lost favor in recent years. A few have been arrested for crimes, and all Peruvians are in disrepute after the hostage crisis in Peru, so recruitment efforts in Peru have fallen sharply. Other foreigners—Chinese, Koreans, Iranians, Bangladeshi—are ranked lower.¹¹ Naturally, education, strength, and language ability are also used to determine what type of job a worker will be assigned. The strongest and least educated guys are sent to the casting plant.

Romone approached me to ask if I would be going to the Japanese language class this week. I said I was and asked him to tell me about himself. Romone had come to Japan in the early 1990s to work at the Isuzu factory. "Safety at Isuzu was terrible, the lines were so fast and the work was so hard that at the end of the day my body hurt all over. And all they gave us was a safety helmet—for the rest, we were on our own."

While on the line at Isuzu, Romone had watched a friend die when a vehicle frame fell from its supports and crushed him. That's when he decided to go back to Peru. He needed two years off to make a complete recovery from the work-related injuries he'd experienced at Isuzu and the trauma of seeing his friend die brutally. But because he could not get work in Peru, he ended up back in Japan, this time working for Nizumi.

The bell sounded, and our visit was over. Erberto and I returned to the white collar world. I entered the office and sat down at my desk. I sifted through the papers that had recently been placed on my desk. Thinking about the men in the factory, I picked up one of the accident reports and saw a drawing of a man on a conveyor belt. I could read a little of what was written, for my knowledge of Japanese characters was limited, so I asked Shiina

¹¹ In his study of Japanese-Brazilian immigrants working in Japan, Takeyuki Tsuda, a social science professor at the University of Chicago, claims that the hiring policy and job placement that the foreigners obtain at most Japanese companies is based on race, as the comment of one employer that he interviewed illustrates, "When it comes to hiring foreigners, there are clearly several levels based on like and dislike. We feel closest to the Nikkeijin, so they work at the best firms with the best wages. Then come Chinese and Koreans, whom we find less preferable and therefore, they work in less desirable jobs. At the bottom are the Bangladeshis and Iranians, who work in the smallest companies and are paid the lowest wages. We avoid interacting with Middle Easterners the most, so they get the worst jobs. It really shouldn't be this way, but it just is." See Takeyuki Tsuda, "The Permanence of Temporary Migration," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 3 (August 1999): 698.

to translate. He said that the man had climbed onto the conveyor belt when it was operating and had been killed. "It happened at Toyota," he said. "It's not unusual for someone to lose their life in a factory in Japan." He handed the report back to me and I took a closer look. The man's head had been crushed between the car and the frame of the conveyor belt machine.

A SAFETY MESSAGE FROM THE FAMILY

I learned more about conditions at Toyota when I went to a dinner party with Kume. The party was held at Rie's apartment. Kondo was there, and so were her friends Jorge and Octavio, two Peruvian foreigners of Japanese descent. Jorge was outgoing, warm and friendly, with a spontaneous laugh and a dashing personality. Octavio was a muscular man who was somewhat more reserved. I had often seen them standing outside the company store during their lunch break, talking, smoking, and joking around. For this dinner party, Jorge and Octavio had prepared a Peruvian meal. My Japanese friends wanted to know each detail of Peruvian dinner etiquette: where the dishes should be placed, when to serve each dish, how much sauce should be placed where. The easygoing Jorge became irritated when they forced him to discuss these details. "Do it any way you want," he told them. "I don't care as long as the food's good." The Japanese looked shocked at this indifference to presentation and detail, but they did enjoy the food.

It was fun having Jorge and Octavio at the party. At dinner parties with my Japanese friends, we always huddled around a single table and only spoke about topics common to us all, so that everybody could participate. No one would dare walk away from the table to talk privately with a friend, for this would be to isolate themselves from the group. I liked the warm feeling of inclusion, but conversations would often remain superficial. If, after all, we all needed to participate, and our interests diverged, topics for dinner conversation were limited. With Jorge and Octavio around, things were quite different. The meal was much more informal, and they joked and laughed like it was the last festival on earth. At the end of the party, everyone was satisfied.

Whether in America or Asia, good food, good drink, and good company make a great party.

When Kondo, Octavio, Jorge, and I approached the elevator, I noticed that Kume stayed behind with Rie. I was delighted to see that they were getting

close. We reached the train station and said good-bye to Kondo. Then Octavio and Jorge asked me to join them at a restaurant called La Bamba. I couldn't believe they were still hungry after all we had just eaten. When I walked in with them off the noisy Japanese street, the owner, a skinny man with long graying hair pulled into a ponytail, greeted us warmly. I heard a cacophony of "hola, como estas" from their Hispanic friends. There was a small mariachi band playing in the corner, and I felt as if I was in Mexico. We ordered beer and appetizers, and I asked Octavio to tell me about himself.

He initially came to Japan on his own in 1992 and learned about Nizumi when he struck up a conversation with a group of Japanese Peruvians on a train in the city. The very next day he applied for a job and was soon working on the Nizumi line. He told me, however, that he'd recently begun working at the Toyota plant. I asked why he'd changed jobs, and he told me the money was better. However, high pay came at a price. He rolled up his sleeve and showed me his arm, which had burn marks on it from spot welding. He said he worked with inadequate equipment and that he was not provided with proper welding clothes. The molten metal had burned right through his shirt.

I was surprised to hear Octavio's story about working at Toyota. It was one thing to occasionally have a serious accident and quite another to have reckless safety policies. Toyota was so profitable that they often boasted about their \$21-billion cash reserve. Couldn't a company that was so wealthy provide their workers with basic safety clothing and better working conditions? Not only that—Octavio told me that the line was so fast it was almost impossible *not* to injure yourself. He had to work constantly, sixty full seconds for every minute on the line, with not a moment to rest. At that speed, accidents were unavoidable.

The partying went on until late in the evening. I saw Bhanu and some of the folks from the Japanese language class. Then a man from Thailand introduced himself to me as Sanan. Sanan was married to a Japanese woman whom he'd met on the island of Phu Khet in Thailand when she was on vacation. "Living in paradise," I said to him. "Man, that sounds great!" But Sanan had eked out just a meager living making canoes, so his wife convinced him to come to Japan. After searching hard and long, the only job he could find was as a waiter at a Thai restaurant. He was looking for better wages, so he was applying for a job on the line at Nizumi. He was happy because Nizumi had a branch in Thailand and perhaps he could move back to his

home. I could see how this would be a great option, especially if conditions in the Thailand plant were safer than they were here.

A couple of weeks passed, and I heard from Kume again. He invited me to a performance of Mozart's Requiem, in which he was singing and Rie was playing first violin. I made plans to go with Jorge. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon, with the sun shining brightly, so we walked to the concert hall. The trees were just beginning to turn green. We arrived early, so we grabbed a cup of coffee. I asked Jorge what had brought him to Japan.

When Jorge graduated from college with a business degree in marketing, he spent a year working in Peru. Then President Fujimori took power. According to Jorge, the previous ruler in Peru had been corrupt, so there were few jobs, but when Fujimori took over, he fired the congress and created turmoil. This put many more people out of work, and Jorge was one of the casualties. Life in Peru was unstable and uncertain, so when he read in a local newspaper that Isuzu was looking for employees of Japanese descent to work at their factory in Japan, he applied to work on a factory floor.

I asked Jorge about safety on the line. That year, Nizumi was designated the third most dangerous auto company in Japan. The government ranked all of the large automobile companies according to safety based on accident reports. We all knew about the safety ranking system because the report was distributed onto our desks and discussed during meetings. One of the objectives of the report was to "shame" companies into improving safety. I asked Jorge what they had done to improve the situation, and he said that the managers now checked the equipment before work. According to Jorge, the rule seemed like a preventive safety measure, but in reality, it helped relieve the company from providing compensation to injured workers. "Workers who are injured get compensation only if they can prove that the condition of the machine was at fault," he told me. "If they are to blame, they receive nothing. But it's often difficult to decide who was at fault, the machine or the worker."

"So who's ultimately responsible for safety?" I asked.

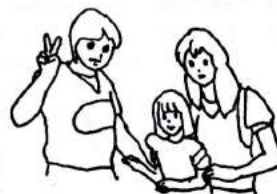
"Managers are supposed to be responsible for safety, so if something happens, they get in trouble. So the rule is—injured workers keep their mouths shut. Workers who break this rule are often threatened with dismissal. The only time they do not cover up accidents is when someone is seriously injured, if they lose a finger or hand, and there are witnesses. In actuality, the workers themselves are responsible for their own safety."

Articles in the company newsletters supported Jorge's claims. They often discussed safety problems within the context of human error. An article titled "Meeting of the Safety and Hygiene Committee" quoted the need "to implement safety control keeping in mind that human beings are liable to act unsafely."

To further reinforce the perception that safety is the responsibility of the workers themselves, the company recruited the workers' own families. Every edition of the safety newsletter included a section titled "Message from the Family," which featured a letter written by a child to his father who worked in the factory. Many of the letters included a plea from the child asking his father to be safe on the line. One letter read: "To my father. Father, you work until late at night. Work hard and please do not catch a cold or get into an accident. During the holidays I want to have a good time with you."

Posters that hung on the company walls also used images of the family to reinforce a safety message.

**Safety is everyone's wish,
it is the family's wish**



Casting Division Fumio Miyuki

July 1 to July 7

National Safety Week

I thought about the idyllic work system that I had heard so much about and wondered why *kaizen* had not been implemented. After all, if workers had the ability to improve the system, certainly the company would benefit. So I asked Jorge about this. They did go through the motions of *kaizen*. When

an accident occurred, many would converge on the site to study exactly what had happened. Someone would write up a report, but usually it changed nothing.

Jorge added, "We have *kaizen* meetings twice a week to try to improve safety, and sometimes they are very useful. Mostly they are not, so no one pays attention—we sleep or smoke cigarettes."

So much for *kaizen*.

We eventually made it to the theater and we saw our friends perform. After the concert we went to a coffee shop and socialized. Kondo and a friend of hers joined us. She handed me a book titled *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and asked if I would read it. They were both active in the *Sokka Gakkai*, one of Japan's largest new religions, basically a fusion of *Sokka* Buddhism and Christian Humanism. I wondered if loneliness had driven Kondo into this religion.

ACCIDENT REPORTS AND HIDING INJURIES

The next evening, I saw Kofi on the street, standing in front of a small juice stand operated by a Japanese woman. Kofi and I shook hands, and I asked him if he wanted to grab some dinner. I kept thinking about the health and safety issues at Nizumi, and I wanted to do some further investigation. We found our way into a small *yakitori* joint where the smell of a charcoal grill wafted into the air. On our way to the restaurant, I told him what Octavio had said to me about the Toyota plant. Kofi had worked with Octavio at Nizumi. Kofi said, "Man, if Octavio thinks Toyota is tough, it must be very tough. Octavio's one of the hardest workers in the plant."

Kofi said many accidents occur because of lack of training. He told me about an incident where both a Japanese and a foreign worker handled a piece of heavy machinery. While they were lowering it, the foreigner's hands got stuck between two large pieces of metal, and when the guy screamed, the Japanese guy didn't hear him.

"Why? What the hell happened?"

"He was wearing head phones to block the noise," Kofi said. "but he wasn't supposed to wear head phones while doing a job like that."

"Don't they enforce the safety rules?"

"Not until an accident happens," he said. "Then they enforce some rules

for a short time before abandoning them again. They're only interested in getting the work done."

I wondered how the company was able to keep its image clean. How could it get away with such reckless behavior? Kofi confirmed what Jorge had told me a few days earlier. Although Kofi had worked for more than six years at the company, and either saw or heard about many accidents, he did not know of a single incident in which the company was blamed for the problem, even if the worker received compensation. If the worker was temporary and he couldn't return to work because of his injuries, he was immediately dismissed. If his injuries were not that severe, he would not be immediately dismissed but his contract would not be renewed. Even if he wasn't injured, if a contract employee was involved in an accident, no matter whose fault it was, his contract was unconditionally terminated. No exceptions were allowed.

Even if the machine was defective, the worker got blamed. Once when a conveyor belt brought a batch of parts, there was a power failure, and a worker injured his heel. The worker was blamed for the accident. Another time, an employee was late for work, and while running to his section, he slipped on oil that had been previously spilled on the floor. He injured his knee. "There was blood all over the place—it was so bad that an ambulance came to the factory," Kofi said. That worker was not allowed to renew his contract.

When an accident occurred, accident reports were completed and distributed to employees. In the office, they were passed to our section and in the factory they were hung on bulletin boards. They always included a detailed illustration showing how the accident occurred. According to Kofi, accident reports were often modified in favor of the company, especially if the worker was a regular employee. When a regular worker was injured, lower-level supervisors would modify the reports for fear of punishment by upper-level managers. If a contract worker was injured, however, it didn't matter as much, so those reports were more truthful. After the worker recovered, he was rushed back on the line to work a light duty job, and when he obtained full strength, he returned to his section.

The management continually piled accident reports onto our desks, not only about those that occurred at Nizumi but also about those that occurred at a number of Toyota-group-related companies. By law, when an industrial accident occurs, Japanese corporations must provide a report to the Ministry of Labor. Those reports always included illustrations showing in gory detail

workers losing body parts, getting their hands trapped in machinery, breaking bones, or getting burned. There seemed to be no end to these reports. We received them on a weekly basis, sometimes a few at a time. In many cases, a dozen or so were stapled together and dropped on our desks.

A typical example of a report discussed the injury to a twenty-four-year-old employee. It stated the date of the accident and the extent of the injury: "a compressed chest that lead to serious lung injuries." The injury occurred when the worker stepped off a floor mat to pick up an instruction board that had dropped. The mat was connected to a switch that controlled the machinery, and when it was activated it caused the machinery to disengage. The worker's body was trapped between a heavy piece of machinery and a building pillar.

What was the real purpose of these reports? The reports could certainly reduce accidents by instructing workers to learn from the mistakes of others, but I questioned whether that was the company's true intention. After I left the company, I talked with Dr. Shinya Yamada, a Japanese labor specialist.¹² I mentioned the case of the young man with the lung injury, and he said the accident could have been prevented had they not located the machinery so close to the wall. Furthermore, he said that the machinery had a serious design flaw, because when the worker gets off the mat the pause is released. A safer design would have involved a way to activate the pause with a button so when he reached down to pick up the instruction board he would not have been at risk. "It's likely they implemented the current design to keep the line moving as quickly as possible."

Dr. Yamada derided the preventive measures management suggested to workers in the accident reports. In one report, the preventive measure read, "Don't work if you know it is dangerous." Another read, "Anything in operation is dangerous, and the more you are accustomed to work, the more careful you must be. Don't touch equipment in operation." By looking at the preventive measures with Dr. Yamada, I saw the true intention of the corporation, the *honne* behind the *tatemae*, and that was to blame workers for accidents.

According to Dr. Yamada, hiding injuries is a long-standing, pervasive, and hidden rule at most corporations in Japan. He explained that companies have an economic incentive to hide injuries. "The financial management for

¹² Dr. Yamada is emeritus professor of the Faculty of Medicine at Nagoya University and one of Japan's leading occupational health and safety experts.

workman's compensation is strictly separate from the National Health care. If a worker experiences a private injury and he goes to a local hospital, he is covered by National Health Care Insurance, and the company is required to pay 50 percent of the cost. However, if the worker obtains workman's compensation, the company must provide full payment for all medical expenses."

According to Kofi, management forced many workers involved in accidents to hide their injuries to improve the safety record and to ensure that they would have work in the following months. "Workers who are in accidents are told not speak about where we got our injuries when we are sent to the hospital. One guy was working on a stamping job when the hammer hit him hard on the ankle. He didn't tell anyone, but it was a bad injury, and soon he went to a hospital outside the company. I told his boss what had happened. The next day his boss told me not to say anything about it to anyone."

In an interview with Satoshi Kamata that I conducted after leaving Nizumi, we discussed his job as a Toyota seasonal worker. He told me, "All workers, whether they were seasonal, contract, or full time employees, would hide their injuries for fear of embarrassing the *hanchō*, the boss responsible for safety." As an American, I was surprised that the fear of embarrassing somebody else would keep them silent about their injuries and the dangers they constantly faced.

Every line worker I spoke to said the factory was *abunai*—dangerous. I asked Higuchi about it. When he first entered the company, he had to work on the line for six long months, and he concurred. Shiina agreed that the factory was dangerous, but he pointed out that the workers have danger awareness training. "It's a process where workers learn from example. They are shown pictures and told of the accident results. It's a good idea, but managers don't implement it. Either they're too busy or they simply don't care anymore, so accidents at the factory are going up."

THE THIRTY-SIX-HOUR SHIFT

I often saw Kofi at the juice stand, chatting with the woman who ran it. I asked him about her. He said she was thirty-eight years old and had a daughter. She was married, but her husband lived with his girlfriend in another house. The husband saw them on weekends, and after his wife made dinner for him, he spent time with his daughter. Then he returned to the girlfriend.

Kofi was very upset about the situation. "These people are sick, how can they live like this, aah, no." I wondered why the woman didn't just get a divorce. But this was Japan, and many things were mysterious here. Kofi wrinkled his dark, sad face and said, "You never know what the Japanese are thinking. Society forces them to hide their feelings, so they keep it all inside."

I had a hunch that the juice woman was interested in being more than just friends but when I asked Kofi, he said he was not at all interested. He was, after all, going through a horrible divorce of his own. He changed the subject quickly and asked if I knew that there were Iranians working at Nizumi. I did not. I heard that many Iranians worked in Japan in the early 1990s, but I thought that most had been sent home.

I obtained a phone number of one of the Iranians, and I immediately gave him a call, for I was eager to connect. In all of my time in Japan, I had yet to meet an Iranian. Later that week, I met Mehdi for lunch. He was a balding man with a buglike face and a friendly smile. He began talking to me in Farsi, but he was disappointed that I could only speak a few words. I was born and raised in America and had only visited Iran once in my life, before the revolution. As an American, visiting Iran immediately after the revolution was out of the question. My parents were thoroughly assimilated and had not taught me Farsi. Mehdi thought it was strange that my Japanese was better than my Persian, but we got along well. I was fascinated to learn about his life.

"Originally I came here on a three-month visitors' visa, but I just stayed on. At that time, during the bubble, it was easy to get a job, so I trained to be blacksmith."

Since the early 1990s, Mehdi had worked at a small Nizumi-related company repairing machinery. Anytime the plant's equipment malfunctioned, they fixed it. Mehdi's company was a typical small Toyota *keiretsu* business employing only fifteen workers. In Japan, more than 57 percent of all companies have thirty workers or less, and more than 73 percent have one hundred workers or less.¹³ The Toyota group has been able to increase its profits by outsourcing manufacturing to small group-related companies. These companies are expected to serve the parent company by supplying work or parts only to *keiretsu*-group related companies. At Mehdi's company, none of the employees was permanent except for the president and his son.

Mehdi's life was difficult. "I fix so many things, and I work so hard! But it

¹³ The Year Book of Labor Statistics, Policy Planning and Research Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Labor, Japan, 1997.

is the only way I can stay in this county." As an overstayer, he always risked being caught. "If I am caught I must spend ten weeks in jail and two weeks in immigration, and then I will be sent back home. We call this jail the 'Royal House,' and is not a good place. I had an Iranian friend who was also an overstayer, and he was caught and sent there. They bullied and beat him and at the end of his time he was given a one-way ticket back home."

Mehdi was paid three thousand dollars a month, which enabled him to live comfortably and to send money to his family in Tehran. He wasn't happy about being an overstayer and breaking the law. "I don't like to lie, I'm an honest person, but I have no choice. I must try to help my family. The cost of living in Iran is so expensive. Some of the money goes to my brother and sister who are in school, and the rest goes toward food and clothing for my parents."

From his looks, he seemed to be about my age and so I was curious to know if he had fought in the Iran-Iraq war. "Yes," he said. He paused for a moment, and his eyes looked straight into mine. "I didn't want to go, my parents did not want me to go, but I had no choice, I was drafted into the army and I could not say no."

He spoke defensively, as if he was ashamed. "All Iranians that I know in Japan fought in the war," he said.

"How was it?"

"I was sent to the front, and within just a few months I had lost two of my good friends. It was terrible, I didn't want to die, and so I did what I could to stay alive. I asked to be transferred into the training school where I could teach other soldiers how to use weapons. Fortunately, my transfer was granted, and in this way I was able to stay away from the front."

He was in the army for two years, and when he returned home, he had trouble finding a job. So, like many Iranian war veterans, he came to Japan. I told him how I had landed at Nizumi, and then it was time to go back to work. He invited me to his apartment, and I soon took him up on the offer.

When he opened the door, the smell of turmeric was in the air—a familiar scent in Iranian homes. Mehdi led me to the living room, and we sat on a Persian rug while I chatted with his colleague and roommate, Hossein. As I made myself comfortable, Hossein talked to me about how he had been fighting for a pay raise for many weeks. His boss had promised him a raise many months earlier but had reneged on his pledge because of worsening economic conditions. After a few weeks of staying home, Hossein had re-

turned to work. As an overstayer, he simply had no other place to go. Although he was barely thirty, he had the face of a rugged middle-aged man. The brutal Iran-Iraq war and Hossein's equally brutal job had aged him beyond his years.

Since Mehdi and Hossein were overstayers, they did not have health benefits, and their health risks were high, since conditions were so dangerous on the floor. "The Japanese people at the company are not bad to me, and some of them are very kind. The main problems are the working conditions and the working hours. It is so dangerous, and if I slack off some days because I am tired, my boss will get angry with me. Sometimes I must work a twenty-four- to thirty-six-hour shift when he needs me. I am always, always tired."¹⁴

I was shocked to hear that anyone would be forced to work for so long. I asked, "What is it like to work a thirty-six-hour shift?"

"It's tough," he said. "There are times when a worker just walks off the job. That usually occurs during the eighteenth hour—that's the time when the body begins to give out."

"Do you get any breaks?"

"About every six hours we get a break. But at the end we are so tired, so very tired."

His boss showed little sympathy. "My boss benefits from my hard work because I am a good worker and stronger than most Japanese who work on the floor. But he does little to protect me, and he provides little safety equipment." It was obvious that the workers at the small companies were the grunts of the Japanese auto industry, sweating away at jobs that are the most dangerous and least secure.

"SAFETY NUMBER ONE!"

While I was wandering around the grounds one day, I bumped into Sanan, the former canoe builder from Thailand. We made our way into a local pub, ordered yakitori, and began chatting about life on the line. Like Kofi and the other contract workers, he received only brief training and was immediately

¹⁴ According to the ministry of labor, small companies in Japan are especially dangerous. Statistics show that in the transportation industry, companies of thirty to ninety-nine employees have more than four times the accident rate of companies which employ eight thousand people or more. See the *Year Book of Labor Statistics*, Policy Planning and Research Department, Minister's Secretariat, Ministry of Labor, Japan, 1997.

immersed in the Toyota Production System. His job on the line was to fabricate a part of the drivetrain, and his general duties involved spot-welding the inner and outer portion of the part in repetitive steps. He would first put the frame on a jig, spot-weld other parts, and then glue on the outer shell. Then he placed the product on a tray where it was shipped to another location to be press welded. Since Sanan worked on a flexible manufacturing line, he was responsible for five different kinds of products. Like most contract workers, he felt his job was not different from that of Japanese workers. He participated in all group activities including *kaizen* meetings, QC circles, and safety drills.

On Sanan's line, each section was divided into several work groups, each responsible for manufacturing a part of the product. Sanan worked in a group of eight, of which three, including himself, worked on the left-hand side of the product. Another three, opposite him, worked on the right-hand side. The other two workers were responsible for various group-related jobs. The group leader, who did not work on the line, would check the quality of the products.

I began to wonder about the concept of the "team" that I had heard so much about with reference to the Japanese workplace. There was certainly no teamwork in my job, and none of the workers I interviewed talked about teamwork either. So I asked Sanan about teamwork. He said in most cases the employees did not function as a team. If something happened on the line, if someone needed assistance from another group member—nobody helped. "Everyone just does their own work. When you start out at the factory, if you have questions, people help you, but not after you've learned your job." According to Sanan, the most direct manifestations of group activity were the safety drills, meetings, and competitions. In the morning, Sanan and his team would engage in drills by shouting out a safety slogan. These slogans included such silly statements as "Safety is thinking of a clean shop" or "Keeping danger awareness in your heart and mind will result in zero accidents." After the slogan everyone in unison would shout "*Yoshi!*" In Japanese, *yoshi* means "let's do it!" *Yoshi* is the formal term. According to Sanan, these drills "did not help with safety, they meant nothing—it's just the Japanese style"



"Safety number one!" The slogan was ubiquitous. It hung over the entrances to the factory, it appeared in the dozens of pages of literature we all received

every month, and one day when I came to work I saw that all the managers were wearing "Safety Number One" arm badges. I asked Higuchi about these badges, and he told me that Kurata had ordered them to be worn because of a recent accident in the factory. An employee had been hit on the back of the head by a piece of machinery and had been sent to the hospital. However, the person injured wasn't an ordinary assembly line worker. He was a college-educated engineer on his obligatory six-month assignment to the factory.¹⁵

Kurata ordered all managers to begin a new safety training program, and to show that they were serious, they were ordered to wear arm badges. Apparently, Kurata took this action because he feared possible retribution from the government after this high-profile accident. According to Higuchi, a few years earlier, a worker had died in the factory, and the government had forced the company to close down the entire manufacturing operations for a full week to investigate why the process was so dangerous.¹⁶

A couple of weeks later, I bumped into Mehdi in the factory while on my way to the motor pool to look at some parts. A large banner hung on the inside of the main factory building reading "It's safety week, let's work hard to make our shop clean and safe." Beside the slogan was a large green cross symbolizing safety. I thought that the company was actually implementing a real safety program. Surely management wouldn't bother hanging this large banner if they weren't serious, would they?

Mehdi grabbed my shoulder to pull me away from a forklift that was being driven at high speed saying, "Be careful, it's dangerous around here."

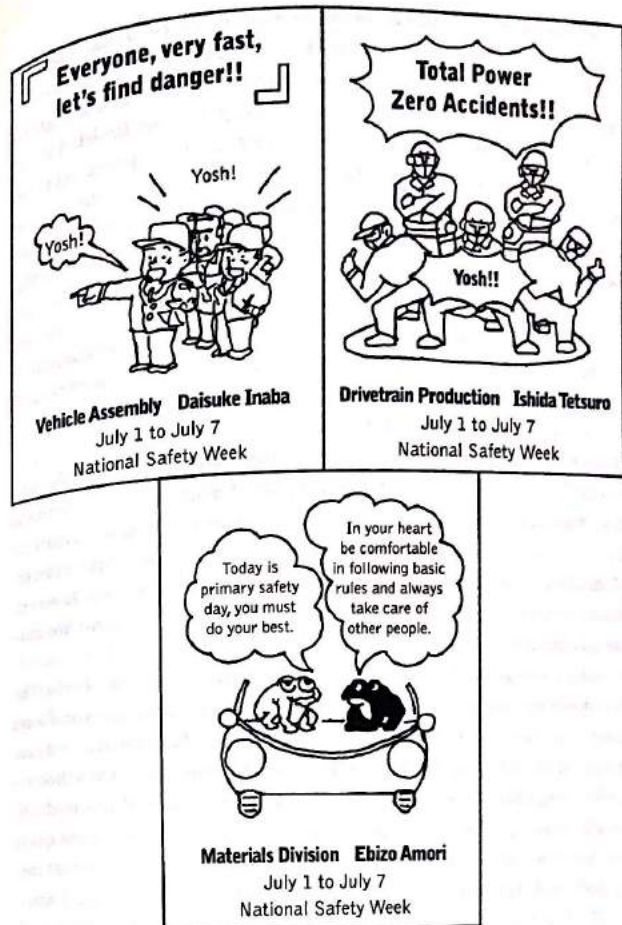
I pointed up to the banner and yelled over the din, "What's this about?"

"It's because of the shareholder meeting. The company wants to make a good impression." Laughing, he continued, "Every week is safety week at Nizumi—but it makes no difference, nothing will change."

There was one way, however, that the workers were actively involved in improving safety during safety week. They all participated in a poster contest, and the winners were published in the safety newsletter. Shown here are some of the winning posters, all hand-drawn by employees at Nizumi.

¹⁵ During their first year of work, all engineers at Japan's largest companies are required to work six months in the factory.

¹⁶ Higuchi told me about this incident but I could not independently verify it.



Sanan said that he had one safety meeting a week, during which all members of his group were supposed to participate to improve conditions. "The team leader will say that you have to clean the machine, if you don't, it will be dangerous. And the supervisor will hold up illustrations showing how to be safe. Of course, this doesn't help. Every day before we start working, these

leaders tell us to be careful, but they never tell us *how* to be careful. They just show pictures of injured workers, like they're trying to scare us."

The safety newsletter covered the work group competitions. The group that had the fewest accidents would win the monthly safety medal. A write-up of the winning team appeared in the monthly safety magazine under the title, "We Are the Team with Zero Accidents." Here is a typical write-up: "Our most important concern is to prevent accidents. The average age of our group is twenty-seven years old. Most of us are very young. Sometimes we feel that we do not have much experience, but we try to understand our deficiencies. Every morning we have a safety meeting where we chant our safety slogan, 'Safety is watching your step to prevent accidents.'" According to Sanan, most workers did not care about winning the safety medal. "No one on the line cares about the safety competition," he said. "Only the team leaders care."

I wondered what happened if someone on the line was sick or injured. Sanan told me that the groups just made do without the injured member unless the job physically could not be accomplished. Sanan said, "If someone is sick, they do not replace him, but if two people are sick then we cannot do the job." Within the section, a small number of highly skilled workers can replace the lost worker in an emergency situation. In many cases, however, these workers are pulled from other work groups, so other teams are burdened that day.

Sanan reiterated what everyone had told me, that the line was *abunai*. The line speed was the main danger. "Working with heavy machinery is always dangerous, but the problem is they work the line so fast that accidents are frequent. Many guys at the company have lost their fingers."¹⁷ On a theoretically average day, Sanan's team was required to make a total of 120 products, which meant spending three minutes on each product. However, the quota was often raised to 132 products, or more, so the production time was correspondingly reduced per product, leading to a faster pace, and accidents.

Flexible manufacturing sounds like a good idea, for it requires each

¹⁷ According to Shuzo Sasaki of the Aichi Labor Institute, an organization with more than thirty years of experience studying Toyota and their group-related companies, the largest contribution to accidents on the line is the fast line speeds. "Fast line speeds contribute greatly to work related accidents and health problems. We have noticed a high blood pressure rate, heart problems, work-related injuries, and death directly related to fast line speeds. About 50 percent of all workers have work related illnesses but are still forced to work" (interview in Nagoya, July 2000). The institute has recorded line speeds as fast as 58 seconds per minute but many workers claim they have not even one second to rest.

worker to use a number of skills in the course of the day. But it also makes working with fast line speeds more dangerous because it increases the overall time necessary to finish the day's quota. Sometimes the employees are required to work on products they don't make often and for which they have received little training, and this, too, creates safety problems.

Although Sanan and his group engaged in morning safety drills and *kaizen* meetings, the line was still unsafe, not only because of its speed but also because of the factory layout. The workplace was crowded and stocked with poorly designed equipment, so there wasn't enough room to move around on the line. Sanan complained about the jig, which is a machine to mechanically hold and move the position of parts during assembly. Sanan said, "When you work the jig, it turns, and sometimes your body touches the buttons which control the tools."

I asked if this had ever caused an accident.

"One guy was seriously injured. He had to put a very small part on the drivetrain, and it dropped inside the jig. When he reached down to pick it up, he bent his other arm back and accidentally hit the button. The jig crushed his hand."¹⁸

Sanan put down his chopsticks and told me about a time he'd injured himself on the line. "I had burned my arm from the welder and it got infected. I had to go to the company hospital and the doctor put my arm in a large bandage. When I went back to work the group leader was angry with me! He yelled at me and sent me back on the line." I was amazed that he had been forced to return to the line.

If a worker was seriously injured and couldn't possibly go back to the line, he would receive compensation. However, the worker was required to come in to work, even if his injuries prohibited him from doing his job. This was perplexing: the injured workers just sat in a room all day and did nothing. Now I understood what I had seen the day I had visited Kofi on the line: a room with a few men in it watching television.

In a later interview with Yoshiatsu Sato of the Aichi Labor Institute, I learned that Toyota and its group-related companies have institutionalized this hidden rule for many years. "At Toyota, even if a worker's accident is so

¹⁸ Yoshiatsu Sato, a union activist with fifteen years' experience at Toyota whom I interviewed later, agreed with Sanan: line speed and crowding are the major causes of accidents. "The problem at Toyota is that the factories are very crowded and the workplace is very, very busy to meet the daily quota. Many accidents occur when workers drop parts while the line is running." Interview with Sato in Nagoya, Japan, July 2000.

severe that he loses a body part, he must come to the company and sit and do nothing."¹⁹ In this way, the company avoids recording injuries and the management can project a safe image of itself to the Japanese people.

Shortly before leaving the company, I learned about a terrible accident in the factory. An employee was testing an auto part when the power went out. So he took the tester to the power box—and 3,000 volts went through his body, burning his chest, face, and limbs. The maximum capacity of the tester was 450 volts, and the worker had not been educated on how to handle electricity. Furthermore, the high voltage system was unlocked when it should have been locked, and the high voltage sign that should have been near the power box was nowhere to be seen. The worker was only twenty-three years old, and he suffered permanent neurological damage.

The company had provided neither training nor safeguards and was obviously negligent. But government inspectors hadn't been allowed to check for safety violations because proprietary technology was in place, and Nizumi had received permission to deny them entry.

EMPLOYEE EVALUATIONS

As September approached, Uno told our section to seriously consider participating in a plan called Hopes. (This did not apply to me since I was a contract employee.) Hopes was new to the pay-by-performance policy. A few years earlier, the pay-by-performance policy had become an option when the company announced that it wanted to change the old Japanese-style policy of "seniority"-based pay and promotion. Theoretically, instead of rank determining an employee's salary, the base pay would rise every year as long as an employee's results were good.

An added benefit of pay-by-performance allowed employees to begin and end their workday when they chose. It was expected that this flextime would allow workers to spend more time with their families. Under pay-by-performance, there was no paid overtime, but the plan still seemed attractive. As long as their performance was good, workers would be fairly compensated, and they could come and go as they pleased. Some of the guys in my section were in the pay-by-performance plan, but they didn't seem too happy with it.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Shortly after the meeting, I noticed that Takanashi was twitching and turning in his seat like an injured bird trying to fly. "What's the matter?" I asked.

Takanashi was highly indignant about Hopes. He had enrolled in the pay-by-performance plan sometime earlier, and now, with the Hopes addendum, he would be required to write a self-evaluation. "Hopes really means hopeless," he said. "There is no light at the end of the tunnel. Can you see the exit? No! The 'smile' of 'Hopes' comes from Human Resources. They want to make the plan look good, but it is hopeless. I would leave if I could, but no one would hire me with the economy down like this. The problem with Japanese engineers is that we are too narrowly specialized. If we are shifted from one company to another, we don't do as well, so we are not motivated to move, even if we are unhappy with our situations."

I switched the conversation over to the evaluations, for all the men were busy getting things together for their presentations to the directors. Takanashi was cynical about the whole process. "The idea is for workers to get more motivated for their jobs, but most people at the company feel they will never be judged fairly."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because there aren't any criteria," he said. "Hopes is hopeless," he said once again.

I realized he was right. The pay-by-performance policy, seemed logical and appealing. However, it required employees to forfeit paid overtime and meant that more work was assigned to each employee. Because of service overtime, the advantages of flextime were largely theoretical. Higuchi told me that since there were no objective criteria for the evaluations, in many cases management did not give a positive assessment because they want to get more work from each worker for less money.

Employee review was on all of our minds, so I asked Kurasawa about it. "I don't think I will get a good review," he said. He pointed his finger to the power group and said, "Those guys will be moving up in the company. That is why they sit in the center of the section. But I sit on the outside." It was true: his desk was located toward at the outer edge of the section. Those who had the power were located toward the center of the section, close to Uno, and those who were least important were seated at the edge. So it was clear to all who was an inside member of the old-boy network and could expect to move up and become a future leader and who was an outsider destined to

remain on the periphery of power. Everyone was well aware of the geography of the desks and what it denoted.

So my initial impression of the office space symbolizing egalitarianism had to be revised. The lack of walls certainly facilitated communication, particularly during technical discussions, but it also demonstrated distinctions of rank and facilitated worker control.

All those who were connected to the line of power moved up or down within the company when the superior at the top was either promoted or demoted. This type of organizational structure emphasized loyalty to one's superior and the group to which one belonged. In return for Scarface's loyalty, for instance, he would move up with Uno and his close associates, maintaining a close-knit chain within the hierarchy.

When a manager was promoted or shifted to another group, however, his desk remained in the section, even if he no longer used it. Although Abe had worked in a separate office for the last ten years, his desk still occupied a space in the section. All the contents of the desk remained in the drawers, and according to Kurasawa, only Abe had the key. When I asked about the purpose of this, Kurasawa just smiled and said, "It is his style." Since the section suffered from space limitations and the desk could not be removed, it was used as a tabletop for a printer.



One day shortly after the mid-year transfer meeting, I noticed something peculiar at the Advanced Design group, which was located adjacent to our section. The entire section of about two dozen employees had moved downstairs and left an engineer named Hiram sitting all alone with just one other employee, who was known to be unproductive.

I remember when I'd first met Hiram. I was in the benchmarking shop looking at the scattered components of a competitor's product, and a short, stocky older man pulled me over and said in English "You see this part. It has a good design." Hiram discussed the merits of the design and then said, "I used to work for the boss of your section many years ago." In mid-career, he had been switched to the design division, where he worked as a benchmark engineer, collecting information about competitor products for technology improvement.

Now I asked Kurasawa why Hiram was sitting alone in the section, and

he responded, "There is no place for him at the company anymore." I initially thought that he would eventually move downstairs with his group, but several more days passed and he and the other employee remained all alone in that huge open space.

HARD TIMES: RESTRUCTURING BEGINS

During the Asian boom, Thailand had become the company's largest export market, buying more than twelve hundred products a month. Then came the Asian crash.²⁰ In November 1997, the section manager released information on monthly sales. In October, Thailand had bought a mere twelve products.

The company immediately began cutting back on expenses. A couple of weeks after the crash, Uno announced that overtime and the next bonus would also be cut. This caused great consternation since approximately 60 percent of an employee's salary comes from overtime work and the bonus.

There was also worry about the fall of Yamaichi, one of Japan's oldest and largest securities²¹ companies. The news of the bank's debt was the main story in all the media. Higuchi said, "All the employees at Yamaichi will be fired from the company, which is very rare in Japan." He frowned and looked despondent. Higuchi always looked concerned when talking about anything related to making a living.

Kurasawa said he was thinking about sending his savings to America. I was surprised; as an American, I never knew that my country's financial institutions were considered especially secure. The very fact that Kurasawa would consider such a move showed he had lost faith in the Japanese economy.

At the next department meeting, Uno announced that the company would be cutting back on research and development. Management also an-

²⁰ Due to international capital flows the Thai economy soared until early 1997. To fuel their economy, Thai businessmen found that they could borrow money at lower interest rates overseas in dollars. By late 1996, however, the economy accumulated too much foreign debt and suffered from large trade deficits and a banking system weakened by unpaid loans. Foreign investors began to worry that their loans could not be repaid so they rushed to move their investments out of Thailand. The Thai government responded by raising interest rates, which consequently caused the value of the Thai *baht* to plummet and the economy to crash. Investors saw similar problems throughout the region so they began pulling their money out of South Korea and Indonesia and as a result the crisis traveled throughout Asia. See Suk Kim and Mahfuzul Haque, "The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997: Causes and Policy Responses," *Multinational Business Review* (spring 2002): 37-44.

²¹ Yamaichi was one of Japan's oldest and largest securities companies.

nounced that it expected employees to arrive earlier each morning in the hope of increasing productivity. We received this news in silence.

After the meeting, I went to see Higuchi. As I approached his desk, I saw through his window that dramatically large snow flakes were drifting down once more. I knew that they would probably melt upon touching the ground, for Japanese winters were much milder than the brutal winters I had experienced in Madison, Wisconsin.

I asked Higuchi about what we had just heard at the meeting. Would employees really start their work day earlier? He shrugged. "Our problems are much too deep to be solved with these silly measures." He looked pensive. We both knew that more service overtime would not contribute much to our productivity for the engineers were already working long hours.

So what could be done? "Since the company cannot fire the full-time workers everyone will get a pay cut," he said. "That's the first step. Next, we will buy less new equipment. And we'll let some of our contract workers go, including a number of farmers who work at Nizumi during the winter when they cannot work in the fields."

Cutting back on contract workers meant that I might be fired, so I asked him about my job. He said that my job was safe because I was a special case.

I walked downstairs to grab some lunch. (Months ago, I had abandoned making my own *obentō* lunch since it took too much time.) I ran into Kofi on the ground floor, and he clasped my hands warmly and asked, "Hey brother, what's up?" Many of my colleagues would see us greet each other warmly, and I sometimes wondered what they thought about this friendship between an American engineer and an African factory worker. We chatted for a bit. I told him about the stringent economic measures management was proposing, and I asked how things were in the factory. He confirmed what Higuchi had said. Many of the contract workers, both foreign and Japanese workers, would not have their contracts renewed. Because he was such a valuable employee, however, Kofi's own job was safe.

When I returned to my desk, once again I asked Shiina to help me understand company policy. I wondered why the unions didn't do more to defend our rights, for at Nizumi, the union represented white collar workers as well as the workers on the line. Shiina said that the union was useless. He said a labor dispute was recently settled in which the company agreed to union demands to extend vacation days by one day a year. Not much of a victory, I thought, considering that most of the company had been coerced to work

overtime without pay—but better than nothing. Then I heard the details. Instead of giving everyone another day's vacation, management cut five minutes from each working day by changing the official quitting time to 5:25 instead of 5:30. Over the working year, those five minutes added up to one day. "Did you notice that now the bell goes off at 5:25 instead of 5:30?" Shiina asked. I hadn't noticed the change, but we both agreed that this supposed labor victory was useless since the company rule of service overtime required an employee to stay well beyond official hours.

LOCAL POLITICS: THE COMPANY SUPPORTS A CANDIDATE

One day, I saw campaign posters for a local candidate on the company bulletin boards. A slogan beside his picture read "For a city with a warm heart." Who was this man and why was his picture being displayed here? I asked Shiina about it. "He's an employee who has been chosen by the company to run for a seat on the city council. I think it's illegal but they do it anyway."

I was surprised that the company was overtly involved in local politics. I wanted to learn more, so I asked, "Do you think I could join the campaign?" Shiina laughed. "Sure. All the employees in our section who live in the city, including myself, have been asked by Human Resources to join the campaign—but I don't plan on doing it, of course. Why would you care? You're a foreigner, you can't even vote!"

"I just think it is interesting," I said. "I'm curious about local politics."

"Well, if you're serious, the office is right over there." We walked to the window, and he poked his fingers into the shade to open a small crack. "See? It's over there, across the street." And there it was, right on company property: the campaign office. A large banner stood in front of the entrance: "Create a city that is warm and green."

That very afternoon, all employees at Nizumi received a pamphlet entitled, "The Ishida Yoshiharu Support Club Newsletter." It included a photograph of the candidate alone and another of him playing volleyball with a group of women, for he was the coach of a "mama" volleyball team. The pamphlet discussed his platform and said he wanted to act as a "conduit between the residents and the city government." Ishida wanted to build a happy, green city "through heart-to-heart communication."

I decided to investigate the role of the company in local politics, so I