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## The Hunter and the Fisherman Part I: Glimpses of Culture Through Decision-Making

*“The Westerner and the Japanese mean something different when they talk of ‘making a decision.’ In the West, all the emphasis is on the answer to the question. Indeed, our books on decision-making try to develop systematic approaches to giving an answer. To the Japanese, however, the important element in decision-making is defining the question. The important and crucial steps are to decide whether there is a need for a decision and what the decision is about. And it is in this step that the Japanese aim at attaining consensus. Indeed, it is this step that, to the Japanese, is the essence of the decision. The answer to the question (what the West considers the decision) follows from its definition.”*

Peter Drucker

*Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*

When it comes to managing and preventing friction in the mixed Japanese-American workplace, one of the toughest nuts to crack is reconciling the two cultures’ starkly different approaches to decision-making. Consider what happens on a human level when Japanese and American decision-making styles collide in the workplace.

### American Gripes About Japanese Decision Making

In our cross-cultural seminars aimed at Americans, we kick off sessions with small group activities, at which

time we ask each group to collectively make a list of what they like and don't like about working with Japanese counterparts. The comments are as interesting as they are enlightening. Common American gripes include:

*It takes forever for Japanese to make decisions*

*Japanese want too much data, "analysis paralysis"*

*Japanese have "secret meetings" that exclude Americans*

*We (Americans) go to meetings to debate an issue to make the best possible decision, but the Japanese always make the decision prior to the meeting*

*Japanese don't involve Americans in the decision-making process*

*Japanese don't like risk*

### **Japanese Gripes About American Decision Making**

To complete the cross-cultural picture, consider what Japanese managers say about American counterparts:

*Americans take action without understanding the problem, and consequently repeat the same mistakes*

*Americans don't gather enough data; don't conduct root-cause analysis; don't practice plan-do-check-adjust (PDCA); Americans are not data driven, they prefer to act on their feelings*

*Americans are confrontational and push their ideas on others*

*Americans don't take time to properly define a problem; instead they take shortcuts through trial-error without proper follow-up, a risky approach that can create unintended consequences*

*Americans are specialists; they take action without consulting with other departments and don't try to view problems from various perspectives*

*Americans do not cooperate/communicate well across departments*

*Americans take risks lightly then don't accept responsibility when failures occur (resulting in excuses and finger-pointing)*

With one foot in each culture it's no surprise I have mixed feelings about the issue. Having refereed countless decision-making bouts between Japanese and American managers over the years, I see the pros and cons of each culture's approach better than anyone—which means I can praise and bash with the best of 'em. Today you'll get a little of both.

So without further ado, let's look at a concrete case study to shed light on the dramatically different ways Japanese and Americans make decisions.

### **The Short-Shot Heard Around the Factory**

*"The Japanese process is focused on understanding the problem...It does not permit commitment until management has decided what the decision is all about. Japanese managers may come up with the wrong answer to the problem, but they rarely come up with the right answer to the wrong problem."*

*Peter Drucker  
Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*

Back in a previous life I managed the operational side of an American injection molding plant. It was the culmination of a decade of training in Japanese factories run by Samurai engineers obsessed with continuous improvement. All serious, stern-looking men, they brainwashed me from early on to embrace certain tenets of Japanese shop-floor control. One of the sacred, uncompromising rules was that reams of data and rigorous

analysis were mandatory before any changes could be introduced into a process.

Well imagine my surprise when I discovered how my American compatriots attacked problems on the factory floor. *Try this, try that, try something else then try that again*—lots of trial and lots of error—without understanding what the problem was! Insane.

Granting that American decision-making has its upsides in the right circumstances, it has a dark side that not many people talk about...which is exactly what we're going to talk about today.

Let's kick it off with a story, an operational blunder that happened not just one fateful day in an American factory, but on many fateful days in many American factories. And you can bet it's happening right now as you read this.

Imagine this scenario: a trained press operator paying close attention to her work, catches a defective part coming down the chute from an injection molding press. The defect category is called a "short shot." It's called this because not enough plastic was injected into the mold cavity to make a complete part, leaving it "short," a condition the customer deems unacceptable. For the sake of visualization, picture in your mind a part that's only half the size it's supposed to be.

So what's a conscientious production operator to do in this predicament? *Standard Operating Procedure* says to page a technician, one of the resident molding experts. And that's exactly what the associate does. So far so good.

The technician who shows up happens to be a young guy still going through "technician training". He has strong vigilante leanings that are about to get the better of him. A proud young man, he's reluctant to consult with others prior to taking action, for in his mind, his ability to solve this problem without help from others defines his competency, which in turn creates a sense of "job security". And although none of his assumptions are even remotely true, he believes in his heart they are and that's all that matters. His pride and false convictions directly drive behavior that will ultimately create consequences detrimental to the organization.

So our young technician—we'll call him "Knob Turner"—looks at the half-formed part and seizes the day. He decides that if he jacks up the pressure then the plastic material will fill the entire cavity, thereby forming a complete part. Confident his hunch will save the day, Knob Turner increases pressure and waits a few cycles for it to "kick in." And lo and behold several cycles later he's got himself a fully formed part. Technician Turner then pats himself on the back and rides off into the sunset to find another fire to fight. It feels good to be a hero.

But hold the phone! Houston we have a problem: there are many possible causes of a "short shot" other than lack of pressure. (In spite of absolutely no technician training, even I knew that.) And had technician Turner considered this reality, he might also have considered the possibility that the problem could be an obstruction in the runner system (the "tunnel" through which liquid plastic flows to the cavity where it's molded) or a poor runner balance; it could also be insufficient injection speed, improper heat settings, malfunctioning heater bands, lot-to-lot variation in viscosity of raw material, or some funky combination of all the parameters mentioned above. But taking action without identifying the root cause(s) of the short shot was just plain dumb—*especially* the decision to jack up the pressure.

What's the big deal? Besides safety concerns there's the risk that excess pressure will "blow open" the mold, a condition that will not only produce unacceptable parts, but can also cause serious tool and equipment damage.

Fortunately we never bumbled our way into a broken tool. But boy did the technician's actions tick off our customer. Why? Because several injection cycles after Technician Turner rode off into the sunset, the jacked-up pressure found its groove and kicked up yet another notch, creating another type of defect called "flash". (*Flash* is the excess/undesirable plastic created when liquid plastic under pressure seeps through the "parting line" where the two mold halves clamp together during the injection process.) In the example above, since Technician Turner unilaterally declared the problem "solved", no one thought to follow up to see if the law of unintended consequences had reared its ugly head. Big mistake.

We found out about the unintended consequence, oh, about a week later, via an angry phone call from the customer asking *why we sent flashed parts!*

We dutifully consulted our records and found no documented evidence of flashed parts. “Gosh, it’s a mystery” we told our customer. “We had a record of short shots that we caught internally that day...but no idea where the flashed parts came from...”

What did the young technician do wrong? Well, he came up with the right answer to the wrong question, that’s what. Had the short-shot problem been caused by “lack of pressure” then turning up the pressure would have been the right answer, albeit a lucky guess. As it turns out, Technician Turner was answering the wrong question; assuming the best of intentions, his action proved to be a terrible, irretrievable decision that hurt the organization. And it illustrates the danger of putting too much faith in a lone “expert”.

### How Would You *Expect* Results-Oriented Folks to Make Decisions?

A cultural pattern in American decision-making is so blatantly obvious you almost miss it: it’s our obsession with “finding the answer”—*What’s the answer, what’s the answer, what’s the answer!*

This is classic results-oriented thinking. Compared to the Japanese, Americans have little resistance to skimming over the process of defining the question, and are happy instead to take trial-and-error stabs at problems based on hunches, with the ultimate goal of finding a shortcut to the desired result. *What’s the answer?!*

As you might imagine this is not how process-oriented Japanese managers roll, a reality that can cause hurt feelings among the Americans. For while Americans are asking themselves, *what’s the answer, what’s the answer, what’s the answer*, Japanese are thinking, *What’s the question, What’s the question, What’s the question?*

The twain will never meet until both sides see this gap. But the moment they do, hurt feelings immediately dissolve and both sides gain instant knowledge on how best to adjust their approaches. In concrete terms—now *both* sides will understand the importance of defining the question before talking about answers.

Who’d have thought that contrasting decision-making styles would offer such a profound glimpse at culture and humanity? Indeed there is a human story to tell here. So buckle up, for in **Part II**, we’re going to blast out of our results-oriented mindset, into a process-oriented place I call “the Zen mind”.

***This post is continued in Part II– A Zen Master’s Guide to Problem Solving***

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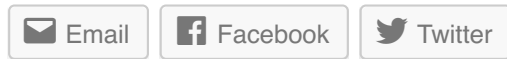
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IslandNotes on May 5, 2009 at 7:53 am

Is it just me or does Dr. Tim's well-laid out analysis suggest that Viagra may not be the only approach to satisfactory sex or am I missing something here?

All kidding aside, I think the dialectic between these ways of operating is pretty important — can't help pondering the Buddhist/Christian relative relationship here (For example, Christian answer: Life after death! Buddhist question: Why? (see dharma).

Also, the differential in material resources would seem to favor experimentation on one hand and conservative contemplation on the other.

In any case, it is always a delight to read your take on these things.

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punafish on May 11, 2009 at 5:50 am

I like the way you think, Darren. The Buddhist/Christian dimension is huge. (The Greeks have a big hand in it, too.) The Buddhist process-orientation drives how the Japanese behave, explain things, advertise, sell and develop relationships, etc. It permeates their thinking so deeply that they don't even realize it. Conversely Westerners/Americans are so "results-oriented" that we often don't see it. The Jews had the "promised land", the Christians had heaven, and America has the "American dream". Common points? All future/goal focused orientations. Wish I had a nickel for every time I heard an American manager say he was "goal-oriented" or "results-oriented". It sounds nice in Corporate America, but doesn't impress Japanese managers, as they value here-and-now, process oriented employees.

Hadn't considered the material resources angle, good insight.

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soulpower on April 3, 2012 at 6:00 pm

Hello Kerry,

I can definitely sympathize as a bilingual/bi-cultural American living in Tokyo working for one of the major automakers. The issues in this article are alive and well at my company. Change is frowned upon, even if it hurts the company; and decisions that need to be made quickly that involve foreign offices take forever without the foreign offices being consulted. It is almost like living in a cocoon. Once I got sick of it and went berserk, sending angry and rude e-mails (in Japanese) to managers “telling it like it is.” I found I became somewhat feared and that I am being listened to more (weird), but still I am not involved at all in nemawashi. However I don’t lash out anymore. I hope I can figure the sweet spot in between the “hunter” and the “fisherman.” Good article.

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eastasiabusinessBill Reed on February 3, 2014 at 11:38 pm

A European and historical perspective: in the 1980s, the financial sector enjoyed the warmth of Thatcherian approval and had it easy. Corporate growth financed by huge syndicated loans and bond issues was the order of the day. The action was extremely fast-moving, especially on the loans; the bigger and better slices were going to the fast movers. It was a bit risky but only a bit. The (relatively) recent arrival of a swarm of Japanese banks and securities houses increased the supply of funds but also the competition. They missed out on millions of Pounds-worth of easy money, especially the more profitable lead roles, because they were too slow. So, the high-quality decision-making worked against them. They didn’t need to indulge themselves in defining the right question; they needed to pick up the phone and say “Yes”.

So, one style of decision-making – what Tim described as the American way, but certainly replicated here in (Northern and Western) Europe – was much more successful when things were urgent and time-limited, even if they made the occasional mistake. When it was important to get it right first time and minimise risk (in an uncertain world), the Japanese approach was clearly better.

Working as I did with Renault/Nissan in the 00s, we came to a view that it was advisable to decide first of all on whether the matter was urgent or important before deciding which approach to favour. For us, by moving from cultural habit to cultural choice, we were taking the first steps towards cultural intelligence.

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Tim Sullivan on [February 4, 2014 at 9:46 am](#)

Thanks for taking time to comment, Bill, great insights. And thank you for clarifying that American decision-making style has similarities with Northern and Western Europe. My take has always been that Japanese and Western approaches each have pluses and minuses. Japanese-style “define the question” was effective in my world (most of the time) because it was in the context of old-school manufacturing. But even then, the Japanese proved to be gun shy when decisions had to be made quickly (even the no-brainers)—there was too much perceived risk for any individual to take action without getting everyone’s buy-in. In fast-moving environments (disaster responses, high tech, IT, growth financing) cultures around the world continue to take action and seize opportunities while Japanese have meetings and assess risk. But in old-school factory management where risk can be mitigated through tight process control and steady continuous improvement, the turtle almost always wins the race.

So I think your approach to determining urgency first is spot on. It helps to be unconstrained by ringi/nemawashi culture.

On a related note, is it just me or are Japan’s new wave of entrepreneurs moving faster than the previous generation?

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eastasiabusinessBill Reed on [February 4, 2014 at 10:53 am](#)

Sadly, I rarely get to meet new, young Japanese entrepreneurs. Most of my clients are ... shall we say, the opposite 😊 .One final point on decision-making. In conversation with a very senior CHRO in a massive sogo shosha, I got him round to talking about bad Japanese decisions. It won’t surprise you to learn that his immediate reply was “Fukushima”. I then asked for an example of the worst in Western decision-making. His one word reply? “Iraq”. ! I really like your blog and your youtube insights. Excellent and with a Hawaiian flavour. I must take this stuff more seriously myself.



Tim Sullivan on [February 7, 2014 at 5:13 pm](#)

Appreciate your kind words, Bill.

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