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Can Japanese management styles be applied to Africa?

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Most of the remarkable managerial know-how of the Japanese is gifted by their culture and society. Culture affects the way problems are perceived and solved. Societal learning also establishes horizons of perception. Managerial efficiency in any business organisation is the fundamental key to success. A good number of managers all over the world are showing a great deal of interest in Japanese ways of managing business because of the great success of the Japanese corporations throughout the world. The fact that the Japanese manage their enterprises efficiently and effectively without using the excessive scientific and advanced management tools has shaken a good number of countries, notably the United States of America. This paper discusses the fundamental management styles of Japan with a view to establishing its applicability to Africa.

Key words: Managerial efficiency, industrialiasation, business culture, corporate governance.

INTRODUCTION

The success of managers in Asian countries like Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan over the years has been rapid. Recently a great deal of interest existed among managers around the world to find out the Japanese way of managing business, because of the tremendous success of the Japanese corporations throughout the world. The fact that the Japanese manage their enterprises very well without the excessive use of scientific and advanced management instruments has shaken the confidence of the Americans in their approach. The latter appears to be more inclined to import the Japanese art of management, while their self-acclaimed monopoly in scientific management was already eroded by the worldwide presence of professional managers.

Western management principles have been borrowed wholesale in African countries, and African managers practice them, irrespective of whether or not the culture permits. On the other hand, Japan also started its economic development in the thirties; it was rebuilt from a devastated state. The Japanese have been extremely effective in borrowing from the West, in the areas the West excelled. But, in the process, they did not become Americanized or Europeanized. Instead, they took the best, the West had to offer which could be transplanted in the East and use it. This is because, throughout history, various management styles have succeeded one

another in attracting the attention of the world's management scholars to investigate and recommend for practice by fellow managers.

In addition, the Japanese have developed their own skills of management, which stem directly from their cultural and social values and beliefs. This blending has led Japan to emerge as a great economic power. Empirical statistics testify to Japanese superiority over any other nation and to the decline of America's industrial standing. This trend has made Japan a subject of research throughout the world since 1960 and vigorous investigations and analyses still continue to bring forth the factors responsible for the spectacular success of the nation.

The meaning of managerial efficiency

Managers of today face a variety of interesting and challenging situations. The average executive in Africa works at least 45 h a week and faces increased complexities posed by globalization, domestic competition, government regulation and shareholder pressure. The task is further complicated by rapid change, inadvertent disruption as well as minor and major crises such as the current economic, financial and political crises in Africa. In this context, managerial

efficiency-the use of the limited resources judiciously and in a cost-effective manner-should be given priority by managers in African organizations. The second emphasis should be on managerial effectiveness in terms of making the right decisions and successfully implementing them. This is because managerialefficiency and effectiveness are compliment to each other.

The ability to develop and use appropriate strategies that will use the best available means for the attainment of desired ends is an important aspect of effective management. Managers cannot live in isolation from the realities of life, nor conduct their operations without reference to the existing economic and technological situation. Hence one of the most significant aspects of effective management is the ability to plan for the future by using the best available resources for the attainment of desired objectives. In this context, management is the ability to develop and implement appropriate strategies in given circumstances. It may be a process of efficient functioning based on correct choices and actions. However, in the contemporary world which is increasingly dependent on large organizations, the most crucial situations are those which require organizational management. This implies decision and action in a context characterized by organized group or collective activity and the goals toward which the group effort is directed.

These objectives are pursued by managers in Japanese corporations who make decisions pertaining to the desired objectives and concerning relationships among resources: the people, money and machines, materials and methods which can be effectively deployed to attain those goals.

Now the economic and technological realities of the emerging Africa nations such as Nigeria and South Africa, for instance, are given importance the circumstances under which, industries have to operate and produce results. Any industry where the managers live in isolation from the realities of life and conduct their operations without reference to the economic and technological situation is, simply existing on a desert island. Thus the choice and use of the right management techniques are a matter of considerable importance, not only for the African nations and its people, but also in the long run for the survival, growth and prosperity of the industry itself.

Background of Japan

Japan is the world's most successful manufacturing and trading economy, accounting for some 10% of world output and generating large balance of payments surpluses. Japan is a mountainous country with relatively few natural resources and variable climate. It suffers earthquakes and extremes of weather. Its culture has been influenced by Taoist, Confucian, Asian and Western ideas. It also tends towards Mercantilism. The Japanese regard people and their competence as the country's key resource. The Japanese are homogeneous race, both linguistically and culturally.In the areas of the national culture, the Japanese have arelatively High Power Distance; and High Uncertainty Avoidance. They are relatively highly Collectivist; although communitarians are limited to membership and reference groups (the Japanese do not see themselves as 'members of the public). Japan is the most masculine of all countries studied by Hofstede (1991). Japan is a monochromic and very high in context because it displays strong national and pragmatic characteristics, operating within traditionally holistic mental concepts that derive historically from Taoism, Buddhism and Shintoism.

A feature of the Japanese is their particularism: an intense interest in detail and miniature (space is at premium in Japan). The Japanese adopt flexible attitudes to change; believing that society is evolutionary and subject to *kaizen* or continuing improvement, particularly as experience is accumulated, refined and handed on over time. They also subscribe to a synchronous view of time rather than the sequential approach of the West. The passage of time is associated with cycles, which in turn affects individuals, generations, entities and processes, and society generally. The present underpins the future, and lays its foundations. This synchronous view is best illustrated by long-term view taken towards technology. Development now will as progenitors yield generations of products in the future. At the same time, the development of technologies may be synchronized over time to achieve fusion: firstly, in the hybrid technologies for which Japan is famous; and, secondly, to produce newly synthesized technologies (such as those based on the properties of the laser (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1994) through the process of *yugo-ka*.

The Japanese business culture and management approach

Business culture tends to be closed. The individual subordinates his interest to the wider purposes of membership and reference groups, which in turn, are expected to provide systems of mutual support, as in the times of economic recession. Groupings are tight-knit. It may be difficult to penetrate them without a sponsor who is already a member. There is an expectation that business relations will develop over a long time scale. Business trust and time are correlated; the Japanese want to know that the people with whom they are to do business are totally trustworthy and will be around for a long time. This business culture may appear very confusing to foreigners, and the Japanese may not say

what they think for fear of offending or losing face. Hiding one's feelings is considered a virtue in Japan.

The socio-cultural traits of the Japanese people have imbued in them a perception, a belief of behavior at the workplace which is congenial for high productivity, fast industrialization and innovation. In contrast to Western "individualism", the "groupism" of the Japanese makes them more cooperative, contributive and supportive of others in the group and hence the organization (Chang, 1982).

This has effectively been used by industry, on the shop floor and other parts of the organization for all-round improvement and quality. Group-based techniques, such as "Quality Control", "Quality Circles", "Zero-defect", Suggestion scheme", etc, which was formulated first in the West, yielded much better results in Japan only because of their group cohesion, group ego and "familism".

Two distinct sectors are visible in Japanese industry. A modern sector comprises large firms engaged in capital intensive production process and facilities. The productivity as well as the wages is high. The best talents are recruited on life time employment commitment and the pay is mostly given on age and seniority basis. The other sector is a traditional one comprising small firms often playing a supportive role. The features of this sector are low productivity, low wages, longer working hours and low profitability. The large firms sometimes help their trusted long-term employees to set up their own small firms either to reward their entrepreneurship or to cut down their own Labour force which cannot be done during recession because of life-time employment commitment.

The Japanese government has complementary relationship with business and does not compete with private enterprise. The government facilitates industrial development by involving itself in the form of subsidies, supply of materials, adoption of technology, preferential licensing and low burden of taxation. Currently, the Japanese industrial policy is making a shift from heavy dependence on exports to reliance on domestic demand. Recruitment to an organization in Japan usually takes place at the entry level. Graduates from the best universities, such as Tokyo university (Tasie, 1997), for example, go to the best firms. All managerial appointments are made through promotion from within. This familism makes job-hopping a degrading act; the work unit is based on human relations rather than on professional abilities. Work is organized around the group rather than around the skills of an individual who is assigned specific tasks. The lack of complete task description even to a group, encourages them to think expansivelyJapanese corporations train their employees and provide them with skills for their effective functioning and thereby building loyalty among them. Indoctrination courses are given to employees to nurture total commitment to the organization. Individual guidance

programmes are as important as group training programmes. The recruits receive instructions not only for his or her identified job but for all the jobs at the same level including the human resource function. The Japanese company unions combine rank and file employees as well as lower level supervisory and managerial personnel. Unions are basically autonomous and self-sufficient and the office and other administrative facilities are commonly provided by the company.In Japanese society, the self is seen as part of a group. Expressing one's individuality and independence are symptoms of immaturity and selfishness. Harmony or "*Wa*" becomes a primary concern among the Japanese to maintain efficiency and morale of the group. Consensus or *Nemawashi* should have been achieved before a decision is made.

Japan has been closed to the rest of the world for a long time. During this period, a sense of conformity and belonging was fostered among the people. As a result, the Japanese have established a very effective non-verbal communication system. Expressions such as *Ishiu Denshin* (tacit understanding) and *Naa Naa Ni Yaru* (doing business without a formal contract) are common features of Japanese society.

Characteristics such as be loyal to boss, respecting a senior person, a boss's obligation to his subordinate and hard work are linked to the virtues of Confucianism. One can easily see the relationship between these virtues and the Nenko System with practices such as lifetime employment, seniority system, father-leadership, company family, and employee loyalty.

Groupism is the root of Japanese Management and the Nenko System is its flower. Since the system severely inhibits inter-firm mobility, intensive training and development becomes feasible. A large investment in employee who remains with a firm for over 30 years is very worthwhile. But the question of whether or not these management practices when transferred to other parts of the Asian countries will make a difference remains unanswered.

Experts' observations

A few unique points as identified by researchers in the area of the Japanese management styles are worthy of mention here. A group of experts (Pascale, et al., 1981) concluded that "the Japanese accept ambiguity, uncertainty and imperfection as much more of a given organizational life". This quality tremendously enhances their skills in dealing with people. They also find that "the Japanese see themselves as far more interdependent. Thus, they are prepared to make far greater investments in people and in skills necessary to be effective in dealing with others".

Another expert group (Lee et al., 1987) concluded that Japanese management was based on a philosophy and

Table 1. Characteristics of top management.

Organic Type: Japan	System Type: The USA
Facilitator	Decision-maker
Social leader	Professional
Group strength	Individual initiative and creativity
Emphasis on human relations	Emphasis on functional relationship
Management by consensus	Management by objectives
Leader adapts to changes	System adapts to changes

Source: D. M. Flynn, "Japanese Values and Management Process", in Sang. M. Lee and Gary Schwendiman (1982), Japanese Management: Cultural and Environmental Consideration (New York: Praeger Publications).

Table 2. Value system.

Factor	Japan	North America
Key strategy	Paternalism	Entrepreneurship
People	Homogeneous	Heterogeneous
Basic concern	People	Tasks
Social system	Close and rigid	Open and fluid
Family	Extended	Nuclear
Education	Specialized	Liberal
Employee feeling about firm	Oneness with firm	A place to earn money

Source: O. L. Crocker, S. Charney and J. S. L. Chin (1984), quality circles: a guide to participation and productivity (Ontario: Methuen Publication).

organizational culture that emphasize:Hard work for common goals;Consultative decision-making; A two-way communication system; Long-term planning;Sharing of overall objectives of the organisation by the employees at all workers and levels;Establishing harmony and loyalty between management, and Showing a high degree of concern for people and their valuesAn expert (Chang, 1982) also maintains that team spirit or group consciousness is very strong in Japan and that Japanese managers do not behave like individuals but as members of groups or subgroups. He concludes that "one of the paths to success in the organization is to melt themselves into the group aura by becoming loyal company men".The above table is a comparison of the characteristics of the top management between Japan and the USA (Flynn et al., 1982). A similar comparison between Japanese and North American companies on the value system has also been done by Crocker et al. (1984) as presented above (Table 2). On the foundation of the aforementioned traits of Japanese, a few more tangible things are also noticed which are widely talked

about in this context. They are:Just-in-Time systemQuality CirclesRingi system of Decision MakingKaizen concept of continuous improvement, etcBut these tools in the absence of the requisite group cohesion, organizational loyalty and flexibility in attitudes, may at best serve only a window dressing purpose. A superficial arrangement will by no way

change the spirit of a management. Giving credit to these systems for economic progress of Japan will only misguide us.

African approach

The forthcoming changes in the business environment of African countries like South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and many others are evident. The emerging social politico-legal standards have increased the expectations from business. Business today is required to respond to the needs of its employees, the customers and the society itself in which it operates.

Besides, African countries, particularly those wanting to industrialize face the problem of major adjustments in their economic system so that they could recover from serious entrepreneurial crises and avoid possible collapse. The continuous economic reforms starting from many circles brought Africa to the era of liberalization and globalization. These alone have put an unprecedented pressure for managerial efficiency in business units for the upgrading of quality and cost effectiveness. The ultimate aim of management will be to provide the customers with value for money as desired and deserved by them in order to ensure its own survival in the wake of global competition in the world market.

The crucial factors in this challenging job will be the quality assurance, cost effectiveness, consumer satisfaction and ethical standards for good image building. In order to achieve these end results, African businesses need the quality in its managerial performance itself, management of change, creating a favorable work and African culture, team spirit and organizational loyalty as well as other relevant conditions. Meeting this great challenge successfullyis

the key to survival. Do countries like Nigeria, Ghana,Zimbabwe and Kenya have enough potential to do all this or are they handicapped by some of their in-built weaknesses that are the real issues before us for serious consideration?

Africa in general does not have a dearth of capable people. Manpower resource is quite large and comprises people with vision, creativity, modern outlook and professional training. The social and religious values are also deep-rooted in the population of Africa, thereby making it capable of becoming a cohesive group with loyalty and respect for elders. This pluralistic orientation of life has rewarded these countries suitably in the West where people are mostly individualistic.

But, apart from these, do we also have a work culture that is conducive to high performance and can we bring up a well motivated team of individuals who believe in results and are prepared to take up challenges in the accomplishment of their tasks? Any structure or strategy will fail to show results without such a workforce in business.

Instead of having team spirit and innovation in the work culture, there are conflicts and unhealthy politics in organizations. Management tools are used by us as armors to defend ourselves and as weapons to offend others. A constructive system turns into a futile confrontation with mutual grips and hard feelings but no solution of the problem. Any organization ridden with a bitter political maneuvering generates opportunism, exploitation, favoritism, yes-man ship, pulling others down, persecution and many more.

Most firms run by the people of this region, complain of having more crises day by day. Consequently, reactive and passive nature managers tend to concentrate on them. They live too much in the present and neglecting the future. When this becomes a way of life, things are attended to only when they become urgent and alarming. Crises put some of the conscientious managers under tremendous stress and tension, but for others they lose significance, causing a decline in their commitment to the organization.

The problem in the managerial system of Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, to mention but few, is so deep rooted and widespread that short-cuts or quickies would probably not work. Although these countries are not completely homogeneous in terms of religion, they do share certain characteristics in terms of culture. Reforms should be started from the foundations per se.

An internal introspection for a few basics for continuous refinement and improvement is the need of the time. Efficiently created corporate work culture that may generate among workers a spirit of continuing introspection, innovation and experimentation is the need of the hour. Managerial values should focus more on implementation rather than on designs, and achievement should be given more importance than

effort. Freedom for entrepreneurial actions should prevail all over the organization. Actions and resulting achievements may become a matter of pride for the African people in general.

To have a kind of culture in the organization, managers have to be more pragmatic, open, innovative, entrepreneurial and risk-taking. The people have to be more tolerant and patient to listen to hired foreign professionals, see others doing, welcome positive as well as negative results of others' actions but at no cost

of creativity, innovation, experimentation and entrepreneurship being halted.Another major element of professionalism which fails to get its proper due in management practice is the MBO (management by objective). The internal balance and harmony in the set of objectives is usually lacking, causing confusion and diversion in effort. Making it a driving force for the entire organization requires developing in each and every

member a consumer orientation. Employers and employees both have to dedicate their efforts to the

consumer satisfaction. This may become a very effective means of causing congruence in individual and organizational objectives.

Can the Japanese management styles be applicable to Africa?

We have witnessed both the Japanese and American philosophies towards human factor as homogeneous and heterogeneous respectively – which have been claimed to contribute towards improved productivity, excellence, creating difference, creating a niche, increasing competitiveness; all of these are targeted at producing the competitive edge over competitors either to survive or to be ahead of them. Other Asian model considers respect for individuals as the most important ingredient in its own right for successful, high quality and excellent management that is the human factor in the form of customer, local inhabitants and/or personnel who actually perform all the tasks in the whole organization. Indeed, if the human factor is absent, there can be most excellent organization in terms of buildings, structures, charts, rules, regulations, systems, support and facilities. Yet nothing will actually move much less function in a coherent, well organized manner. To paraphrase Yong, "training will neither make a fish fly nor a bird swim; but training will certainly help a fish to swim faster and a bird fly higher" (Yong,1996). Alhabshi's argument support

the above statement when he said, "You can bring the horse to water but you cannot force it to drink" (Alhabshi, 1994). On the other hand, in the absence of the rest, the human element can still move something, as in the case of establishments which are about to be organized or started.

In the beginning, the Japanese success was termed as ideal and hence separate from the rest of Asia due to their commitment to quality and productivity ascribable to outstanding investments in Research and Development.But, in due course, many scholars turned down the idea and attributed their success instead to values, work ethics, work culture, and corporate values. Tersely, described as successful based on the appropriate blending of technological education and knowledge advancement in the close and rigid Japanese cultural mould.

The contributions of contemporary management in Japan and Western countries including the USA are so numerous; many of the conclusions were derived from empirical studies that were carried out within a certain cultural framework. These conclusions are not universally practicable and are more applicable to the societies in which the experiments were carried out. The differences in the social set-up induce variations in the managerial skills, strategies, systems and structures. Moreover, some of the Western managerial concepts are based on a certain premise of thought that is alien to the state of mind of some business managers in other Asian countries. The strategies, structures, and systems that are strictly contradictory to the revealed knowledge are, however, few and they are equally controversial among the Western scholarship. Hence the strategies adopted by the Japanese will provide more additions to the field of existing knowledge of management theories and practice.

It must be appreciated that the Japanese style of business and management is deeply rooted in traditional Japanese society and culture, and is considerably influenced by their values and attitudes. Some key contextual factors which have paved the way for the success of Japanese style management are authoritarian society, a communal outlook, factions and cliques, copying and perfecting technology, future orientation and business-government relationships, decision-making by consensus, active role of middle and top management, lifetime employment, seniority-based wage system, training by rotation and enterprise unions.

Many observers of Japanese management practices have taken the view that these practices are desirable to be applied in other countries and cultures. Consequently, little attention has been paid to the costs which the system inflicts on society and workers in particular. These costs can be substantial in terms of loss of individual freedom, a rigid social structure and sacrifice of other values which individuals and groups may cherish. Another little known fact is that the benevolence of the Japanese management system is not bestowed on a majority of workers, but is limited to a small minority (Iwata, 1982). Approximately 35% of the total workforce enjoys the privileges of lifetime employment in Japan. Women are almost never granted this privilege, and therefore occupy the lowest paid jobs in industry (Yakabe, 1974).

Despite the above limitations of Japanese-style management, William Ouchi (1978) has argued that the theoretical basis of the Japanese management system is the existence of industrial clans which have developed by a slow organic process within the Japanese society. Drawing on the work of the classic French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, Ouchi suggests that industrial organizations in the big business sector of the Japanese economy can be described as clans in the sense that they provide employees with a feeling of social cohesion and stability and a sense of belonging, meaning and direction in life. It is these characteristics which have been lost in western society which is suffering, in Durkheim's terms, from a problem of normlessness, with the decline of the family and other traditional social institutions and values. In the case of Japan, the values underlying the industrial clans have developed, according to Ouchi, as a result of cultural imperatives.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing discussion, the author recommends the following basic elements in management model of African countries, as these are a *sine qua non* for contemporary world of African managers facing the present day problems.

It may be noted that the basic philosophy of management in respect of concern for human beings does not figure in the previous models, but it has specially been placed in African model in order to cleanup the internal as well as external environment of the organizations and build an atmosphere of mutual trust, team spirit and group consciousness in the firm-the human interface.

The managerial tools with their roots in the culture and subcultures of African nations have been included for their importance and priority to its system. The leadership that has to play a vital role in implanting a healthy culture within organizational premises has then been positioned. No discipline and order can be maintained without providing an acceptable and exemplary leadership. But an effective leadership is expected to emerge easily in a fairly healthy work culture. The present state of organizational climate in industrializing African countries is hardly capable of supplying us with great and committed leaders in sufficient numbers.

Incorporation of the elements of professionalism which refer to African managerial styles completes our list.

Table 3. Elements in the management approach of African countries: Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and Zimbabwe.

Respect for individuals as an organizational philosophy
Its dimensions will be:
Low concern for the employees
Low concern for customers
Low concern for the local inhabitants
Low concern for society and ethics
Organizational culture as an infrastructure for efficiency.
This includes, in particular:
Super-ordinate goals - that gives direction to the effort
Zeal - that supplies energy and fervor
Action Bias - that discourages entrepreneurship and implementation
Leadership - Creating impact of people running the business
Professional arrangements in the form of tools of scientific management, viz.
Strategy - to plan the course of action and resource allocation
Structure – to divide and distribute the task of personnel
Skills – to create distinct capabilities in key personnel
Systems – to proceduralise reports and routinise processes.

Source: Author's observations through residential experience, traveling and working in Africa.

Anybody who can manage well the strategy, structure, skills and systems in a given social set-up may be qualified enough to be called a professional manager. Anachronistic management methods such as those demonstrated above should be redefined to incorporate the more modern and scientific ones. The implementation of this step, it is anticipated, could possibly improve efficiency and update managerial decision-making process.

The emergence of Japan as a global economic powerdramatically illustrates the nature of global economic change due to some of its management styles. Best known for the prowess it developed during the 1970s and 1980s in steel, electronics, and automobile production (Post et al., 1996), by the year 2008 and beyond, no continent including African business leaders could afford to ignore Japan as a leading competitor in major sectors of the global economy. If other African countries, such as Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana and Zimbabwe (Table 3) are to improve efficiency and quality in their organizations, they must, to a significant extent, follow a success story of the Japanese management styles. The issue of cultural impediments to organizational change like unemotional, conservatism, depersonalization of problems, subordination, isolationism, and antipathy (Blunt, 1988) must be carefully and constructively addressed. South Korea and Taiwan are two newly industrialized countries, which have shown rapid growth in productivity and per capita income since the 1950s. Most of their business culture, organization, working practices, and relations as well as management styles are, to some extent, similar to that of the Japanese. Singapore, one of the fast growing economies in South East Asia has shown a great interest in the Japanese way of managing, particularly in the area of human resources.

If African countries are to improve their management styles efficiently and effectively, they must apply, but with caution, the Japanese styles of management. However, to do this, African countries, particularly Nigeria and others, must put in place certain fundamental infrastructural facilities such as constant supply of electricity, water, good roads, dependable health institutions and a very effective system of corporate governance.

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