

## Japanese Style of Team Working: The Unique Way and Characteristics

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### Abstract

*This paper analyses the teamwork system, which is one of the major element of Japanese style of management. Emergence of Loosely Structured Organization (LSO) as a new paradigm of work organization in Japanese firms played a vital role in shaping the teamwork system at planet level. The LSO consists of organic work organization and flat management organization – the combination was found as perfect match to the small volume, multi-product, lean production system which evolved with the diffusion of micro electronic technology. The primary objective of group work which was manifested in such methods as quality control circles, zero defect system, self-managing groups and small group activities in 1960s and 1970s was to improve quality of products. However these practices of Japanese firms laid down the promoting conditions for team working under new technology after 1980s. Team working is now considered as a natural way of getting things done in Japanese factories. Indeed, the Japanese work organization could be recognized as team working. Assigning work on one-team, one-task method, developing multi-skilled workers, giving wider discretion to workers, maintaining the feeling of cohesiveness, providing appropriate training facilities, sharing information with planet level employees, and directing subordinates with less control are some of the important characteristics of Japanese style of team working. A closer look into these characteristics makes the Japanese way unique and forms the “Japan Model” for transformation of industrial practices in other countries in this age of globalization.*

**Keywords:** Japanese Management, Team Working, Quality control circles

### Introduction

Japanese firms maintain competitive superiority for decades in the global market. Particularly markets for industries such as automobiles and electronic appliances are heavily influenced by Japanese companies worldwide. The main reason attributed to continuous success of Japanese businesses is about the practice of unique management methods and techniques. The term ‘Japanese Style of Management’ has widely become popular among academic and business circles in recent times. Also, seeds of Japanese management have taken root abroad. There are ample research evidences showing the diffusion of

Japanese management techniques in other parts of the World (Abo, 1995; Morita, 2000).

Managing human resources is recognized as the most important aspect of Japanese style of management. Humanistic elements of Japanese management are supposed to underlie the competitive superiority of Japanese firms. Some scholars argue that the strength of Japanese management have found their roots from the unique features of Japanese society such as group orientation and ethnic homogeneity of work force (Yoshino, 1987). However, some others argue that the humanistic elements that underlie competitive superiority of

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Japanese firms are both rational and universal (Shimada, 1988). In fact, Japanese firms pay much attention to human factors at work place. Organic aspects of organization play a vital role in the way of doing things in Japanese firms (Okubayashi, 1998).

This paper aims to analyze the teamwork system which is one of the major element of Japanese style of management. Attempts are made to clarify the unique characteristics of teamwork in Japanese organizations. Analysis is carried out by reviewing the existing literature and by the author's own experience gathered through factory visits and observation in selected firms in Japan. The author would like to express his sincere thanks to all those who extended their fullest cooperation in this project.

### **Japanese Style of Work Organization-Emergence of Loosely Structured Organization**

The human resource management system of Japanese firms has undergone considerable changes during 1980s and 1990s due to the influence of new technology. Introduction of Information Technology in communication and Micro Electronics in manufacturing led to great modification of organizational structure of both work and management organizations in enterprises. At work organization level it was observed that the so-called Tayloristic machine principle of one-man, one-job got modified as teamwork in which workers became multi-skilled capable of performing various kinds of job. This modification was manifested in the shift of work organization from mechanistic to organic characteristics.

At management organization level, the hierarchical organization structure

transformed into the so-called flat type or net work type organization where middle level managers assume new roles based on information sharing between top and lower level within organizational unit. The technological innovation or micro electronics revolution as it is sometimes called, was considered as the driving force of these changes and transformations of organizational structure, job contents, and duties of workers, and new roles of supervisors. Thus the diffusion of new technology which was thought as the perfect match to the small volume, multi-product lean production system, led to the development of Loosely Structured Organization (LSO). The research team headed by Prof. Okubayashi Koji at Kobe University, Japan, has identified the existence of LSO in Japanese companies as well as Japanese affiliates in overseas.

The so-called LSO which was brought about by the diffusion of new technology, includes organic work organization and flat management organization. Organic work organization implies a teamwork organization in which tasks are assigned to a work team of various forms. It also allows flexible job boundary and wide discretion to workers. Flat management organization means a flat management hierarchy with delegated responsibility of managerial decision-making. This kind of LSO is the dominant organizational form among Japanese companies at present.

### **The Japanese way of team working and its unique characteristics**

After the Second World War, Japanese organizations were very keen in introducing advanced technology from Western countries. Earlier production systems in Japan were based on Taylorism, which popularized the philosophy of one-man, one-job.

There were several methods such as standardization, industrial engineering, belt conveyor line, increased wages on job evaluation etc. adopted by companies in order to stimulate productivity. However, the group work at shop floor began to be appreciated by managers after 1960s. The first main objective of group works was to improve the quality of products. Thereafter, group work was intensified by such new methods as quality control circles, zero defect system, and group based problem solving – all of which eventually led to the Japanese style of team working, especially manifested in self-managing groups in 1970s. These activities adopted by Japanese companies put forward the promoting conditions for team working under new technology after 1980s.

Indeed, the Japanese work organization could be recognized as team working. The LSO is now considered as a new form of knowledge-utilizing work organization by way of allowing workers to work as a team. Working as a team at shop floor in Japanese factories was not artificially designed, but it has been the usual aggregation of their daily work patterns in which both management and workers tried to achieve a good work performance. In Japan, team working is not a form of organization designed apart from the work place, but the work practices adopted by management and workers through their experiences in the work place.

According to Prof. Msaya Morita team working could be defined as follows: ‘a way of working in which some multi-skilled team members are responsible for performing their team target with a high degree of freedom from external control to respond to their environment’. Based

on this definition, the following characteristics of such teamwork organization are noteworthy to mention in this regard.

- **Assigning work on one team, one task method** – The first characteristic is one team, one task style which accompanied with the concept of groupism as a special feature in Japanese style of management. Under the introduction of new technology as manifested in multi-product, small volume lean production system with flat administration, team work has developed on the basis of working style of Japanese people, and a team is allotted one task. The work process within the team is controlled and improved by team members.
- **Developing multi-skilled workers** – Second characteristic concerns multi-skilled workers. This means that workers are capable of performing several duties at the work place. The job content of each worker is kept ambiguous, and there is no clear job demarcation. Workers are allotted work in versatile pattern which makes them to play decisive roles where changes or unexpected situations happen in the work place.
- **Wider discretion to workers** – Third, it leads to the delegation of wider discretion to workers in order to learn and operate new machines at work place. The existence of a room for autonomy is a necessary precondition for effective team working. Workers

therefore obtain an opportunity to utilize their own abilities to think and behave much more than under the old Tayloristic system. They are made more responsible for coordinating their activities by themselves and utilize their wide discretion in a responsible manner without relying on directions from supervisors. The job contents of workers are enriched with flexible job boundary. Duties and responsibilities were enlarged with more authority to handle complex situation at work place.

- **Continuous skill development of workers** – The fourth characteristic is about continuous skill development of workers. Japanese management believes that workers can learn and progress through their daily work, and thus building up a comfortable human resource base for the company. By enhancing employees' skills continuously, they become capable of performing vertically enlarged jobs. This would help the firm to build up a talented human resource base which underlies the competitive power of firms in the present rival world.
  - **Feeling of cohesiveness** – The fifth characteristic revolves around the concept of cohesiveness among team members. Under the individual work style promoted by Tayloristic approach, a worker concentrates on his own work and reluctant about the performance of other workers and the shop floor as a whole. But, workers at the same shop floor will help and
- consult with each other in teamwork. There is a consciousness of team membership among the workers, and thus a feeling of cohesiveness among team members.
- **Continuous training of workers** – In Japanese factories, workers are regularly trained by their companies. Also those workers who show superior performance in their work are promoted to technicians who are significantly different from general blue collar workers, especially in the sense that they possess higher skills and abilities to enable them to be engaged in maintenance and programming activities.
  - **Information sharing** – The continuous information sharing among workers even at shop floor level strengthen the working methods in team working. There are cooperative mutual relationships in sharing information among various organizational units. Workers in a team often share the objectives of team, in addition to their individual objectives. This would help to cultivate the perception of high performance target among workers.
  - **Supervisor as a facilitator rather than a controller** – The final characteristic concerns the role of supervisor. According to Prof. Masaya Morita, supervisors generally assume the following two functions in team working: acting as a role model for workers, and acting as buffer between

labour and management. Workers are given a certain degree of freedom to observe problems in their work area, find out the causes and consider remedial measures. Supervisors direct their subordinates but at the same time they always accept the voice of workers if it is effective in improving their activity. Utilizing workers' ability to find and solve problems themselves is supported by the management attitude that is "people closest to the shop floor know best". Thus, it is customary in Japanese factories that the workers who show better performance in their job are promoted to the grade of supervisors. Often these people are regarded as technicians who are significantly different from general blue collar workers, and hence to be role model for rest of the team members.

As mentioned above, the new form of knowledge-utilizing work organization with team working as its backbone seems to determine the fundamental characteristics of the Japanese style of management in modern technological environment. It aims at making workers multi-skilled so that they could realize the potential of new technology. Because, the degree of exploitation of technological advantages is determined by the judgment of workers. LSO effectively uses the potential of workforce as well as the technology.

### **The relationship between LSO and team working**

The characteristics of LSO and team working under new technology clearly reflect to a large extent the structure and

functions of the Japanese work organization today. The characteristics are well enough to satisfy the conditions of team working and as such the Japanese work organization could be regarded as team working which is a quite natural way of doing things. It is also evident from research studies that most of the work organization at shop floor where micro electronic technology was introduced intensified the teamwork characteristics (Okubayashi, 1998).

It should be noted that the foreign scholars often argue that Japanese firms stand on advantageous position to practice teamwork as a work method in the shop floor level because of the feature of groupism which has been deeply rooted in Japanese society (Stewart, Manz and Sims, 1999). Although this view is probably true in the sense that teams naturally flourish in a cultural environment, which supports collectivism, there is no any strict rule that teamwork will not develop in a culture that does not support collectivism. Now it is clear that teamwork is the usual method of carrying out functions of work organization in Japanese firms. There are some research results showing that Japanese organizations succeed in transplanting Japanese team working to other countries where collectivism is said not to become widespread (Morita, 2001).

In a factory, it becomes absolutely necessary for management to maintain mechanical factory orders and production while at the same time utilizing with less limitation the organic ability of the people in the shop floor for more creative and qualitative functions for the system. This concept is in line with the modern thinking of fostering creativity and innovation at all levels in the hierarchy within organization. Teamwork, quality circles, task groups and

autonomous work groups emerged inevitably to tackle a trade-off relationship between mechanistic and organic aspects of production system. The essential technological feature of Japanese production system and practices is to be found in the quest for perfection which emphasizes the combination of human organization which permits more flexible, and free mobilization, and exploitation of qualitative, creative abilities of human resources of all ranks as well as quantitative energies from them. The result is a sort of special unification of the so-called LSO. The logic extracted from Japanese experiences often grasped as the "Japan Model" may have some implications for the transformation of industrial practices in other countries in this age of globalization.

### Conclusion

This article makes it clear that the way of managing human resources at work place plays a vital role in securing competitive advantage. Due to the influence of new technology, Japanese firms have adjusted their organizational structure in order to grasp the fullest potential of employees. The emergence of LSO paved the way for effective team working in Japanese organization. Eight characteristics of Japanese style of team working clarify the operational aspects of teamwork in an organizational context. One could notice the unique way of managing human resources in Japanese firms as elaborated by these characteristics.

It is often said that Japanese culture characterized by groupism provides advantageous conditions for teamworking at the shop floor. But such a team work system was intentionally introduced by companies to increase workers' job satisfaction as well as productivity under

the wide diffusion of microelectronics technology. Groupism as national culture is not a driving force, but one of the conditions for the popularity of teamwork organization. The effectiveness of Japanese style of management confirms the truth to the large extent that Japanese management methods and techniques constantly become universal, even though factors specific to Japanese society play an important role.

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