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Read to Lead

Middle management drives Japan

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The extreme politeness of the Japanese can bowl you over. As I was getting out of the lift, after some casual conversation about the Japanese breakfast at my hotel in Tokyo, one of the reception managers rushed to touch my feet. Unnerved, I stuttered, "What, what?"

Stepping back, I discovered my shoe laces had opened and he was trying to tie them. Never have I seen such courtesy, except perhaps in Japanese trains. Unlike the underground or metros in different parts of the world, in Japan, people are quiet and gracious. I've never seen anyone speak on a mobile phone when travelling, and they readily accommodate one another so everyone can travel together in comfort.

"In America, my father would come home for supper every day, and we'd spend two weekend days together," said Kuniko, an office clerk at a store in Tokyo. She recalls her childhood spent in New Jersey. "Our family bonding was joyful like Americans. But when we moved to Tokyo, my sisters and I would barely meet him for weeks together."

Being the head of a gas station, her father went to work on Sundays too, "so he never ever came

to our school events and I hardly know my father now," she says.

Her father is not very different from the thousands of office goers in Japan who board an underground train at 7 am and return home at midnight. The Japanese passion for hard work is legendary, being a workaholic has emerged as corporate culture that's appreciated. The longer employees stay at work every day, the better rewarded they are. You're in your boss's good books if you leave office after him, which is generally after 11 pm.

Not being able to cope with the demanding 14-15 work hours plus family responsibilities, most women prefer to quit work after getting married. Kuniko speaks excellent English and had become a section manager of the departmental store she worked in. After she had a child, she returned to part time work and was given a lower, clerical position. "When I started leaving office at 6 in the evening to pick up my baby from the crèche, people would look at me like I was an alien," she recounts. "For me, my family is my first priority. Even if I get more salary, if I have to stay long, I will not take up that job." No promotions have come her way since, although she's back to normal hours, while her male counterparts have leapt ahead by burning the midnight oil. Although such gender discrimination exists, Japan's traditional society is averse to litigation, and social attitudes respect a woman's household role.

Immediately after World War II, Japanese women started to participate in the labour force. Today, about 50% of all women have paid work

in service, wholesale and retail trades, eating and drinking joints and secondary industry like manufacturing. This percentage is higher than most countries. But reaching positions of authority in managerial roles largely remains the preserve of black-suited salarymen. According to the UN International Labour Organisation, women held only 6.6% management jobs in Japanese companies and government in 1985, which rose to just 10.1% in 2005, whereas in the US at the same time, women held 42.5% of all managerial jobs.

Japan's demanding, morning-to-midnight corporate culture is the expectation of its dominating middle management where productivity is very high. According to a 1988 study in the Journal of Applied Psychology, management development systems in Japan's leading corporations have produced executives and managers who are commonly acknowledged to be among the best in the world, although how these systems operate is not well understood. Although the Japanese always listen to their superiors, when it comes to decision making, they discuss a matter threadbare and have several consensus rounds, everybody in the room has to agree to a point, and unless that happens they don't move on. In contrast, the Chinese are very shrewd and quick, and the senior-most in America has the authority to take decisions.

The top management can be quite different in Japan. They socialise in business lunches and dinners to develop relationships with their customers while the middle-level stays stodgily at work, shapes policy, sends more than 100-200 emails a day and holds many meetings. It takes the responsibility to maintain harmony so employees can work together in a "uchi soto" or "us and them" situation, that means working in groups and teams. This term can also translate as "we Japanese" dealing with an international "them" in the globalising situation.

The business and social cultures in Tokyo, Osaka, Hiroshima are a bit different from one another. In Osaka, they talk a lot, joke, express their feelings directly. But people are more reserved in Tokyo. As a society, the Japanese are humble, they are polite, understated and don't shout. In fact, in their wonderful fast trains, nobody talks, but you will observe a large number of commuters extremely engrossed in reading novels. The Japanese characters are in large print in these 4"x6" books, and I found a lot of them are illustrated comic books. Sitting next to an old gentleman as he pored over the comic book, I got curious and peeked into what absorbed him so. Lo and behold, it was a pornographic comic book! A thought flashed by: If Japan with 99% literacy, as per UNDP's 2009 report, needs illustrations for easy comprehension of this subject, how long will it take India's piracy pushers to deliver the same to the 44% of our people who are unlettered?

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