Japanese Management Theory and Library Administration

by Peter Clayton

This article suggests it is time librarians examined Japanese management theory to see whether some of its ideas might be applicable to libraries. An overview of Japanese management theory is followed by a linking of some of its key concepts to current trends and issues in library administration.

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These days, almost every management school is offering units in Japanese management theory. The reason is obvious enough: Japan's overwhelming economic performance in the world market provides ample evidence that their managers must be doing something right. Western business enterprises from General Motors to Levi Strauss have looked at Japanese management theory to help improve their performance, and business schools have added this subject to their curricula.

So far, however, those in academic libraries have shown little interest in applying Japanese management theory to their institutions. Perhaps the emphasis of most management theory on profit-oriented organizations appears to limit its direct applicability to libraries. As libraries and other service-oriented organizations increasingly seek entrepreneurial opportunities, however, this distinction may become of diminishing importance.

It is surprising that the library literature does not reveal an increasing tide of comparisons to and lessons drawn from Japanese management principles and practices. The Western management literature in general certainly has done this,[1] and library literature has in the past followed such trends, though usually at a pace or two behind.

This article suggests that librarians can gain new insights from considering how some aspects of Japanese management theory may have fruitful application to their own organizations. A brief outline of some outstanding concepts of Japanese management theory is presented; it is followed by an attempt to link these and related concepts to current trends and issues in library administration. One word of caution is in order here: library managers and administrators should consider carefully how any component of Japanese management can be fully and consistently integrated into the fabric of their organization. "Add-on" management practices and philosophies are likely to be ineffective or even harmful.

Essential Features

It is difficult for Westerners to grasp the essential features of Japan's culturally embedded system of management. This difficulty is reflected in the diversity of views, descriptions, and prescriptions for application found in the Western management literature on this topic. One pair of authors has actually referred to our understanding of Japanese management theory as a "jungle."[2] Another author has commented that "no clear-cut definition of 'Japanese-style management' exists."[3] Some have suggested that Japanese culture itself is a basic component

of the system. Others have asserted that Japanese management theory is by nature eclectic, and that its essential features can be transferred to Western organizations. Certainly, the apparent success of some Japanese corporations in offshore enterprises—so-called "transplant" factories—would appear to support this last view.[4]

The essential features of Japanese management theory include a strong emphasis on participation, with consensus the preferred decision-making mode, and a corresponding focus on collective responsibility. The process may be time-consuming, but once collective decisions are made, they are strongly supported. In fact, it has been argued that a mediocre consensual decision may be more effective that a superior-but-contested decision.[5]

A focus on long-term objectives is also characteristic of Japanese management style[6]—a focus reflected in employee retention rates. For example, the average job tenure at Fujitsu is 13 years, compared to 3.6 years in the United States.[7] The extent to which "lifetime employment" actually occurs has been questioned. In his best-selling book *Thriving on Chaos*, Peters claimed that only 15 to 35 percent of the Japanese workforce, mostly males employed by big companies, enjoy lifetime employment.[8] A recent work comparing factories in Japan and Britain concluded: "Overall, the figures suggest that 'fixed' [long-term] employment does characterize a greater proportion of Japanese workers than British workers...."[9] However, Japanese women are very much less likely than their male counterparts to experience long-term employment (20.6 percent in 1984, versus 55.9 percent of males).[10] The crucial difference may lie in the cultural norm—i.e., the assumption that long-term employment is the preferred pattern.

Linked to the concept of lifetime employment is a strong emphasis upon people as the critical resource of the organization. That this goes well beyond rhetoric is evidenced by the care most Japanese companies take with recruitment, induction, and training. Pascale and Athos state: "An obsessive concern for training is, in fact, a distinctly Japanese quality."[11] Job rotation is also common, as is mentoring.

Lifetime employment is one of the "three pillars" of the Japanese industrial relations system.[12] The other two are *nenko*, or seniority plus merit pay, and enterprise unions. An enterprise union is

one related to the organization rather than to the skill or craft its members employ. Enterprise unions enable employers to deal with a single union. In addition, that union is more likely to be committed to the future growth and prosperity of the organization. These three pillars are said to be much more closely interconnected than equivalent features of industrial relations systems in the West.

One of the most publicized and, to the consumer, most apparent aspects of Japanese management theory is a striving for quality for its own sake—making things right the first time. This approach includes but is not limited to "quality circles," excellent maintenance of equipment, and the absence of "crisis management"— indeed, the whole approach has an apparent synergistic effect, greater than the sum of its separate components.

Pascale and Athos developed a framework of management variables in association with McKinsey & Company.[13] They believe that in terms of strategy, structure, and systems — the "hard S's"— Japanese and U.S. managerial styles are very similar, but that for cultural reasons Japanese management is superior in the "soft S's," staff (the right people to do the job), skills (training and development), style (the manner in which management handles personal relations), and superordinate goals (the guiding concepts an organization imbues in its members). In discussing American firms in relation to Japanese corporations, Pascale and Athos concluded:

No quick introduction of uncoordinated parts will address the whole problem. Quality control circles, "Theory Y" re-organizations, team building, two-week organizational development programs, etc., etc.—each has its uses, but unless there is an overall *fit* of all the managerial parts across time, there will be little sustained leverage and few results.[14]

Another best-selling book on Japanese management theory also deserves mention. This is William Ouchi's *Theory Z*.[15] Theory Z represents an attempt to combine what Ouchi believes are the most useful aspects of both Japanese and American management theory—an attempt not all reviewers have regarded as successful.[16]

Lessons for Library Management

Some aspects of Japanese management theory would appear to relate well to the operation of academic libraries. No less

an authority than Amitai Etzioni apparently concurs:

What I would call "Japanese" management training, which aims to encourage the sharing of responsibility and participation of various levels of employees in management, makes the hierarchy less pronounced and is certainly desirable. It is even more desirable in libraries than it is in other places of employment, such as assembly lines.[17]

Most observers seem to agree that Japanese management theory differs significantly from Western theory in its stress on collective responsibility and on shared decision making. Librarians have talked a great deal about participative management, but appear to have done rather less. In particular, few librarians would subscribe to consensual decision making. Among others, White has pointed out that real participation involves some devolution of actual control over work, not just mere consultation.[18] If this is correct, perhaps it is time we focused more consciously on devolution of responsibility, on building teamwork and cooperative work values, and attempted to make participative management a reality.

Libraries have always operated with long planning horizons for such essential functions as information acquisition, storage, and provision. The increasing awareness within our profession of preservation and conservation issues complements this long-term approach. Yet management styles adopted by librarians have been short-term and reactive. Perhaps this style has merely been borrowed from the Western business sector, with its emphasis on short-term profits. Japanese enterprises, on the other hand, operate with "long-term planning horizons, less direct influence of shareholders and a blurring of the capital-labor divide; in other words, [with] a different kind of capitalism."[19] This "different kind of capitalism" would seem much closer to the public sector origins of most libraries. We too have shareholders—external "stakeholders"—although their voices are perhaps less clearly heard than may be desirable.

In any case, library administrators will find other activities that should be carried out with a long view. These include developing an integrated organizational philosophy, and investing in staff training and human resource development.[20] Only now does the need for strategic planning seem widely recognized, and in some cases this may be more in reac-

tion to external pressure, or even fashion.[21] Japanese management theory may well suggest a checklist of the opportunities that long-term management offers us. It could certainly provide further support for changes, such as the movement towards strategic planning, which are already apparent in our profession.

In this context, it is interesting that at least one library in Australia has consciously followed the Japanese approach to planning. In reorganizing the technical services division of the State Library of New South Wales, Schmidt referred to the process adopted as "modeled on the Japanese approach of lengthy planning followed by speedy implementation."[22] As reported, the library's experience seems to have been particularly successful.

Staffing Issues

Similarly, the claimed Japanese commitment to lifetime employment finds a ready library parallel in the long-term staffing patterns imposed on most libraries. Library managers typically have limitations on their ability to hire and, more particularly, to fire staff. This is more than ever true today, with what amounts to a static, almost closed job market. Some library managers see this situation as restrictive, and view with envy the relative freedom of private enterprise in the personnel area. Yet many Japanese businesses apparently *choose* such public sector-like personnel practices. Why? Perhaps we should look not at the restrictions, but at the opportunities such an approach offers: long-term training, reduced turnover, improved loyalty, teamwork, and cooperation.

Japanese companies also tend to eschew specialists for generalists, consciously rotating staff through a variety of work experiences and grooming those that do well in many areas for senior positions. Problems with meeting the career aspirations of specialists in library work and with integrating them into library structures have long been a theme of our professional literature. Recent public sector responses to such problems have included "generic" duty statements and "multiskilling."[23] Here, too, the Japanese approach of preferring generalists would make sense in a library environment.

Competitors or Colleagues?

Japanese firms have also regularly been described as cooperating and collaborating with their competitors.[24] This contrasts sharply with the adversarial commercial environment found in the West—yet it is far more in tune with how libraries see other libraries. Librarians tend to view their counterparts in other institutions as colleagues, not rivals, and find references to them as "competitors" in such processes as strategic planning to be inappropriate. Kagono et al. state: "Japanese firms, while competing with each other, reduce the risks facing individual firms through interorganizational networks."[25] Here again, the parallels with the library world seem apparent.

Another important aspect of Japanese management is the establishment of a close and trusting relationship between a firm and its suppliers. Walton has aptly characterized this as "symbiotic."[26] Libraries have not, on the whole seen themselves as in the same business as their suppliers, nor have they attempted to work in close collaboration with them. Yet in areas such as library supply and in the development of integrated library management systems, such close collaboration may provide real benefits. This area seems ripe for further exploration.

One feature of the Japanese supplier relationship is avoidance of large manufacturer inventories through just-in-time (JIT) deliveries. It has been suggested that JIT may be applied to the acquisition and provision of information as well.[27] As the authors of *Project Quartet* point out, the availability of information in electronic form makes it possible for libraries to acquire and provide information only as it's needed.[28] Libraries have traditionally stockpiled information against the prospect of future use, but economics and efficiency are dictating an approach favoring information on demand.

Quality Issues

Quality is—or should be—a matter of particular concern to libraries. Reports that up to 50 percent of reference queries do not receive a complete and correct answer call into question the basis of many of our claims to professional expertise.[29] The traditional Western approach to achieving quality has been one of "quality control"—i.e., inspection and rectification of faults after production but before distribution. This type of quality control can be applied in a cataloging section, but not at a reference desk. What we need to focus on in reference, and at other library service points, is "quality assurance," or getting things right the first time, which is the service equivalent of building quality in rather than adding it on.[30] Quality assurance has characterized the management approach used by Japanese industry—an approach learned largely from two U.S. experts, Juran and Deming.[31] But despite Deming's successful work in the Far East, his quality lessons were largely ignored in the United States until the 1980s, when the "quality movement" gained a toehold.[32] Perhaps it is time library managers gave serious consideration to the adaptation of methods such as quality circles, as has been regularly suggested in our literature.[33]

Total Quality Management (TQM) has recently surfaced as another strategy of potential interest to library managers.[34] Based on many of the same concepts as quality circles, but broader in scope, TQM endeavors to promote intrinsic quality by encouraging employee participation at all levels, by maintaining a focus on customers, and by striving for continuous improvement. Whether an academic library itself introduces TQM or is part of a wider organization that introduces it, some familiarity with Japanese management theory would seem essential if its potential is to be realized.

Conclusion

At least in some settings, Japanese management theory has provided the basis for implementing comprehensive and internally consistent management practices. These practices differ in important respects from those traditionally adopted by for-profit corporations in the West. Because academic libraries may share more characteristics with Japanese corporations than with Western firms, library managers may wish to borrow from Japanese management theory in developing operating practices and programs, rather than limiting their borrowings to the more familiar Western enterprise area.

Japanese management itself has been characterized by just such an imitative, derivative approach. As one researcher states: "Selective learning from other countries which builds on existing strengths can enhance competitiveness, as the Japanese experience has shown."[35] Today's library managers have more reason than ever to reconsider how their organizations are managed. In this pursuit, they should attempt to learn from Japanese as well as conventional management thinking.

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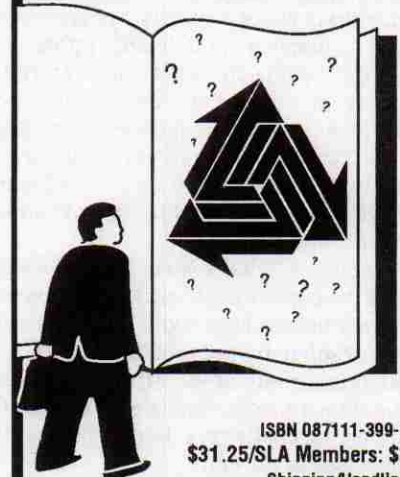
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