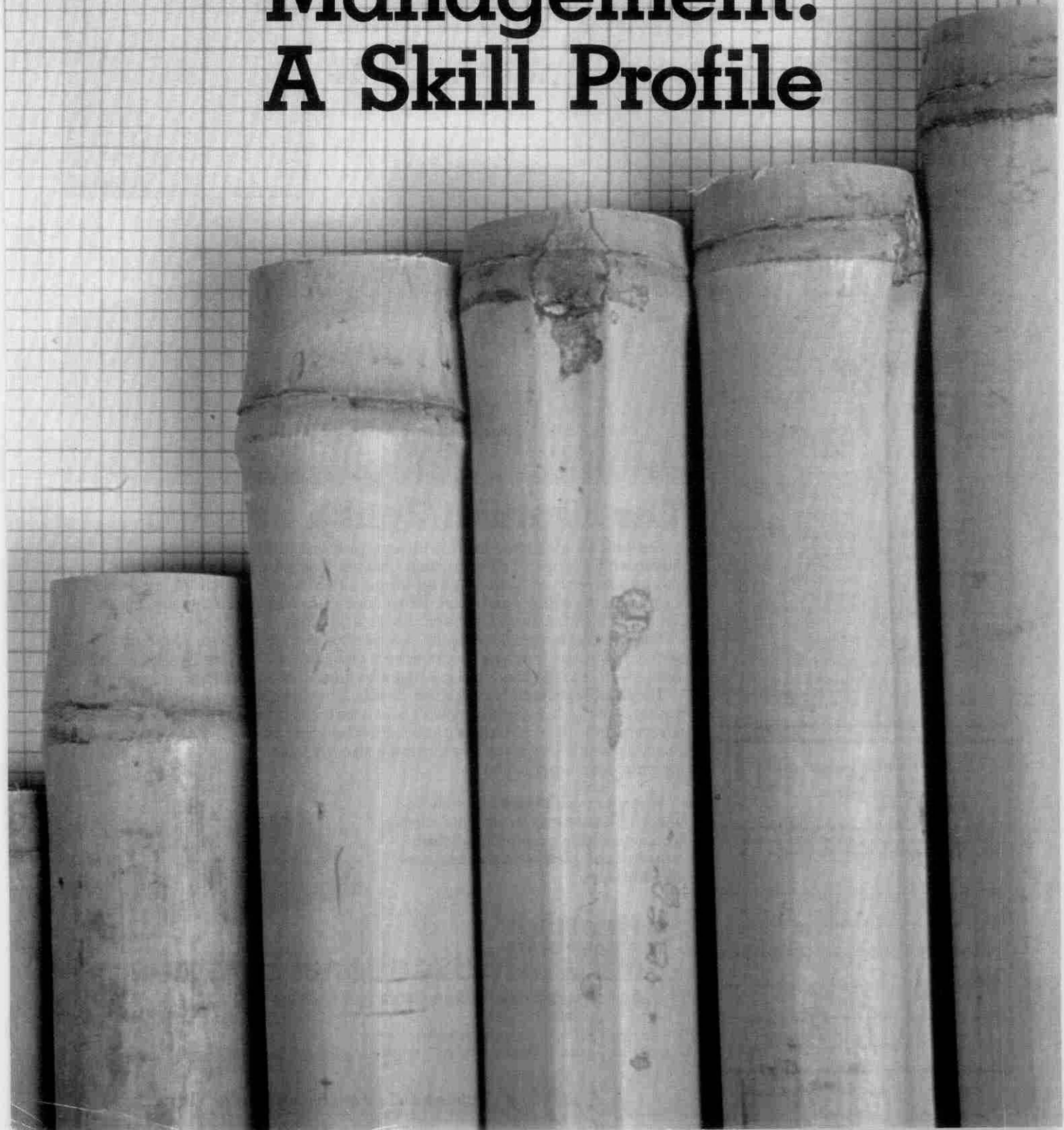


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a position exactly opposite to ours.

Japanese Management: A Skill Profile



Managers have recently been wearing their anthropologists' hats in order to learn how the Japanese do it. The consensus so far is that their success is due largely to their strong group orientation which permits a high level of teamwork. This conclusion has stimulated a torrent of projects to implement quality circles and participative management.

In many ways, the lessons from the East help us to return to some old American values. Teamwork has been a part of the American ideal for a long time, but at least in our business affairs we have placed it second to self and individualism. Although some observers have argued that managers should reverse this priority in order to improve organization effectiveness, those arguments never had the force of data and statistics behind them. The Japanese experience gives us firm evidence that teamwork and group effectiveness have productive value.

But in some ways our fascination with this aspect of Eastern management blinds us to other facts. We have spent very little time looking at the Japanese as individuals. Reischauer (1977) warned us that the group orientation of the Japanese could be a trap which held us back from seeing the rich individualism in Japanese life. One sign that we may be already in this trap is our lack of attention to the skills profile of Japanese managers. Rather than appreciate the unique skills they bring to the job, we often attribute their talent to history and tradition. This makes it appear as if being Japanese is enough to make anyone group oriented or a good team worker. Such a view is contradicted by the intense

discipline which the Japanese give to their actions in groups. Working in groups may not be any more natural for them than it is for us. They however have been willing to give much more effort to developing and maintaining group functions.

All of this tells us to examine their personal skills more carefully. In doing so we confront a problem. Teamwork strikes a positive cord in us, it seems rational. In contrast many aspects of their individualism seem mysterious and exotic. We find it hard to see parallels to their Zen values, self-discipline and forms of self-expression. Keeping a diary, for example, is a very popular form of self-expression in Japan. For Americans this is one of the least popular forms. Some Japanese companies even use diaries as a part of their management training in order to foster self-examination (Rohlen 1974).

Perhaps another reason we haven't looked too deeply into the individualistic side of the Japanese manager is our ambivalence about samurai ethics. This code of conduct has been so much a part of Japanese self-discipline that many Westerners would prefer to look elsewhere for the key to their success. This ambivalence may be changing. The advertising world seems to have found a new prophet in the writings of a seventeenth century samurai named Musashi (1974).

If American managers are to learn the skills of the Japanese manager, we need to give them a translation which has as much validity and credibility as the team analyses. The best vehicle for this purpose is Confucius. Although most books on Japanese culture and management concede that he was and continues to be a major influence in Japanese life, few have bothered to show how he can be used as a way of building a managerial skills profile.

Most of us think of Confucianism as a quaint and ancient philosophy which advocates respect for learning and elders. In fact it has played an active and dominant role in the history of Japan. During the turbulent sixteenth century, Confucianism was the device used to help establish social order (Hall 1970). From the management development point of view, the importance of Confucianism lies in its principles of self-

cultivation and growth. People, he said, have one overriding responsibility and that is to act according to the highest standards. Usually this meant imitating some superior person and striving to correct faults in one's outlook and behavior. People in high positions had an added duty because they ought to serve as role models for their subordinates. But the leader should act according to the same principles as everyone else, which was to cultivate himself by striving to emulate the highest standards of service to others (Lin 1966).

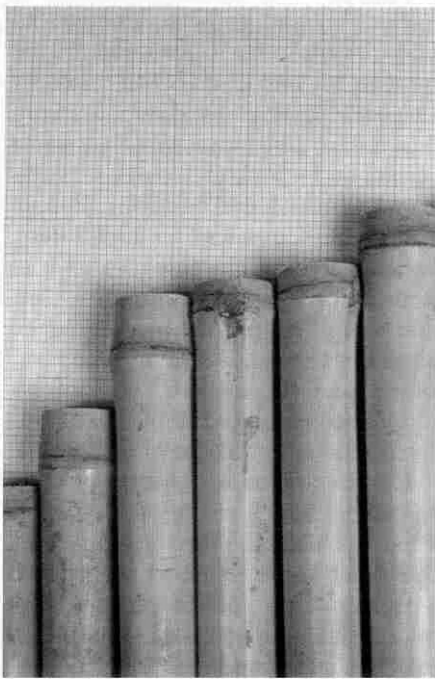
Here again, as with teamwork, we see ideals which closely follow some Western beliefs. But managers in the West have also had to contend with opposing philosophies which take a more pessimistic view of human nature. Machiavelli, for one, advised leaders to use dubious tactics if they were to do their jobs properly. Confucius took the opposite view. He said we should apply the same ethics in our public life that we use in our private affairs.

In general, the Eastern skill profile tells people to worry about themselves; the Western profile says worry about others and what they might do against you. The Western skill profile is definitely more aggressive, perhaps because of the need to worry about others; the Eastern profile gives more room to qualities we might normally consider signs of weakness and uncertainty.

This brings us to the major reason for looking at a profile of Eastern managerial skills. The wide difference between the two profiles should stimulate us to rethink what we consider good management. This does not mean wholesale revisions, but a careful inspection of the benefits and costs of the Western style of management. This style has been very

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stable for many decades, in spite of the introduction of innovations. In many cases these innovations have quickly been passed off as fads with the result being less faith in each new idea. By using Japanese examples judiciously, we might be able to help American management regain its momentum.

A Profile of Eastern Skills

We do not usually think that it takes much skill to follow some standard of excellence. In the West we sometimes even think that taking someone else as a model is a sign of weakness. But *self-cultivation* according to the Eastern view, sees this imitation as a skill of the highest order. It demands that the individual constantly act to achieve excellence by standards known to the society at large.

Perhaps the most visible sign of this trait can be seen in the Japanese manager's desire to learn. American managers who have lectured to Japanese groups are struck with their intensity of concentration and note-taking. They want to understand how things are done and with what results. This does not necessarily mean they plan to implement the same methods. Their intense study of American management for example contrasts with a continuation of their own unique style.

But there can be little doubt that the Japanese have raised self-cultivation to a social value. Each sphere of Japanese life has its own

"way" or path: the superior man of Confucianism, the enlightenment of Zen, the loyalty of the employee, the ritual of the tea ceremony, the seventeen syllables of haiku poetry. These are not ideals of tiny cults but broad values of the masses.

The overriding value for managers is social harmony and it determines much of the self-cultivation for managers at all levels. For this reason, higher level managers are just as concerned about their actions in maintaining harmony as are their subordinates. This is quite different from our Western view. We expect that higher level managers have the freedom to speak candidly and even bluntly.

The ability to *transmit diverse values* shows itself in the diversity

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of goals and objectives which Eastern managers pursue at the same time. Many of these would seem contradictory to our eyes and make us wonder where we should put our priorities. Eastern managers are more concerned to insure that all the conditions necessary for an effective operation have a place, regardless of the consistency between them. This skill leads them to honor seniority and promote managers for their length of service, yet at the same time to preserve an intensely achievement-oriented climate. They can also be obsessed with quality and sophisticated production planning while simultaneously finding time to maintain a complex network of social relationships and ritual. Many of these couplings we would find hard to pursue. Seniority promotions for example run counter to merit and achievement in our way of thinking.

This skill might be called living with contradictions. Western thought might be more linear. We will give up one objective in order to

follow another one. In fact we're accustomed to directives which tell us to shift our priorities.

Using All Capacities

The Japanese style of managing welcomes more human characteristics than the Western. Some of the traits we would reject as disruptive or emotional have a place in their scheme. This is true of intuition and feelings. Japanese managers will sometimes recommend action on grounds we would consider flimsy. Often these recommendations are made to help a person maintain "face." The result is a management approach which strikes our eyes as complex and chaotic. Their use of organization charts for example does not have the neat and legalistic appearance we expect in such charts (Clark 1979). Their charts permit the use of unfilled slots and absentee supervisors who never participate in the work of the department concerned.

To a degree, this skill of drawing upon a wider range of human capacities can be traced to a certain pride they have felt regarding the "non-rational" aspects of their culture and language (Nakamura 1964). They don't view logic and rationality with quite the respect we do. They tend to favor actions which recognize the complications of human feelings and uncertainties. But in appreciating this aspect of the Japanese style we shouldn't forget that they have also developed one of the finest systems of mathematics training in the world. They seem to believe in covering all bets.

Our own notions of professional management take us in a very different direction. It advises managers to keep their eyes on the numbers and not get distracted by the very factors which get the attention of the Eastern manager. For this reason we can label Eastern management as inclusive and Western management as exclusive.

Dependence on others is another skill we would normally consider a weakness. Our traditions encourage individual effort and self-reliance and our appraisal criteria reflect this fact. Japanese upbringing reinforces the opposite. Mothers in particular encourage their children to be dependent on them. This sense of de-

pendence continues through adult life where we see the company filling the role played by the mother.

The important lesson for us is that this dependency does not weaken their drive to excel and achieve. On the contrary, it seems to feed their ambition. At the same time this dependency is a large part of the cement which binds the group together. The person maintains a constant vigilance about what others think; but he/she also has the satisfaction of knowing that others will give him/her the same consideration.

One of the few Western social scientists to appreciate the importance of the group and to develop ways of building more mutual effort has been Slater (1970). His notions of human needs emphasize community (the desire for trust in others), engagement (the desire to face interpersonal problems) and dependence (the desire to share responsibility). He rates Western society very low in its ability to meet these needs. We would have to rate Japanese society very high on this scale.

Using a Skills Profile

A skills profile approach to Japanese management has one primary value: to encourage more managers to experiment with Eastern ideas. So long as we explain the Japanese success in terms of a unique culture or history, we are discouraged from taking personal action. A skills profile has implications for individual responsibility and comparison. This does not mean that massive change is possible or desirable. The history of Western management over the past two decades shows that successive fads do not add up to progress.

However, the sharp contrasts between their profile and ours should encourage us to ask more questions about why we do things the way we do. In so many cases we see that Eastern thinking takes a position exactly opposite to ours. What does this mean for the basic logic of our business practices? Only careful thought and examination can yield the answer... thought and examination which can occur only in cooperation with others.

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