

Can We, Should We Adopt Japanese Management Methods?

Quite unfortunately, there are still a vast number of managers and even policy makers in Hungary who, with almost no hesitation, would answer these questions in the negative. Their most often used argument would still be the ill-fated Suzuki case when the would-be Hungarian blue-collar workers of Suzuki's car manufacturing plant in Esztergom decided to go on strike soon after their arrival for on-the-job training in Japan. They did so in order to protest against some employment methods and the food served to them, both different from those they had got used to back at home in Hungary.

Even if the above story was given wide publicity in Japan and some other Far Eastern countries and has undoubtedly contributed to a temporary standstill in the investment inflow from that region, one should not come to the conclusion that two types of working and management cultures have clashed with each other. Rather, it should be pointed out that, on the one hand, the case has been solved along the lines of the wise Japanese compromise and consensus seeking method, and by now Magyar Suzuki is one of the most important foreign owned companies in Hungary, exporting its products to Western Europe as well. On the other hand, as opposed to the counter-productively childish chest-beating attitude, a completely different approach is much more advisable: it is not at all difficult to find people in Hungary who can and would appreciate the chance of being employed by a company of high international rank, especially at a time when 10 per cent plus unemployment rates prevail.

One could even argue that quite a few elements of the so-called Japanese management methods are, in fact, a part of our "own" working practices. Who would, for example, doubt the obvious resemblance between our staff meetings (or more specifically brainstorming sessions) and those of the quality circles in Japan? Less formal discussions among Hungarian construction workers about how to solve a certain task the most efficient and best possible way are not far cries from those of their Japanese colleagues either. Chatting about earlier working experiences while drinking beer after hours of work is equally a part of the daily routine on both sides.

Thus, it is not at all a fruitless effort to pay more

attention to Japanese management methods even in Hungary. In a report on a research project by the Institute for World Economics we have tried to summarize those lessons from Japanese employment and management practices which we considered applicable in our country as well.

Group orientation, respect for the employer company, is not so foreign to Hungarians either. Looking back to earlier times, cooperation with neighbours was quite common, particularly in the countryside. The times of transition have also given a chance for the revival of team spirit by the expansion of private sector activities and the division of larger companies into smaller units. The bigger the say people have (or feel they have) in the decision-making process of a company, the easier it becomes to identify with it. Even the practice of developing a consensus (cf. *nemawashi*, *ringi*) becomes easier on such a basis. Principal-subordinate relations can and should change in a group-oriented climate as well. Cooperation, cohesiveness and solidarity are not incompatible with (mutual) respect and one-person leadership and responsibility.

The whole method of seeking and offering employment must change under the new circumstances. Besides such superficial innovations like the rechristening of personnel managers as human resource specialists or the spread of head-hunting, some other, more than nominal changes will come to the fore. Finding a job will increasingly become a process of competition on the basis of professional merits. Similarly, the process of hiring employees will require a preparatory phase of thoroughly investigating the requirements of the vacant job and the quality of the applicants for it. Another Japanese procedure that could usefully be adopted is annual employee assessment, although the technique used in Japan – the entry of detailed information about the employee on a form – would be inappropriate in Hungary because of negative recollections of the files kept by personnel departments under the previous regime.

Caution is also needed with the seniority system still so prevalent in Japan. Privileges should not be given to employees on grounds of age unless they automatically represent greater assets to the company

(through their expertise, personal and business contacts, task orientation, loyalty etc.). Membership of an age group is not a merit in itself, but other things being equal, promotion within the company should be preferred to the appointment of outsiders, so as to encourage longer-term attachment of employees to their firms.

There are various means often used in Japan of reinforcing employees' attachment to their firms, and these do not necessarily entail a significant increase in overhead costs. They include excursions, celebrations, sports events, bargain sales, counselling and so on. Small souvenirs, gifts and company symbols (such as ties, scarves, ballpoint pens, badges, bulletins and business cards) or merely letters of thanks and congratulations are often favourably received. There seems to have been a long-term neglect in Hungarian companies of this kind of in-house PR.

Unrealistic though it may still sound at present, the Japanese system of just-in-time delivery should also be adopted in Hungary. It will be brought to the fore by considerations of competition and efficiency primarily under conditions where the role of the market is increasing and will continue to do so. Fewer and fewer companies will be forced or able to afford

to produce every component themselves or hold large stocks. In more general terms, much more emphasis will have to be placed on keeping one's word, notably in abiding by contract and payment terms. Personal relations will gain an entirely new meaning when the benefits rendered and received cease to originate from a neutral anonymous source. Favours and preferences will be granted on ground of performance, rather than old friendships. The decisions of company managers will depend on considerations of reliability and profitability.

Just as if to prove that the call for more importance rendered to Japanese management methods is not merely wishful thinking, it was most reassuring to note recently that scientific and educational publications started to devote more space to relevant literature, and a number of institutions of higher education decided to (re)launch various courses on such methods or at least also covering them in their curricula. Thus, based on all the above, the proper answers to the questions raised in the title should be in the affirmative.

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ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

Tudjuk-e adaptálni, kell-e alkalmaznunk a japán menedzsmentmódszereket?

Sajnos, fölös számban vannak olyan menedzserek, sőt, politikacsinálók is Magyarországon, akik különösebb habozás nélkül nemmel válaszolnának a címben feltett kérdésekre. Leggyakrabban felhozott érvük még mindig a balsorsú Suzuki-eset, amikor az esztergomi Suzuki-gyár majdani munkásai rögtön azután sztrájkba léptek, ahogy megérkeztek Japánba a munkahelyi kiképzésre. Ilyen módon tiltakoztak nemcsak egyes munkamódszerek, hanem az étkezés ellen is, mindkettő oly mértékben különbözött az idehaza megszokottól.

Bár a fenti történet Japánban és néhány más távolkeleti országban is nagy nyilvánosságot kapott, és az ügy kétségkívül hozzájárult ahhoz, hogy ideiglenesen megállt a régióba irányuló beruházás, nem szabad arra következtetnünk, hogy a eltérő munka- és irányítási kultúra összecsapott volna. Sokkal inkább arra mutathat rá, hogy egyfelől az affér megoldása a bölcs ja-

pán kompromisszum- és konszenzusereső módszerrel történt, és ma a Magyar Suzuki az egyik legfontosabb külföldi tulajdonban lévő vállalat Magyarországon, mely jelentős nyugati exportot is lebonyolít. Másfelől bebizonyosodott, hogy a gyerekes mellődöttség helyett sokkal inkább tanácsos egészen más módszert követni: nem túl nehéz Magyarországon olyan embereket találni, akik örülnek, ha egy nemzetközileg magasan jegyzett vállalatnál dolgozhatnak, főleg, ha a munkanélküliség aránya 10 százalék fölött van.

Az ember továbbá úgy is érvelhet, hogy az úgynevezett japán menedzsmentmódszerek jó néhány eleme gyakorlatilag része a mi „saját” munkakultúránknak is. Ki kételkedhet például abban, hogy nyilvánvaló hasonlóság van a mi stábértekezleteink (vagy speciális brainstorming-üléseink) és a Japánból ismert minőségi körök összejövetelei között? A korábbi problémák