

Leadership for Creativity and Innovation: Is Japan Unique?

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Abstract—Japanese companies have proven their technological supremacy especially during the Japanese miracle period until the 1980s. Their success in producing innovative products/services is partly attributed to the management practice of Japanese firms and efficient production techniques. While extant literature posits that creativity and innovation can be supported or suppressed by leadership, little attention has been given so far to investigate the effect of leadership in promoting creativity and innovation (C&I) in Japanese organizations. At present, the current understanding on leadership and C&I is mainly based on Western (pre-dominantly American) studies. However, the distinct characteristics of Japanese management may create different notions and expectations on how leadership affects C&I in Japanese organizations. This paper conceptualizes the unique, Japanese way of leading creativity and innovation by linking it with the Japanese management practices and culture.

Index Terms—leadership, creativity, innovation, Japanese management, transformational leadership

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has always been held responsible for the success or failure of a nation or organization. Stiff global competition today has created a tremendous attention on the concept of leadership that best drives a nation or organization towards success. As history notes, successful leaders are those who have brilliantly mobilized the power of creativity and innovation (C&I) in the attempt to achieve their nations' or organizations' competitiveness in the challenging global markets of today.

The Japanese economic miracle has attracted researchers to study its unique management system rooted in strong socio-cultural background. Interestingly, however, most studies on Japanese management have been about its practice in manufacturing [1] and sparsely on the role of leadership in nurturing C&I [2]. Japanese super-efficient operational systems and high engineering capabilities may have overshadowed the need for strong and capable leaders especially in C&I [2].

Another important argument as to why it is important to understand the leadership for C&I in Japanese organizations is the cross-national variation in the extant literature on leadership studies. This is because most

research evidences on leadership for C&I in the extant literature are based on Western studies, and predominantly American [3]. However, there are also evidences that indicate leadership behavior is affected by culture [4]. Furthermore, there is also evidence that shows despite adopting American management model for the country's development, Japanese management is not necessarily an imitation of American model [5]. Hence, leadership for creativity and innovation is expected to show similar orientation.

This paper attempts to trigger the discussion on how the concept of leadership for C&I may diverge from the current understanding and to find the missing link between the socio-culturally founded Japanese management and the leadership for C&I in Japanese organizations.

II. MANAGING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

Managing C&I is very challenging. Firstly, it is because creative effort is "chaotic". Not only it is ambiguous and complex, it may also require a very long time to complete and face the risks of frequent failures, disruptions, delays and setbacks [6]. It also requires extensive processes such as problem definition, information gathering, idea generation and plan implementation that are time intensive. At the same time, organizations are expected to keep up with the demanding market as product life-cycle is getting shorter and technology becomes more complicated. Another key challenge in leading C&I is managing the creative people [7]. Creative people are identified as having contrasting behaviours, high cognitive abilities and intelligence. They believe in their knowledge and ideas, thus they possess high self-confidence, portray dominance and autonomy [8].

Therefore, it takes a special set of leadership skills to encourage C&I of the team while accommodating the complex and chaotic nature of creative process. Ref [9] argued that unlike leadership in other domains, a leader must have substantial technical and professional expertise, substantial creative thinking skills, social intelligence and influence tactics to lead C&I effectively. Technical and professional expertise is crucial because it fulfils the expectation of the team members, especially when the leaders are sought for their input [9]. Having high cognitive skills will enable sense-making activities at the part of the leader so that the origins and significance of

events can be articulated to the team members [10]. This in turn will bring people from different backgrounds and expertise to work together to solve problems.

A. *Transformational Leadership Sine Qua Non for Creativity and Innovation?*

Scholars have made attempts to associate various leadership styles with fostering C&I. Transformational leadership, thus far, has gained the most attention, as being most frequently compared to transactional leadership. Transformational leadership is a leadership style that is exemplified by charisma and shared vision between leaders and followers. It consists of four dimensions: charisma, or idealized influence, inspirational motivation intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, involves the “give and take” working relationship - rapport between leader and follower is established through exchange such as rewards system to achieve particular objectives [11]. Transformational leadership, to current understanding is the most influential leadership style in nurturing C&I.

While many studies show positive findings on the effect of transformational leadership on C&I [12], there are also mixed findings about transformational leadership and its relationship with creativity. Some researchers argue that this relationship is not so straightforward and subject to contingencies. For example, a transformational leader works well in generating creativity amongst collectivists, but it takes a transactional leader to help individualists generate creativity [13]. For an innovative organization to achieve ambidexterity, an important feature of leadership for innovation is the fostering of either exploration (induced by transformational leadership) or exploitation strategy (induced by transactional leadership) according to the current requirement of the innovation tasks that quickly change over time [14]. Others argue that both transformational and transactional leadership, while viewed as distinct, complement each other to effectively contribute in followers' C&I [15].

At the extreme, transformational leadership may also bring little or even negative effects to C&I. Vision communicated by transformational leaders may restrict the autonomy of scientists and engineers thus inhibit creativity [10]. This is further supported by a case study that shows transformational leadership produces negative effect on team-level shared leadership in Japanese R&D teams [2]. Transformational leadership behaviour is more oriented to consensus seeking. Consensus leads to conformity, which is well-known to be an underlying process in groupthink. When groupthink occurs, solutions and products of groups are not likely to be creative since diversity of thought and opinions will not be present [13]. Such inconsistency in the effect of transformational leadership in nurturing C&I leads to two important questions; is transformational leadership a sine qua non for C&I? And is it effective across national variation, specifically in distinct work culture of Japanese organizations?

III. JAPANESE MANAGEMENT

Japanese management is quite distinct in characteristics compared to American. It is very much a reflection of the Japanese culture rooting from Eastern philosophies such as Taoism, Confucianism and particularly Zen Buddhism [16]. These teachings carry the notion that ultimate reality is an all-embracing unity from which nothing can be separated, and that it must come from the innerself [17]. Unlike Americans who believe that it is the environment that defines a meaningful job for an individual, the Japanese orientation is more towards regarding the individual as the primary cause agent [18]. Such contradictory views on work causes a lot of criticism on Japanese work culture saying that it runs counter to the creation of creative climate. However, these characteristics may have also been a competitive advantage in terms of nurturing C&I in Japanese companies. The preceding section discusses Japanese employment model in terms of its possible counter-innovation and pro-innovation features to provide insights of how this model affect C&I in Japanese organizations.

A. *Japanese Employment Model vs American Employment Model*

The notion of the “firm as a community” is deeply rooted in Japan. Workers are regarded as the stakeholder of the company while employment is seen as a social bonding amongst the members of the ‘community’ that is securely protected by lifetime employment (especially in large companies) [19]. The policy is supported by seniority-based reward system to discourage high turnovers. The relationships between the manager and employees, senior and junior, and amongst peers are given priority to ensure conformity and harmony [20]. The organization is hierarchical yet consensus seeking and generalized pay is practiced. In factories, it is nearly impossible to differentiate the manager and operators, as they wear the same uniform and work in a corner-to-corner open space.

On the other hand, American employment model treats every worker as an individual. The main stakeholders are the shareholders and not the employees, therefore such opportunistic employment allow hiring and firing to take place at any time on any circumstance for the best interest of the shareholders. In this performance-oriented model, diversity and even conflict (for a better way of doing things) is embraced to get the best out of the employees. Young, highly performing employees can get promotion earlier than the less performing seniors. Managers get their own space, separated from ordinary workers.

B. *Possible Counter Innovation Features of Japanese Management*

Lifetime employment is the cornerstone of human resources management in large Japanese firms. These large firms annually recruit high school leavers and university graduates without job experience. Traditionally, they will remain with the firm for their entire career and enjoy seniority-based career advancement. This policy is

criticized for being a disincentive to young creative workers who may not be rewarded with promotion for their excellent performance as they have to wait for their time to be promoted [21]. Consequently, this can also create in-breeding and competency trap because senior employees may become complacent with the guarantee of career advancement the longer they stay in the company. Their first 6 months or so are spent for on-the-job training; they will be assigned to different departments across the company to do different tasks and meet different people. Such rotational assignment can remove (potential) creative leaders from the focus on technical exposure and credibility in the field which C&I is being pursued [22]. Furthermore, generalized pay system practiced in Japanese management does not appreciate high performers thus may dampen employee motivation from being more creative. Consensus seeking in a hierarchical oriented organization such as Japanese also slows decision making and favour established ideas.

C. Possible Pro-Innovation Features of Japanese Management

Conversely, lifetime employment does not only promote a sense of loyalty, but also nurture skills of the employees to a greater extent by subjecting and exposing them to ambiguities in their daily tasks [18]. It is through lifetime employment that both explicit and implicit knowledge transfer can be executed with minimal disruption (usually caused by high turnover) and core competencies can be preserved in the company. Trainings are given to employees at all levels to improve themselves as part of the companies' long term capacity development. This model also helps foster the relationship and accumulate trust between the senior and junior (*senpai-kohai*) [20]. These relationship remains for a lifetime, thus hierarchy is very much respected. Additionally, to keep the organization in harmony, the model also implements generalized pay and consensus seeking in decision making. In a harmonious organization, consensus-based decision helps lubricate the execution that it can be done quickly and thoroughly [19].

The companies' commitment towards employees as portrayed in the lifetime employment policy is not unidirectional. Employees' mutual commitment is reflected by their willingness to work long hours. They also love perfection in their job. Unlike Americans who find the meaning of work extrinsic; from the environment they are bestowed upon, Japanese find work meaningful from their inner self [18]. It is their intrinsic qualities that define the meaning of job; the value does not come from the job itself. Therefore, if the outcome of a job is mediocre, this portrays a person who withholds such low values. This explains why the Japanese persevere and take pride in whatever they do [23]-such quality is especially crucial in creative efforts.

Such propensity in the emphasis on inner self, social interaction and relationship in Japanese employment model shaped the way Japanese organizations innovate. Japanese innovation model is based on capability accumulation through mid and long term objectives which regards human as the medium of innovation.

Japanese organizations find value in capability inheritance itself. Comparatively, the American model of innovation prioritizes equipment and system as a media to support the mechanism of innovation (human resource is exchangeable) and value is pressed on achieving maximum result in a short time [23]. As such, it is expected that the focus of leaders in promoting C&I is dissimilar between Japanese and American companies.

IV. JAPANESE VIEW ON WORK AND ITS IMPLICATION TOWARDS CREATIVITY AND LEADERSHIP

One of the fundamental reasons why leading C&I in Japanese organizations is expected to be different from the current understanding is how "work" is being perceived. For the Americans, work is an economic necessity, thus it is instrumental and relies on environmental factors to be meaningful. These external factors then define their work behaviour and motivation [18]. However, the Japanese believe that work is an assignment from heaven, a vocation where both their skills and characters are being developed in a highly disciplined manner along the way [17]. In Japanese language, "work" literally means "the act of creating or achieving something". The "act of creating" includes labour that requires repetitive use of hands and feet which results in high skill. The "achievement" of their work is measured by how much trust they are gaining from their stakeholders in the supply chain. Therefore, instead of being shaped by the nature of work (i.e environment), the Japanese believe that they themselves create meaning to work. As they create meaning to work, it becomes a purpose of life because it has become a mean for expressing their ideas and training for character building.

The unique understanding of "work" by the Japanese may affect how they perceive C&I in a holistic manner compared to the Americans. While the Americans think that C&I are two distinctive processes measured by economical outcomes (i.e financial returns and number of patents), the Japanese perceive C&I as an integrative social process that act as a medium to link people together [24] in achieving a common goal to benefit the society [25].

Consequently, "work" as skill and character building may have also shaped how Japanese view leadership. This relates to a study that examined the differences between American and Japanese workers' perception on effective leadership [26]. While Americans perceive personality characteristics such as honest, confident and approachable as more important for leadership, Japanese believe that skills and behaviours are more important for leadership. For Japanese, having a leader who behaves appropriately for appropriate situations is a paramount as the leader represents the whole "community" of the firm [26]. In reality, Japanese name successful, leading companies such as Matsushita(former Panasonic), Mitsubishi and Toyota to their admiration, and less of individual leaders per se, while Americans celebrate individual leaders heroically such as Steve Jobs of Apple, Bill Gates of Microsoft, Howard Schultz of Starbucks and many others compared to the organizations they belong to.

Such differences in the worldview of C&I may influence leaders' goal framing for the organization which later translates into shared vision through signaling effect of the leaders upon the followers. This creates social contagion among the followers that gives impact on their attitude, behaviour and focus of cognition towards achieving organizational goals.

V. JAPANESE LEADERSHIP STYLE FOR C&I

It is possible that the concept of leadership (thus leadership for C&I) is not accentuated in Japanese context as much as in the Western culture due to the collectivism principle in Japanese society. *Mikoshi* leadership, *Genba* Leadership and *Jinmyaku* Leadership are among three leadership models that can be derived from the Japanese culture.

A. *Mikoshi* Leadership

The seek for conformity and harmony in Japanese society brings out a fundamental question; as leadership provides authority and power to one, or a small group of people thus providing a separation of rank, how do actually Japanese view leadership? Ref [27] described leadership in Japan as a *mikoshi* (a divine palanquin carried by people to transport deity throughout town in festivals). A *mikoshi* is respected and influential because it carries the spirit of God, but it does not go anywhere unless it is being carried by people [28]. The analogy tells us that top managers are essential because they portray the image (spirit) of the company as leaders, but they must follow where the consensus of the middle management wants them to go and function principally to help middle management achieve communal goals. This deviates from the current concept of leadership that has always emphasize on the influence of a particular person (leader) on the follower.

The concept of *mikoshi* leadership also reflects the people who carry it. *Mikoshi* bearers must be about the same height and move in uniform steps towards the same direction when carrying the *mikoshi*. The loud shout of "wasshoi" in unison to pep one another in upheaving the heavy *mikoshi* on every step forward creates a commune energy that one can feel deep inside oneself. It symbolizes how people (the followers) share the difficulties, hardships, richness, and happiness of their lives through uniformity, conformity and harmony [28].

The above discussion shows that when leadership theories are focusing on how individual leader impose influence on the followers, Japanese leadership describes the leader-follower relationship as integrated and indivisible. As such, to understand Japanese leadership, it is imperative to study it from organizational culture perspective than of its top leadership's will.

B. *Genba* Leadership

Genba is the actual shared space (physical, virtual, mental or their combination) for knowledge creation through interactions [29], where action happens and people meet. The concept of *genba* is allied to *genchi genbutsu*, which involves going to the actual place

(*genchi*) to check on the relevant objects (*genbutsu*) [30]. This approach was coined by Taiichi Ohno, the creator of Toyota Production System [31]. Leaders must understand what is happening at *genba* by being observant and sensitive to physical and social cues at *genba*. This will enable them to detect problems at early stage, or even sense it before it occurs and consequently plan for problem-solving [31]. Because work is a normative commitment, *genba* leaders also place informal barriers and nurture cross-functional collaboration by promoting communications.

This is somehow contrary to the American style of "Management By Walk About (MBWA)," which involves managers wandering around, in an unstructured manner, through the workplaces, at random, to check with employees, or equipment, about the status of the ongoing work. Through MBWA the leader-worker's interaction may not be genuine as the leader is not usually there to understand what is happening at the site.

C. *Jinmyaku* Leadership

Inclination towards team-oriented and self/group protective style leadership (House) predicts that leadership in Japan maintains the central focus on relationship even for the purpose of C&I. Ref [32] argued that organizations that utilize the concept of know-who besides know-how are able to expedite the sophisticated processes for innovation. While know-how is the ability to solve problems efficiently based primarily on internally accumulated knowledge, experience and skills, "know-who" is the ability to acquire, transform and apply that "know-how" through personal relationships [32].

Jinmyaku is the Japanese term for personal network. It places an incomparably greater importance than the network as perceived in the West. A person's *jinmyaku* decides the actual power that he has in the society. In the current understanding of leadership for C&I, a person who has an excellent technical and professional skills is likely to be an effective leader [9]. On the contrary, in Japanese society, a person who has reliable *jinmyaku* is more likely to be selected as leader compared to those who is highly knowledgeable or skillful. This is because a person who has a larger *jinmyaku* is perceived to be a trusted person, especially when the relationship has been going on for a long time. As Japanese tend to group people by loyalties, duties and affiliations, a leader with larger and more reliable *jinmyaku* is perceived to be able to solve more problems, at a shorter time frame compared to those who have not without having to worry that they will be betrayed. This is particularly useful when the creative effort is highly ambiguous and complex. Through *jinmyaku*, leaders will be able to bridge different people and bring together disconnected ideas to innovate [33]. It also helps to recover sensitivity and responsiveness to external technological and market factors that may guide product development [32]

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper posits that the distinct characteristics of Japanese culture embedded in their organizations suggest

that leading C&I in Japan is different from the understanding of leadership for C&I in the extant literature. Specifically, the way Japanese view work, C&I and leadership, and the nature of Japanese employment relationship have a bearing on how C&I is led. When leadership theories are focusing on how individual leader impose influence on the followers, Japanese leadership describes the leader as someone who is predictable and can be trusted, and leader-follower relationship as integrated and indivisible. As such, to understand Japanese leadership, it is imperative to study it from organizational culture perspective than of the leaders' individual wills.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The first author wishes to thank Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for supporting the work through a scholarship for her doctoral research.

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