

Four Keys to Success

By Ayako Sono

The whys and wherefores of Japan's present prosperity is a subject endlessly debated, but, being neither a politician nor an economist, I find it easy to cut through the complexities and to respond unequivocally. As I see it, there are four basic reasons for Japan's remarkable development.

The first reason is that, on the whole, the Japanese *like* to work. The financial rewards of work, while important, are secondary to the pleasure so many of us derive from our work. Japanese are often accused of working too hard, but the admonition falls on deaf ears. These dire warnings about workaholicism do not deter the Japanese any more than criticisms of "unseemingly behavior" will stop a love-struck gentleman from spending every spare minute with his lady love. We derive great satisfaction from our work, and this idiosyncrasy might as well be accepted for what it is, because it will not change.

Japanese corporations both encourage and profit from this trait. A woman I know used to work for a company that supplied parts to a major Japanese automaker. She tells me that there was a suggestion box in every shop, and that employees were encouraged to submit ideas for improving productivity. People who contributed practical and profitable ideas were rewarded by the company president. Although the rewards were never much in monetary terms, the recognition and the company's obvious commitment to employee-generated improvement succeeded in convincing everyone that improved productivity was a good thing and that the company somehow belonged to each and every employee and not the other way around. This is powerful motivation, and it gets people to apply themselves to solving the problems and issues that every company must face.

This is not to say that all Japanese work for work's sake. There are plenty of clock-punching Japanese who are simply selling their time and are not interested in going beyond the minimum job requirements. But to most Japanese such an attitude reeks of spiritual impoverishment. The Japanese have a talent for enjoying their work, and what more could a person ask than to be allowed to spend his days doing work he enjoys.

Part of the gratification we derive from

our work comes from satisfying our insatiable appetite for learning. There is considerable joy to be had in learning the ins and outs of a job, discovering the most efficient methods of production, and succeeding at a difficult task. When a Japanese corporation is considering entering a new market, for example, it begins by learning all it can about the market. Commercial success may be the ultimate goal, but the average Japanese worker derives considerable pleasure from the getting-there process. American and European companies would do well to emulate this characteristic. The better they understand Japanese markets, the better they will do in Japan. There may be some products that have universal appeal, but for the most part products need to be adapted to each particular culture, and foreign companies that try to sell their products here without making any attempt to understand the Japanese market are bound to have trouble.

"Know your enemy and know yourself, and you will be undefeated though you fight a thousand battles," says the ancient Chinese classic on military strategy. This is equally true in other aspects of life. Obviously, we did not heed this sound advice before the war, and our negligence cost us dearly. But defeat burned the lesson into our minds, and we have since applied it diligently in seeking to learn all we can about Western culture—not only in science and commerce but also in lifestyles and the arts. So well have we applied ourselves to this task that the average Japanese knows considerably more of the West than his Western counterpart knows of Japan. Arising from the postwar ruins, we willingly spent what little we had on acquiring Western culture. Impoverished though we were, we did not begrudge this investment in learning, and it grates to be accused of an unfair diligence.

The second reason for Japan's prosperity is an ironic one: we have never really been convinced of our own success, and see our prosperity as a very fragile thing. Nor is this ever-present sense of poverty totally unfounded, for we have no natural resources to speak of and must depend on our wits, our technology, and our labor to get by. The rich man's son can afford to be complacent, for there is no pressure on him to work to survive.

But the poor man's son must work while the rich man's son is idle, he must study while the other plays. Even when he becomes rich himself, he can never forget the bitter taste of poverty. Japan is like the poor man, driven by the memory of poverty still snapping at his heels. Though we have long since achieved material comfort of sorts, there is a perception of the ever-present danger of lapsing back into impoverishment.

Sensitivity to other people's feelings is the third reason Japan has gotten as far as it has. Conversing, I find myself automatically weighing the other person's response and phrasing my message accordingly. This almost-unconscious Japanese habit is a highly developed technique for getting one's point across without offending anyone. The smooth workings of Japanese society prove its effectiveness. Like most virtues, this can be overdone by people who appear chameleon-like and end up pleasing no-one in their attempt to please everyone, but the fact that everyone has this talent means that the individual is able to achieve something within the framework of society, and without having constantly to swim against the current.

The fourth, and perhaps the most significant, reason is that Japan has successfully preserved its cultural heritage throughout centuries of interaction with other cultures. The fact of being an island nation with easy maritime access to all of its population centers has made it possible for culture to develop and spread throughout the land and throughout the centuries. Even the foreign influences which lap at our shores are quickly assimilated and Japanized to enhance indigenous traditions. Much of this may have been the luck of a geostrategically unimportant location, and a nation's luck can change as quickly as a person's, but it cannot have been luck alone which enabled the Japanese to take advantage of these fortuitous conditions to achieve today's prosperity.

These four keys—love of work, motivation, sensitivity, and assured identity—are available to most other peoples as well, and Japan should not be blamed for having found the right combination. ●

(This is the first of five parts.)

Ayako Sono is one of Japan's leading women novelists. An ardent Catholic, she is deeply interested in religious and social problems and speaks and writes on these as well as writing novels.