Section 2: Culture-bound Aspects of Japanese Management

Michael Axel

Toward an Analysis of Japanese-style Management: A Psycho-cultural and Socio-historical Approach

Abstract

- Japan’s exceptional economic success and the shaping of the Japanese management system are yet to be conclusively explained. Apart from a good number of “contributory influences” one crucial factor is Japanese culture, in particular the inclination of the Japanese to act collectively. However, what is still needed is a conceptional framework that describes the features shaping Japan’s culture.

- In this study an attempt is made to develop a concept that enables the essence of Japan’s cultural features as they affect and influence its economic development and management system.

Key Results

- The Japanese management system is shaped essentially by the features of Japanese culture. These features can in turn be traced back to the family system and child-rearing patterns in Japan. It is not possible to come to an understanding of the Japanese management system without knowledge of this connection.

Author

Michael Axel, Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, Berlin College of Business Administration and Technique, Berlin, Germany.
Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Japan’s phenomenal economic development and the international competitiveness of Japanese enterprises is usually explained by particular attributes of Japanese management. There is, however, no explanation for the question how and why Japan developed a management system which in many respects is the exact opposite of Western practice and standards (Murakami 1990, p. 13). Sullivan and Peterson (1989) have identified seven factors used to explain the so-called “Japanese miracle”:

1. economic pressures,
2. institutional structures and functions,
3. interests of powerful elites,
4. convergence theory,
5. created organizational cultures,
6. national cultural influences,
7. social relations and values (groupism).

According to Hazama (1977a, 1978), Iwata (1982), Tsuda (1979), Hayashi (1988) and Yang Tien-yi (Kan Toshio) (1989), the Japanese management system is based on the special inclination of the Japanese to act collectively. Nevertheless, as Sullivan and Peterson (1989) point out “the sources of this strong group orientation are not clear.” (p. 261).

In this paper an attempt is made to understand Japan’s culture in conceptual terms in order to find systematic access to Japanese management practice.

Method

It is generally accepted today that the Japanese management system has been influenced by Japan’s cultural features, especially the inclination of the Japanese to act collectively (Hamaguchi 1985, Kumon 1982). However, the background of this inclination as well as of other cultural features is still unclear. Furthermore there is a lack of plausible method to infer the central features of the Japanese management system from the Japanese cultural background. In the context of the discussion concerning the transferability of Japanese style management, Kagono (1990), Ishida (1986), Kono (1982) and Yoshihara (1989) propose the following approach: These authors distinguish in Japanese management various structurally interrelated levels. Three features make up the core of the manage-