Under the Japanese Corporate Roof:
Through the Eyes of an American

by Jennifer Jakubowski

After nearly fifteen years inside U.S.-based Japanese companies as a Human Resources Consultant, I am struck by the remarkable consistency of issues that gives shape to this particular collection of landscapes. Whether a bank in New York City, an IT firm in Dallas, a sushi distributor in Philadelphia, a factory in western Michigan or a retail store in Los Angeles, what I've learned to be true is that the experiences of Americans working under the Japanese corporate roof bear striking resemblances.

To be sure, each workplace has a unique dynamic and its own set of rewards and challenges. Furthermore, general observations lend themselves to, well, generalizations; naturally there is no one-size-fits all profile here. However, after reading thousands of employee opinion surveys and meeting with hundreds of American employees engaged with Japanese companies over the years, I can assert with confidence that there are more similarities than differences through the eyes of the Americans, in both positive regards as well as challenges.

Let's start with the positive. As a broad stroke, Americans working for Japanese companies tend to appreciate a similar host of things: the professionalism and politeness of their Japanese colleagues, the loyalty towards employees that is often sacrificed in favor of business expediency in American companies, the willingness to invest in training, the commitment to quality, the attention to details, good benefits, and the allure of working for a company whose culture is unique and different from their own. Even when people eventually move on to a non-Japanese company at some point (and, as you know, we Americans do a LOT of moving on to other companies!), I often hear them waxing nostalgic for these particular aspects of their Japanese work experiences. And I like to remind my Japanese clients of the importance of recognizing these 'positives' so that they are aware of what draws and retains talent…and also to remember that they are indeed appreciated in many regards, even when the complaints roll in.

And just what are these complaints? Actually, let's call them challenges. Yes, that sounds nicer…
I'm going to explore these challenges in a bit more detail here, in no particular order:

Communication & Information Sharing – The natural tendency on this note is probably to assume that I am referring to language barrier. While that does pose some challenges (in some cases more than others), it is not the core of the issue I'm getting at. Rather, it is the Japanese tendency to be less transparent with information and to place less significance on communication strategy than typical American leadership. That is not to suggest that all American management teams are completely transparent or that everyone embraces a proactive and far-reaching approach to communication. Far from it. However, comparatively speaking, Japanese management holds their cards much closer to their chests and is less inclined to prioritize sharing strategic and big picture information with the general employee population. For Americans who consider effective and transparent information sharing a sign of strong leadership (and studies indicate that the majority do), this can be frustrating and lead them to feeling they are under weak leadership and in the dark about matters that affect them. If I had a nickel for every time an American asked me "Why do they have to be so secretive about everything?...", I'd be a wealthy woman indeed.

Japanese Rotational System – The Japanese have the system of rotating staff within a company down to an art. The same goes for rotating expatriates to their overseas operations. From their perspective, it is a great training tool, a way to be sure that their employees learn many aspects of the business, and one of many means to the end of creating a more global operation by bringing knowledge gained abroad back to Japan. Makes sense, right?

Through American eyes unaware of this strategy? Not quite as sensible. The two most common complaints I hear are as follows: 1) Just when locally hired employees finally become familiar and comfortable with a new Japanese expatriate staff (and that individual finally starts to understand how things are done in America and improves his English), he is sent back to Japan and replaced by someone, only for the cycle to have to repeat itself; and 2) The expatriate staff sent from Japan are often coming from a different role within the company and learning a new

position while in America. For example, the guy who most recently worked in accounting in Japan has been sent to America in a sales role. The typical American, on the other hand, is transferred overseas precisely because they already have expertise in a particular area and they continue to serve in that role when transferred, with the expectation that they are adding value through their expertise in that area. So, perhaps you can imagine their surprise, and frustration at times, when someone is transferred from Japan into a fairly responsible position in the U.S. branch, without the expertise to back up the assignment or the title. Often, the training ends up falling on the American employees who had expected someone to arrive already equipped with that knowledge and experience.

Frequency & Type of Feedback – It is a well-known fact that American workplaces have traditionally been more merit-based than their Japanese counterparts, which have historically focused more on seniority. While Japanese companies have been evolving in the direction of performance-based systems in recent years, there is still more of a focus on this in the American workplace. A focus on individual performance necessitates regular and specific feedback, both positive and constructive and, as such, it has become a more integral part of the American work experience over time. The typical American reporting into a Japanese manager notes getting very general feedback and typically only at the time of his/her performance review. In between reviews, if they receive feedback the focus tends to be something they need to do differently.

By way of cultural expectations, even from a very young age, Americans are programmed to expect feedback on what they need to improve AND what they are doing well. If you go into school classrooms respectively in Japan and the U.S., the difference in individual recognition and reward is remarkable, with American kids getting far more praise for their contributions and individual opinions. The same thing rings true at home; American parents lavish praise on their children in a much more liberal fashion than their Japanese counterparts. Americans working at Japanese companies often lament that they do not get enough positive recognition for their contributions (and, incidentally, it has been established by extensive research that positive feedback is one of the strongest motivators in the mind of the American employee). When I remind my Japanese clients of the importance of positive feedback and recognition on a regular basis, the response is typically to the effect of, "That's what they are supposed to be doing, so why is it necessary to praise them?" I concur that it may seem childish in ways; indeed, it stems back to childhood norms. However, it is something that is ingrained in the American psyche from an early age and when it is missing, it is conspicuously missing…and, for many employees, demoralizing.

Decision-Making & Individual Authority – This is perhaps among the most frequent issues I hear about in the Japanese-American business culture divide. While Japanese are still most comfortable with a consensus-based decision-making process, Americans who do not understand the roots and benefits of this approach become quickly frustrated by a system that appears to them unnecessarily slow and lacking in leadership. The typical American with a senior title will likely talk things through to some extent with people involved before making a decision, but is most often empowered (and indeed expected) to make the decision largely on his or her own and assume individual responsibility for it, for better or for worse. Because this process involves fewer people and fewer detailed points for discussion and consensus, it typically happens faster than the Japanese process allows. This is perceived by Americans as strong and effective leadership. When they are faced with the Japanese process, by contrast, it appears as though no one wants to take accountability and that it takes an unreasonable amount of time to arrive at decisions. What they often fail to consider is the amount of time after a decision has been made "American-style" that it takes to get people on board and to iron out details for implementation…and, likewise, the benefits of the consensus building and discussion *pre-implementation* that the Japanese system yields, even if it does take longer and involve more people.

Kimari ga aru – While this is generally regarded as a concept that makes Japanese society (including companies) function with a unique synergy, it can be the source of frustration for the more 'think-outside-the-box'-oriented American. Through the American set of lenses, it seems that the established way of doing things that Japanese typically look to leaves little room for creative approach outside of that box. This points to the common generalization that Japanese are less comfortable with 'coloring outside the line', Americans more so. This has roots in our respective histories. Japanese have cultivated 'ways' of doing things over a long course of history that have engrained themselves into the fabric of society and everyone somehow just knows the way; to challenge it or take another path requires creating more waves than it is worth. On the contrary, Americans have a history (by all

means brief when compared to Japanese history) of 'winging it' to find solutions and often see taking risks as the most effective and logical – even respectable – path to growth and achievement. I frequently hear Americans in Japanese companies voicing frustrations about wanting to take what they see as an alternative approach to something, only to be told by Japanese management, "That's not the way we do it in headquarters" or "We've never done it that way" (Read: We're not going to try it that way.) Most simply generalized, it seems to be the case that Americans are more comfortable with risk-taking and out-of-the box behavior than their Japanese counterparts and this translates into different approaches to business and, occasionally, frustrations (no doubt, on both sides).

Glass Ceiling – This is perhaps the most clichéd and well understood of the challenges Americans feel under the Japanese corporate roof, so I'll keep this brief. The fact of the matter is that Japanese companies remain among the least 'localized' foreign players in the global field with their overseas operations on the senior management front. While some companies integrate a higher percentage of locally hired (i.e. America) staff in executive positions, it is still not the norm. As such, talented locally hired employees with aspirations for advancement see limited opportunities within a Japanese company and will likely move onto another company sooner than they otherwise would if they had more promise for moving into a senior management position within the Japanese company.

While these various 'challenges' arise with notable frequency, naturally they do not all manifest themselves in every U.S.-based Japanese workplace and/or in the same ways when they do. The fascinating thing, through the eyes of this consultant anyway, is that no matter how common the challenges, the appropriate responses and solutions must be strategically crafted to suit the unique dynamics of each landscape. And that's where the creative fun begins…