



Land of the rising blood pressure

Pay attention now, as I will give you the benefit of my meagre intelligence and share with you a profound thought. Yes I know, intellectual discourse in what many believe to be the senile ramblings of a degenerate old git is about as common as a kamikaze pilot's reunion, but here it is anyway.

I have a long held belief that in the interest of obtaining the most out of our short existence on this planet, it is wise to self impose change on ourselves. This change can take many forms. A new job, a move to a different part of the world or perhaps taking on the challenge of a new pastime or skill. Failure to execute such variation could result in the years becoming indistinguishable from one to the next until before we know it old age has permanently set in and the body succumbs to the irresistible urge to don warm slippers and smoke a pipe. So with that somewhat depressing notion in mind I have always looked on change in whatever form it takes as a means of slowing time down into a series of tangible slots each of which is a source of learning and experience.

One such recognisable period of time I was lucky enough to experience was when I became Head Greenkeeper at a Japanese owned golf club. I still look back on this period of my life as one that was rich in variety, if not monetary gain. There is no doubting the fact that the Japanese are a highly successful people and I looked forward to learning of their undoubted wisdom and superior management techniques. But trying to understand the Japanese I found to be challenging to say the least.

One thing I did learn and this may go some way to explaining their success, was the incredible capacity that they have for detail. It is almost as if the detail becomes the most important aspect in every problem to the point where the main issue is all but excluded.

At one of the painfully regular meetings I attended (The Japanese I found out have pre-meeting meetings, lists of lists and analyses of analyses.) we discussed how the milk should be served for the golfers coffee. Should it be in those little package type things or filled into a jug in the mornings. Should it be UHT or

pasteurised, skimmed, semi-skimmed or full cream, who would check the quantity of milk available and at what times would it be checked. Should a rota be drawn up for milk checking duty and if so who would draw up the rota. What temperature would the milk be served at and at what point should this be checked and what techniques would be used for milk temperature study.

On and on it went for well over an hour until a conclusion was finally drawn and the next item on the agenda was discussed.

The point that they appeared to miss was that the club was making an annual loss of somewhere between £100,000 to £200,000 a year. This was a result of the vast numbers of administration and managerial staff they needed to run the club.

One Friday afternoon at the club just as we were winding down for the weekend I learnt about another of the Japanese traditions. This was the one where they never expect the impossible. I was approached by one of the many office staff and told to build several bridges over the courses numerous ditches, place sand on all the pathways and to remove the water that was retained in the bunkers following some especially wet weather. The time limit on this undertaking was to be the end of the day ready for some VIP's that were playing the following day. I explained that this would be entirely impossible as we did not have any railway sleepers for the bridges and all the staff were at that time concentrating their efforts on the contemplation of how they would blow their unsubstantial wages on the fast approaching weekend.

But true to form I was presented with two Japanese trainee accountants complete with designer tracksuits and Gucci trainers and informed that they would help me achieve what had to be done. These guys weighed in at about seven stone tops and had all the muscular development of an anorexic stick insect. When we stuck a cast iron shovel in their dainty little hands they all but toppled over and that was before any sand entered the equation.

Amazingly enough though we all pulled together and got everything finished on time, although this did involve myself

hurting down a busy high street with a couple of tonnes of railway sleepers hanging out the back of the hatchback, having borrowed them from a neighbouring club. It was late at night when we finally finished sanding the last of the pathways by the light of the tractor. My staff and I were "cream cracked" as the local vernacular would put it, but the two Japanese accountants were close to death. With their filthy tracksuits and decimated Gucci's they could barely put one foot in front of the other let alone yield any productive output. But to my amazement they then made their way up to the office to carry on with their paper work until well into the early hours.

This highlights what is in my mind the main reason for the success of this nation. The work force has a totally unquestioning loyalty to their superiors and will obey them regardless of how demanding or even futile is the task.

To give you an example of this, when I went to Japan to visit the headquarters I noticed the main office was not set out like the Western equivalent. Instead of it being a large room full of office staff surrounded by smaller management offices it instead consisted of one large room and in the middle sat the manager. There he would deposit himself and do all but nothing save for signing the odd document. When home time arrived he would stay put and no one would leave until he decided the time was right. This would commonly be about eight o'clock in the evening. Only at this point would all the others follow at a safe distance.

It did not matter if his or her work had been done hours before, it was simply not customary for any one to leave before the manager and so no one did.

Paradoxically I believe this unquestioning loyalty has been the reason for some of their problems in recent years. If you don't question, you don't change; and often radical change is essential in today's highly competitive world.

I used to sometimes go out for a drink with the Japanese office staff they used to employ at the club. This was never much of a financial hardship as it would generally require about three whiskies for them to get to the paralytic stage, but they once asked me of my opinion of our

Japanese MD. With my usual belligerent lack of subtlety I described in detail my thoughts using a form of English that they were never officially introduced to but understood perfectly. They found this heartfelt critique of the man highly entertaining but when I asked the same question of them it was a different matter. It did not matter how persuasive I tried to be, they simply would not divulge any opinion whatsoever on the subject of their boss even though they knew just as well as I, that he was a mobile disaster area that had an unsurpassed talent for inviting hatred.

Memos were another aspect of the Japanese way that I found difficult to appreciate. Memos are a ghastly invention that gives the issuer a golf iron method of passing the buck and when used to excess as they were at this club, they begin to replace all conversation. When it got to the stage where I received a memo that said remove a fallen stick on 7th tee, I felt the time was right to start studying the employment section of this magazine.

But there is one lesson the Japanese could teach to the rest of the world and this is their attitude to golf. You will never see a Japanese person show any trace of frustration on a golf course at all. To them a bad shot is a source of endless merriment and a succession of bad shots the ultimate in hilarity. To see them run after their shot, duff it, crack up laughing and run after it again is a sight to behold and speaking as someone who has on more than one occasion indulged in some quality club throwing they offer a lesson to be learnt.

So there you have it, McDivot's guide to the world of the Japanese. They are illogical, unfathomable, incredibly sexist, often extremely generous, totally loyal, by and large, complete nutters and in most cases especially the younger ones, terrific people. If ever you get the chance to work at such a club be prepared for intense frustration and a great deal of hard work but take on the challenge with open arms as it will be an experience you will look back on with satisfaction.

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and Play.