



HARMONY

Building and Maintaining Relationships in Modern Japanese Business



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INTRODUCTION

The concept of harmony plays a large part in the Japanese culture as it plays an important role to many Japanese aesthetics. Besides its roles in Japanese aesthetics, harmony is greatly valued in relationships, whether it be between human and nature or human and human and seen in everyday situations. In this paper, I will be focusing on how harmony is maintained within groups of people in Japan's business world. I have come to write about this topic since businesses and corporations are plentiful in Japan and many people find their careers within one. But also, there are many practices and etiquettes used in daily life in the office to make sure relationships with co-workers, higher-ups and even other companies are stable and in harmony.

This idea of having different practices and customs to ensure harmony within a group is particularly unique to Japan when looking at it from an American point of view. This intense willingness to avoid any sort of negative events or conflict that could ruin harmony in a group or relationships is not seen often in most human relationships in the United States. From personal experiences as an American, I can tell that the value of balancing the harmony of people one encounters is not viewed as highly as it is in Japan. Especially in the business world of America, maintaining group harmony is not a priority and there are definitely not defined practices like there is in Japan.

There are many concepts, practices and etiquettes that are used daily in Japan's business world. In this paper, I will discuss a few of the many aspects of maintaining harmony in business relationships such as *honne* and *tatemae* and *amae*. Because of the intensity and dedication to the customs of maintaining group harmony in general has piqued the interest of many people, but from my experience, I feel like few go into further into detail than just giving a brief description of the topic. If one was to look at these concepts from different points of view, one could

point out the pros and cons for each and could then theoretically apply them to other countries to see how successful they would be. Comparing Japan and America, especially, could bring to light some large differences and possibly some similarities.

By researching journal articles and textbooks, I have come to answer these questions; Why are these practices of maintaining harmony uniquely Japanese and how have they been successful? How successful would these practices be in America and how long would it take for them to develop to a similar level to Japan? Lastly, how are the concept of group harmony Japanese Mind and what does it reveal about it? I have used my own experiences, my own culture's point of view and as well as my own cross-culture understanding in order to further discuss and analyze the topic of maintaining group harmony in Japan's businesses.

HARMONY IS WA

In the Japanese language, the idea of keeping a stable group harmony is referred to as *wa* and it is a very important concept cultural and as well as in the business setting. According the article *The Influence of Japanese Culture on Business Relationships and Negotiations* by Naoko Oikawa and John Tanner (1992), it is stated that harmony or *wa* is the “central point of Japanese culture” and it defines the quality of the relationship while also incorporating trust, sharing, and cooperation that builds off compassion that are expressed towards others. These things that define and make *wa* are believe by the Japanese people as to what makes their business world successful (Oikawa & Tanner, 1992).

Wa is a perfect explanation for the success story of Japanese business, because group harmony has been something that is taught and instilled in the people of Japan at an early age. As Japanese people age, they have a better understanding, work mentality and attitude when it

comes to working in groups. Unlike like in America, emphasis on encouraging a good attitude toward group work is not seen as often. Working groups for projects in school is not done until middle or even high school level. Also, an important factor is that culturally America is focused on individual work and achievement, thus working in groups, which many people have do in their careers, is not something that is looked forwards to or dealt with similarly to Japan.

Going Past Immediate Group Members to Establish *Wa* with Others

Maintaining *wa* goes beyond just the immediate people that a person works with and it even goes beyond that of the company as well. Business people in Japan also extend the keeping harmonious relationships with business partners, suppliers and clients (Oikawa & Tanner, 1992). Although these people at some point associate themselves with a company, they are still outside of the main office. This can indicate the flexibility of the *uchi to soto*, or who is considered inside and who is outside. I believe that a stereotypical thought of *uchi to soto*, is that if a person is considered *soto*, or outside, then Japanese people do not worry about them as much as someone who is considered *uchi*, or inside. I would say that partners, suppliers and clients are not people that are dealt with daily to the point that they would be considered *uchi* all the time. So this shows the flexibility of this concept and show it that it may not be as strict and ridged as once thought. And it also show how important cultural when it comes to looking at keeping and building relationships without conflict.

For Japanese people maintaining *wa* with the people one comes into contact with is very important concept in the Japanese culture and it hold an equally important role in the business world of Japan. According to the book by Jon Alston and Isao Takei, *Japanese Business Culture and Practice*, even any decision makings are heavily influenced by the concept of keep *wa* stable with the co-workers (Alston & Takei, 2005). With Japanese business, the idea of *wa* could be

said to break certain rules or stereotypes about *uchi to soto*. But there are other concepts that are practiced within the work place and are tactics that are used for maintaining the *wa*.

HONNE AND TATEMAE

One concept that is practiced often and is used in the maintaining of *wa* is the concepts of *honne* and *tatemae*. *Honne* and *tatemae* play an important part to the Japanese business harmony. These two concepts are very unique and it is interesting to see how they play a role in maintaining *wa*. To begin *honne* and *tatemae* are an aspect of verbal communication and expressing one's feeling within the business. According to *Japanese Business Culture and Practice*, *honne* are a person's true thoughts and feelings. *Honne* is usually never expressed openly with other because of the fear of disrupting the *wa*. *Tatemae* are the thoughts and feeling may not true but they are what people want to hear. This is more openly expressed because they maintain *wa* by making other people feel better and avoid any conflicts that may come if a negative *honne* was expressed (Alston & Takei, 2005). There is conscious effort being used when having to consider one words carefully and the thoughts and feeling of other people must in the front of one's mind constantly.

What are the Negative Points of *Honne* and *Tatemae* System?

There is a huge negative issue with *honne* and *tatemae* which that is having to constantly consider your words when expressing something and that means not even expressing what one really thinks about something. Considering this from an American point of view, it would be very stressful to not be able to express one true feeling about something. Especially when dealing with the business world, it would be hard for most Americans not to be able to give some sort of criticism in order to improve the idea or to just to be able to point out flaws.

Not only does *honne* make people holding their own personal opinions backs in favor for maintaining *wa* can be stressful or frustrating, but it could also deprive someone from giving a good answer, solution or opinion that could be beneficial in the end. Also this fear of ruining the harmony of group in general is not a positive point to begin with. By fearing what people may say against or react to one's opinion can have effect on the person themselves. They may begin doubting themselves or reluctant to answer.

While the concept behind *honne* many have some serious negative effects, *tatemae* can also have some negative aspects as well. *Japanese Business Culture and Practice* states that *tatemae* are “social lies and verbal noises that are not meant to convey information but rather to maintain good feelings through the avoidance of tension” and “demands conformity to positions and age rankings (Alston & Takei, 2005).” This helps dictate and maintain the hierarchy system of Japanese business. But in a similar way as *honne*, this can have similar negative effects on the person. The real point with these two concepts is that a person has to ignore their real feeling and have to conform to standards of the company and give statements expected of them.

How is *Honne* and *Tatemae* Used to Keep Harmony in Business Groups Stable?

After seeing how these two concepts could affect ones mentally in a negative manner, it is time to look at just how *honne* and *tatemae* benefits *wa*. The whole purpose of these two concepts is to do just that; to keep the peace within the groups and avoid conflict. While looking at the points made earlier through an American point of view can seem very negative, but the same points looked at a different light is exactly what makes *honne* and *tatemae* work to maintain harmony.

With these two concepts people are avoiding saying anything that could bring conflict to the group. Personal opinions have to be left unsaid and people have to think more as one in order

to have a harmonious discussion. In America this would be very difficult to achieve such a connection and consideration between all members of the group. Most likely there would be at least one person who would not put aside their personal views and will continue to openly state them causing friction between the group. The idea of individualize is valued much higher than the groupism in America. While parents do try to teach their kids to respect others and to consider their words, American culture nurtures expressiveness and voicing opinions much more than Japanese society does.

Honne and *tatemae* require a lot of consideration for other people and the ability to think and work as one, which can be a daunting task considering how big companies can be. Practicing these two concepts, while can be stifling individually, is a good way to bring people closer and preserve *wa*. Also the cultural value placed on these two concepts and the fact it is expected of people to be able to behave in such a manner shows that they are important and are found useful to *wa*.

AMAE

Another important concept to maintaining group harmony that is practiced daily in the work place is *amae*, which refers to the dependences the Japanese people have to another person. The idea behind this concept is to receive affection and support for another person while also have nurturing feeling for another. The dependency is not one way like most people would assume nor is just the lower-ranked workers dependent on the higher-ranked ones. It is a two way street, where higher-up depend on the lower-ranked workers and vice-versa. With this concept the expectation of loyalty from the lower-ranked workers and support from the higher-ranked workers is the main aspect to *amae* in the corporate world (Oikawa & Tanner, 1992).

There are many more aspects and different situations to this concept and it actually does go beyond just the simple translation of the term.

What are the Positive Aspects of *Amae*?

Amae is similar to *honne* and *tatemae* in the fact that they are not just used within the business world, but is a cultural concept overall and is seen often in daily life situations. Although, there can be different and unique business situations that *amae* is used in that is not seen in daily life. Considering this idea of social dependency is also cultural, it can be said that it is important in general for maintaining harmony in daily relationships. And since it is used in the business world as well, it must be considered important to maintaining *wa* in business relationships.

One of the more important aspects of *amae* is the two-way street idea, as mentioned before, where there is an equivalent exchange of sorts happening. While looking at Oikawa and Tanner's article, it states that this two-way street is what helps insure that the "Japanese hierarchical relations is appreciated by both sides (Oikawa & Tanner, 1992)." Because both sides are getting something, either loyalty or support and affection, it secures and enforces positivity to such a rigid system of hierarchy. In addition to this, it promotes harmony by allowing people to form deeper and stronger connections with one another because there is no cultural stigma against depending on someone like there is in America.

In America, there is a strong idea against depending on someone, especially if what is expected out of it is support, affection and nurturing (Oikawa & Tanner, 1992). There are cases where it is expected, romantic relationships or either family and friends. But in the work place, this

level of dependence is seen in America. Also, culturally in America, the idea of males having this kind of dependence with co-workers and bosses is not something that is thought to happen.

While could reinforce American ideas or stereotypes, this is actual beneficial to Japanese business and help in the maintaining group harmony. It can also break the *sempai/kouhai* stereotype a bit, because it shows the reciprocation of benefits. Whereas in T.V. shows or anime and manga typically depict *sempai/kouhai* and dependence as one way and it is usually the *kouhai* or the lower-ranked person who does everything without gaining much in return. In the end, *amae* is still important aspect and concept in the maintaining of harmony.

What are the Negative Aspects to This System?

Although, when it comes to dealing with *amae* it could be very frustrating for individuals. The main issue with this would be the difficulty of trying to establish relationship in the beginning. According the book written by Alston and Takei, it states that “it is extremely difficult to meet personally those making the final decisions in a Japanese corporation because Japanese subordinates work very hard to protect their superiors from meeting those they do not want to meet (Alston & Takei, 2005).” This could be bad on both sides. It could mean that subordinates that have biases or any negative feeling towards another can and will prevent their superiors meeting them. It may not matter to the subordinate that outsider could potentially be very helpful to the company in some way. Although in reality, the real reason for when happen in *amae* is the fear of being blamed for a rejection.

This leads into the next issues of *amae*. Despite the *amae* concept being a two-way street in a general description, but can be far from that sometimes. While supported is given to the lower-ranked workers by their superiors, it is the lower-ranked that can take the heat for many

negative events. Events like rejections of deals or promises that fall through, all fault for such things happening would fall on the subordinate, because the higher-ranked are responsible for it since there was no *amae* formed through a face-to-face meeting (Alston & Takei, 2005). This could cause a negative effect and unnecessary stress on the lower-ranked workers.

These aspect of *amae* have the potential of ruining the harmony in a group if handled wrongly. Although these can affect people greatly, it is something that is not outwardly expressed towards other in order to maintain the harmony. But in the end, it is could be considered unfair for lower-ranked workers to take the blame for something that is not their faults.

THE SUCCESS

According to J. Thanopoulos and J. Leonard, authors of the article *Nourishing American Businesses with Japanese Recipes* state that “the family system constitutes the core of Japanese society.” It is something that is taught and nurtured from a very young age. It begins with the understanding and learning about group harmony and the hierarchy system within their families. The learning and reinforcement continues throughout schooling with such activities as group work that are formal and informal in setting helps in allowing Japanese people to easily continue this idea into the working world (Thanopoulos & Leonard, 1996). Thus the reason that it has been such a successful aspect of the Japanese business is that fact that reinforced throughout a person’s life and is not something that is taught and then never applied.

This is very different than in America. These concepts and ideas are briefly taught by family members early on in life, but after that there is not continuous reinforcement in school or in life for several years. Typically, things such as group projects are assigned until around middle

school, and they are never taken seriously by the whole group. Especially in middle school and high school, there is one or two people that do the majority or even all the work while the other people do nothing. Because of these experiences in school most people do not like group work since it means having to deal people who may not pull their weight in the project. For the people who would not pull their own weight, they may not like having to deal with people or don't care about their work. It is the positive experiences and continuous exposure to situations that call for the maintaining of group harmony which has allowed for this concept to be successful in businesses today.

What if America's Businesses Were to Take on the Concept of *Wa*?

Harmony is one of the key factors of Japanese business management, which has been the focus of many American articles of the success of Japanese businesses. Although, it would be a very long time or impossible before American businesses would have the level of understanding and dedication to group harmony of Japan. The main reason for this is because this concept of harmony is culturally rooted in Japan's society. Whereas in America, and now more than ever, being an individual and making sure one's own voice is heard is being promoted and supported at a young age. While basic ideas of group harmony are taught in the beginning, such as "don't say to other that you wouldn't want said to you" Americans are prioritizing ideas of "making sure your voice is heard" and "be true to yourself" is important.

For American businesses to be successful in adapting group harmony concepts, America would have to change culturally or businesses would need some sort of intense training of employees and strict, no-forgiveness rules. Another issue would be how different each state in America is. An example would be how Californian businesses manage and run companies based on values of California versus Ohio who would use their own values (Thanopoulos & Leonard,

1996). Thanopoulos and Leonard's article suggests, that it would impossible for America to adopt this Japanese concept completely and exactly the same, but it could more easily take bits and pieces that do work and fit in American culture and work them into the businesses. In the end, achieving some similar and just as successful (Thanopoulos & Leonard, 1996).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, group harmony plays an important role to Japanese businesses. It promotes good work ethics and allows people to form connections and bonds with their co-workers.

Honne, tatemae and *amae* are just a few examples of practices and concepts that are used to maintain harmony. These practices have their good and bad aspects to them, but in the end they work and fulfill their purpose. Although, the bad aspects may not been seen as clearly from Japanese point of view, whereas an American point of view can see many different negative points to these concepts and may not understand how they are able to work. But in some cases what would be consider negative by an American, may be thought neutrally or even positively from a Japanese point of view. Each culture has defined what they would considered good or bad. In America, many things that would stifle individualism though and expression is viewed very negatively, but in Japan it is not seen as bad.

This idea of harmony in general in one that has been around for a long time and has become interwoven into modern society flawlessly. Since it has been around for a while and is a concept that is constantly being applied in life at an early age, it understandable as to why it has been applied towards the business world so effortlessly. America would never be able to apply the exact same concepts of their businesses, because it would mean changing cultural values and the mindsets of all Americans. It may be possible to take some aspects, modify if need be, and be

able to apply them, but America will never have the level of commitment to group harmony and work as Japan does.

Although, other countries may have something similar, the idea of harmony in businesses is unique to Japan, because of the practices, concepts and values they used in very day work life that other countries may not use. This idea of harmony is also a part of Japanese mind, because it is something that is constantly considered and thought about while also being something taught throughout life. It is a cultural values that will be continued to deemed important and each generations will continue to teach and use these concepts with hopefully with as few modifications as possible.

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