

An American in Toyota

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Dr. Toyoda, as usual, looked grim. So, for that matter, did his cousin the Chairman Eiji Toyoda, his immediate team of lieutenants the executive vice presidents, and the entire 50 member Board of Directors, all of whom were sharing the dais with him. The same way they did every year on this day, initiation day, when Toyota's management doyen ceremoniously welcomed new members into the fold.

I had come in from Tokyo the day before via a one-way bullet train ticket, and stayed the night at the Toyota Plaza Hotel, a Japanese "business hotel" like tens of thousands of others across Japan with 10 X 12 rooms, no closets, and baths so tiny one faucet can handle both the sink and bathtub. The Plaza was a five-minute walk from the Headquarters Large Hall where I was to receive initiation along with over 400 other mid-career types. The only difference between them and me was that they were all Japanese and I was American.

The initiates were all herded in the proper direction by Personnel Department staff. I felt at home knowing most of the players, since my earlier position had been in the Education and Training Department, which shares the same Director with Personnel and for a time during my tenure there even shared the same *Bucho**. We in E&T always thought of ourselves as the poor cousins of the aristocratic Personnel Department, which always seemed to have more information, better access, and to be writing the music to which we would be teaching others to dance.

The dance for this particular day was a well-practiced one. Ritual is important in Japan, and is one of the defining elements of group membership, which in turn is the dynamic that more than any other makes Japanese society and business tick. Today, my colleagues and I were being promoted. Some 300 of us to *Kacho* and another 150 or so to *Jicho* and *Bucho*. These are the middle management ranks of Japanese business, the operational fronts where most of those famous aspects of Japanese management have been born and nurtured: *nemawashi*, *ringi*, bottom-up, by-the-window (or out-to-pasture) managers, and the rest. Had I stopped to think about it, I would have been amazed that I was there at all, but after seven years I had come to take it all pretty much in stride.

This is what I had come to Japan to do, to work for the biggest, most Japanese company I could find. I planned to work there a couple of years and take what I could of what was worthwhile back home to the U.S. I knew it would be difficult. Everyone told me, "Japanese companies will never accept non-Japanese as "real" members -- you will always be an outsider." I remembered the first time I heard academic reference to Japan years before in Anthropology 101: "In China, you can wander unexpectedly into a village and be accepted immediately and remembered 30 years later; in Japan you can live in a

(*Note: The English rough equivalents of titles used here are: *Bucho*, General Manager; *Jicho*, Assistant General Manager; and *Kacho*, Manager.)

village for 30 years and still never be accepted." I didn't know if it was true, but I knew it was conventional wisdom.

As it turned out, the job I was able to get was with Toyota (which easily qualified as the biggest, most Japanese company one could