

Toshihiko Yamashita: Work and Life -- the Meanings of Work

Young people are looking for rewarding jobs

I think that young people today are rather different from their predecessors. For example, there is an organization called Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. When it started in 1967, it attracted only 26 volunteers. But, then, the numbers began to rise significantly: 200 volunteers in 1975, 800 in 1985, and more than 1,000 in 1988.



To become a volunteer member, you have to pass a grueling exam. More than 8,000 people must have applied for positions, because only one person in eight will be good enough to pass the exam. The volunteer work is tough, dirty, and dangerous, a good example of a very demanding job, and some forty people have died of diseases such as malaria. Although most parents would strongly oppose their children going to such places, the young volunteers are determined persons and have overcome parental resistance. I think that these people must have a volunteer spirit or strongly desire to work in jobs where they can contribute to society.

There was also a volunteer recruitment program last month for the Tokyo University Day Hospital that will open in July, and they reached out to department store personnel to find the volunteers they need to work on weekdays, since department stores have closed days on weekdays. I heard that there were 420 applicants. People at the hospital are hoping that the atmosphere of the hospital will change because these volunteers will be used to guide customers.

I often hear that young people today don't have a work ethic, but I don't think that is true. I think they are looking for jobs that offer clearly defined roles and that are rewarding.

The hours we spend at work make up a great deal of our lifetimes. Therefore, it really matters whether you devote yourself to your work gladly or unwillingly. If you are working unwillingly, you will just get tired. In the play called *Lower Depth* by Maxim Gorky, there is this line: "Life becomes a paradise if you enjoy your job, but hell if it is merely a duty." I believe that this is true.

Find strong points and compliment employees on them

So, what makes you want to dedicate yourself to your work? I think that there is no better way than to have your talents recognized by those around you. Masahiro Yasuoka (a philosopher) said, "If there are ten people, they all have different features and looks. Similarly, their talents all differ. It's easy for people to identify shortcomings, but difficult to identify strengths and talents. Finding these strengths and talents is important."

As an example, Yasuoka introduced the case of a mentally disabled child. "There is a steep slope at a place called Teramachi in Osaka, and the people who work at carrying goods there really struggle. One day, someone said to this child, "Help by pushing from behind when you find a person in trouble on the slope. Even if they appreciate your work and offer money, don't accept it because I will give you a tip, instead." This child then started helping to push horse-drawn wagons and his assistance was really appreciated by the people around him.

Gradually, the expression on his face became cheerful and lively as he earned appreciation from the people, he being someone who had always been scolded for being mentally disabled. The news spread and one person came along and said that he would like to offer the boy a job at his shop. This child eventually came to have his own shop. Thus, every person has something good in him or her. So, it's important to identify that talent and to bring it out.

The ability for every individual to spend a fruitful life counts above everything

Until now, companies placed top priority on getting results, and employees were required to work collaboratively to achieve those results. But, I think that we need to change our views and stand on the side where companies endeavor to make people's lives fruitful. If each employee can find enjoyment and meaning in his or her life, this in turn will help companies grow.

As companies get larger, it will become more difficult to think that way. If a company has 200 to 300 employees, the president can speak directly with those employees. This is an advantage enjoyed by small and medium-sized companies.

There is a company called Topre in Hiroshima which makes bathtub covers, and it has about 120 employees. The company has two factories in Hiroshima and one in Osaka. The president visits the factories every month and speaks with each employee. However, he never interferes

with their work. He listens to their opinions and concerns and gives advice. The quality of the company's products is superb and it has a market share of around 40%. Employees say that they work with the feeling that "we are entrusted by the president, so we cannot betray his trust." I hear that the president never admonishes the employees. I visited them once and saw that each employee was working with confidence.

There is also a Swiss company called Nihon Ciba-Geigy, in Takarazuka. The company president, Mr. Doodler says, "It's a boss's job to think about how to make work enjoyable for those who have happened to come to work under him." "A boss who cannot get his subordinates to concentrate on their jobs is not qualified and should leave the company." He also says, "When the technology and production strength become equivalent to those of competitors, it's the employees' motivation and vitality that makes the difference and brings success in the market place. If you are working proactively rather than just trying hard, vitality will come on its own."

Konosuke Matsushita, our founder, would often say to me: "We humans are not gods. We have weaknesses and shortcomings, but we also have strong points. We must look at these good points." Recognize the strengths and compliment the worker on his or her achievement and let employees take care of their work by themselves. I believe that it is at that point that people start to feel that their work is rewarding.

Compiled from Shofu Summer Edition 1994