

The Sunao Mind

The Japanese term *sunao* connotes a mind that accepts life in an open and constructive way, a mind that is unresisting in the face of truth and free from adherence to narrow views. This quality enables us to develop disciplined objectivity free from prejudice, and to see things as they really are.

There are many important prerequisites needed for managing successfully, but the one I think is most fundamental, and that I think about most often and strive to achieve, is the *sunao* mind. The *sunao* mind in a manager is what allows all the other qualities discussed thus far to come to life. Managing without this *sunao* mind will not allow the company to grow in the long term.

Having a *sunao* mind is essentially about maintaining an untrapped mind. A manager with this quality tries to see things the way they are, with a certain sense of detachment from his or her own interests, emotions, knowledge, and biases. People who are caught up in their own opinions cannot see things as they really are. It is like trying to look at something through a tinted or distorted lens. If you look at a white piece of paper through a red lens, the paper will appear red. If you look at a straight pole through a distorted lens, the pole may appear bent. These obstacles make it impossible to see the true nature of things, to see things as they really are. Looking at things with a trapped mind can easily lead to mistakes in both judgment and action.

In contrast, a *sunao* mind allows one to view things through a lens that is neither tinted nor distorted, such that white appears white, and straight appears straight; it allows one to see things as they truly are. A *sunao* mind allows one to know the true shape of things, and to understand the reality of a matter. A manager who views things this way and acts accordingly is likely to make relatively few mistakes in any situation.

Management will succeed when managers act in accordance with natural law, pay attention to the public and consumers, listen to the collective wisdom of their employees, and do what needs to be done. In this sense, management is not all that difficult. However, to do all this, a manager must have an open, *sunao* mind.

Earlier I said that adhering to natural law is as easy as opening an umbrella in the rain. When it rains, you naturally open an umbrella. This is the act of a *sunao* mind. People who are too obstinate to open their umbrella have a mind that is encumbered in some way. They will end up soaking wet, and will not manage a business well.

Managers must humbly listen to what is said by consumers and employees. The ability to do this is a sign of having a *sunao* mind. People who always believe they are right or who believe they are somehow more important than others do not pay attention to what others have to say. They do not collect input from others. They will try to manage based on their own limited knowledge alone. This can easily lead to failure.

Having a *sunao* mind allows managers to see the true state of affairs. Based on this insight, they will then be able to determine what does and does not need to be done. True courage to do the necessary and avoid the unnecessary will be derived therefrom.

From this will emerge a spirit of tolerance and compassion, and these qualities will allow managers to

manage in a way that realizes the full potential of all their human and capital resources. A *sunao* mind also makes it easier for a manager to be flexible and versatile in adapting to any circumstances, and to start anew every day.

Simply put, a *sunao* mind makes a person right, strong, and intelligent. Only God can achieve the ideals of perfection, strength, and intelligence. And while human beings can never attain the perfection of God, they can attain qualities that seem almost god-like by cultivating open-mindedness. This will allow them to succeed in everything they do. This is also true in management.

However, it is not easy to cultivate this level of openmindedness. Human beings have their loves, hates, and desires, and we cannot expect people to shed them, since these are some of the traits that make us human. Eliminating these aspects of ourselves would be to eliminate our humanity.

The tendency to be trapped by our own emotions and interests is part of being human. As scholarship and knowledge have progressed in recent times, and various beliefs and ideas have emerged, we have become trapped by those beliefs and ideas. Thus, remaining detached from things is easier said than done. Still, it is precisely because it is difficult, and because it is so important to have a *sunao* mind, that we must strive to cultivate and improve this attitude within ourselves.

So how can we cultivate a *sunao* mind? There are many different ways. An example from Japanese history may help illustrate this. During the civil wars of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many warriors practiced Zen Buddhism. Zen training aimed to free the mind from attachments, and this led to the cultivation of an open, *sunao* mind. War is a form of management, and when engaging in this most serious form of management, one with truly life and death consequences, those ancient warriors tried to go into battle with untrapped minds. Zen training is likely what helped them achieve that kind of outlook when heading into battle.

This is the type of approach I am advocating. From what I have heard, the game of go—a Japanese game of strategy played with white and black counters on a wooden board—is one in which anyone, even someone who has not been trained by a teacher, can become a player of the first dan, the first of the “master” ranks, by playing the game about 10,000 times. If you sincerely want to acquire a *sunao* mind, you must try hard to seek it actively each day for ten thousand days, or roughly thirty years. Once you achieve the first dan, the *sunao* mind in you will be at work to some extent in whatever you do, so that you will likely be able to avoid making big mistakes. Having learned this, I decided that I would try this every day, and I reflected on my words and actions in an effort to cultivate my own *sunao* mind.

You as an individual should seek out a method that you consider right for yourself, but the effort to cultivate or improve a *sunao* mind is itself very important for all managers, and in fact for all people. Without it, true management success and true human happiness will not be attainable. If there were actual rankings in achieving this type of mind, we would all want to strive to achieve the first dan. If we were able to get that far, we would naturally master these other things that have been discussed, and would be able to put these lessons to good use. A *sunao* mind is the basic mental approach needed for achieving management success.

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