



Asian Productivity Organization “The APO in the News”

Name of publication: Dailymirror.lk (6 February 2017, Sri Lanka)

Page: <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Kireizuki-approach-to-quality-and-productivity--123347.html>

Kireizuki approach to quality and productivity

2017-02-06 10:49:07

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The Japanese are known for their obsession with cleanliness. They are also known for their high quality and productivity. There is obviously a connection.



BY Sunil G
Wijesinha

Kireizuki is a Japanese term which closely translates to the high level of cleanliness and an almost obsession with it. Chinese historians who visited Japan in the third century as well as European visitors who arrived when Japan opened up in the 16th century have commented on the fastidious Japanese where cleanliness was given the highest priority. Even Sri Lanka had a glorious sanitary system in the past as far back as the Rajarata civilization. However unlike the Japanese who kept on improving their standards of cleanliness we in Sri Lanka have seen a drastic deterioration. We are only left with historical artefacts to prove that once, a long time ago, we were a clean and hygiene conscious nation.

We even arranged for Queen Elizabeth to see the ancient toilets slabs during her visit to declare open the Victoria dam. It was as if to say, even though the country is filthy dirty now, we were more advanced than you in 500 BC. We need to face reality and not fool ourselves. We are not a very clean nation. We do not have a culture nor do we have social rules that promote cleanliness. Historical records indicate our advanced sanitation systems and high standards of cleanliness of the Sri Lankan royalty, and there is an abundance of evidence of the precise vinaya rules for the monks.

There is no dearth of concepts nor profound proclamations about the need for cleanliness, but the actual practice is far from those abstract concepts. It is said that even Kautilya's arthashastra had many concepts and rules for cleanliness. Kautilya has been widely studied and discussed in India and even in Sri Lanka. However Kautilya's thoughts on hygiene and cleanliness do not appear to have made much impact on the Indian or Sri Lankan cities.

This proves the point made over and over again that South Asians are very good at conceptualizing and theorising but hopeless at implementation. I have been speaking about this, and writing about this, since 1980 when I first visited Japan and saw at first hand their cleanliness culture. When I returned I tried my best to implement some of these methods at the Sri Lanka Tyre Corporation where I worked as the Industrial Engineer in late 70s and early 80s.

I failed miserably. I only succeeded in getting my office cleaned 'the Japanese way' as my colleagues called it, and it became a big joke to everyone. However in every organization I was the CEO I was successful in drastically improving the standards of cleanliness. After over 30 visits to Japan since then, I once again visited Japan at the end of last year and decided to write

this piece.

Attitude in Sri Lanka

I had learnt the Japanese 5S system in Japan and was the first to conduct seminars and promote this concept since the 1990s. When I took over as Chairman of Dankotuwa Porcelain Ltd and then the Japanese investors came in after 'peoplistation' I had just started implementing 5S there. I still recall the conversation with the Japanese technical expert who had been in the factory for few months before and who very bluntly told me, that I may succeed in the first two steps of 5S but will miserably fail in the third step, which is mostly about cleanliness. On challenging him, his reply was that "Sri Lankans believe that they have a fundamental right to dirty the workplace and get workers, janitorial services, peons and servants to clean up". He gave loads of examples to prove his point. He had once found a dirty piece of cloth on a machine and asked the factory manager about it, and the Factory manager called an Assistant Production Manager to attend to it, who called the supervisor who called his Charge Hand and finally a factory worker removed it. He may have exaggerated this a bit, but made his point. Next he took me into his office, sat down, wrote something on a piece of paper with a pencil and then erased it, collected the eraser dust off the table onto his palm and dusted into the waste paper basket very neatly. He looked up at me and said "That is Japanese method". Then he took me into the general office and asked me to observe, at which point someone was just erasing something he had written. He erased, lowered his head towards the paper and blew away the erased dust across the table onto the floor. "That is Sri Lankan method" said the Japanese Expert, adding "you expect someone else to clean your mess, because you think it is your birthright to mess up your workplace".

Once a team from Sri Lanka was on a productivity and quality observation mission organized by the German GTZ. We were in Hanover, in an apartment hotel. One day there was a suggestion to cook a Sri Lankan dinner organized by a good cook amongst our team members. We cooked Sri Lankan food and after an enjoyable evening in his room and when we were breaking up I suggested that we all get together clean up the room and wash up the utensils before we head back to our own rooms. The organiser protested "Our room charge includes cleaning up so we just leave things as they are." I was aghast and asked him how he could possibly sleep with bits of curry spilled on the writing table and blobs of seenisambol on the floor etc. He was quite happy to sleep with all that mess because 'we have the right to dirty the workplace'.

This is the problem with us Sri Lankans. This was quite in contrast to the philosophy of the Japanese. Once a Japanese Director told me how he won a competition in school and the prize was 'the golden opportunity to clean the school toilets'. I am not joking. Japanese schools usually do not have janitorial services, the children clean the school themselves. In Sri Lanka a child will never be asked to clean a toilet even as a punishment. The difference is that we think it is our right to dirty the workplace while the Japanese believe it is bad manners not to clean up and keep the place clean and neat for the other person.

Once a former boss of mine who had retired from the then Ceylon Civil Service told me how he refused to give an extension to an officer who never kept his institution's toilets clean. He said whenever he visited the Institution he was greeted by an unbearable stench emanating from the toilets. On hearing the news that his extension was not approved, he had confronted the boss and asked why he did not get an extension and was promptly told the reason. In disbelief he had asked "What do you mean clean sir? They are toilets no sir".

My boss explained to me that to many Sri Lankans a toilet is considered an excellent toilet only if it smells to high heaven, with water splashed everywhere, and generally filthy. If not, it fails to qualify as a 'good toilet'. When I took over as Chairman of the ETF the toilets at the entrance were smelly and dirty, the office was disorganized and unclean. I had the whole place cleaned up and floors polished, and introduced potted plants decorating the place. Although petitions went to the Minister that I was wasting ETF money the staff soon became cleanliness conscious and maintained the office very well. Some even told me that they are so proud of the office when their friends visit them. I distinctly recall the incident when Hon Aboosally took over as the new Minister of Labour and visited the Labour Department and the ETF, which are housed in the same Labour Secretariat. He was very impressed with the cleanliness of the ETF and asked why the Labour Department could not be kept equally clean. The answer was that since most people who come to the Labour Department are floor level workers with some workplace issue, such as a dismissal, and therefore in a distressed state of mind, it would make them feel far more comfortable in a dirty smelly environment! Once again I must say I am not joking, it is a true story.

Relationship of cleanliness with quality and productivity

It is obvious that breakdowns are far less if machines are kept clean and well maintained. Japan boasts of having one of the lowest breakdown rates in the world. The Japanese philosophy is to bring back to original condition every piece of equipment at the end of every day. This applies to large machines and even to your personal equipment kept on your table such as calculators, mobile phones, and even paper punches. It's not just the breakdowns only, because poorly maintained machines will turn out defective products lowering quality yields and machines that do not perform at the rated output levels will lower your productivity as well. There is a definite direct correlation between a well maintained workplace or factory and a higher quality yield.

Personal hygiene too can have a significant impact on quality and productivity as demonstrated to me by a Japanese expert. In the porcelain industry the factory has to be very clean because if iron particles (which may not be visible easily to the naked eye) rest on the item before it is fired it will end up with a black spot, easily visible, after firing, and it therefore becomes a rejected piece. Workers had been asked to regularly wash their hands with soap before they handle products before firing, but the problem still persisted. The Japanese expert then decided to visit the toilets and observe how workers washed their hands.

To his horror he found that the steps were as follows; with dirty hands they open the tap, wash, apply soap, wash again and close the tap. What happens? The dirt on the tap comes back on the clean hands. In Japan, said the expert, school kids are taught to wash their hands properly so that they take water to their hands and wash the tap before touching the tap again to close it. He was surprised that we do not teach our children in Sri Lanka how to wash their hands.

Instituting a cleaning culture

Although there has been a remarkable change in attitudes in Sri Lanka over the past few years, we need a massive change to come upto world standards. Many years ago if a worker from Telecom came to your house to install a telephone he would do his job and depart leaving all the mess behind. Cleaning is someone else's job.

Today it is much better. A person who came to install a shower cubicle in my home recently cleaned and vacuumed the entire area before leaving. A person who came to fix a wall bracket had an innovative method of holding the vacuum cleaner near the drill while he was drilling so that the plaster and brick dust arising from the drilling was immediately sucked in to the vacuum cleaner. Hopefully things are changing. One important aspect of the Japanese concept of cleanliness is 'clean in one step rather than with two or more steps.

This concept was first driven to me during my first visit to Japan in 1980. The programme included home visits where we had to visit a typical Japanese family one afternoon, spend the evening with them, and have dinner. For the two of us Sri Lankans it was a wonderful experience. The day before we left Japan this family visited us in our hotel and brought along with them some typical Japanese fruits. We sat in the lobby and they brought out the fruits on a plate and the knife to peel and cut the fruits. Before anything else they took out a small garbage bag and made it sit on the table with the open end in an open circle. They peeled the fruits straight into the garbage bag, so that there was no need to put the peels on something else and then collect and put into the garbage bag subsequently. It was a single step cleaning.

Generally in Japanese cities today, it is hard to find garbage bins because garbage is your responsibility, and you are supposed to take the garbage home. Once when my son and I visited the touristic city of Nikko he was wondering why there were no garbage bins anywhere, only to realise the reason when we arrived at the bus station when we saw everyone carrying their own garbage back home.

Five minute SEISO

One of the recommended methods under the third step of 5S, Seiso, is cleaning your own workplace for 5 minutes at a designated time every day. At this time everyone gets up from their seats and will first arrange their tables, tidy things up, clean their own desk, chair, computer, cupboard tops etc with a cloth and other cleaning equipment such as brushes and leave everything spick and span. This will inculcate a self-cleaning culture. Today many garment factories that practice 5S have inculcated these good habits to their workers. They wash their own plates and mugs and clean the table so that a janitorial service is not required. Even the Managing Director follows the same routine. In Sri Lanka we desperately need to take away the stigma attached to cleaning by yourself.

The Castle Street Maternity Hospital was one of the pioneers to practice the Japanese 5S method and they proved with statistical data that mortality rates reduced and rate of infection reduced. Once I took a team of Indian senior managers there and they were astounded by the standard of cleanliness and were surprised that there wasn't a single fly to be seen. This only proves that we can do it with good leadership.

Machines that are not cleaned will break down more often, produce defective products and work at a slower rate. Homes, schools, and workplaces that are not hygienic will cause more disease. Even the dengue epidemic currently prevalent in Sri Lankan cities could be brought under control if we follow the Japanese practices. Let us emulate Japan and make our country the cleanest at least in South Asia.

(Sunil G Wijesinha was the first Sri Lankan to be awarded the prestigious National Award by the Asian Productivity Organisation (APO) for promoting productivity in Sri Lanka, and later the only Sri Lankan to be awarded the Regional Award by the APO for promoting productivity in the Asia Pacific region. He is the most well known promoter of Japanese Management techniques in Sri Lanka and recognized as the pioneer in introducing Quality Circles and 5S to the country. He is a consultant in Productivity and Japanese management and is on the Boards of several listed and unlisted companies)