

On the Line at Subaru-Izusu : The Japanese Model and the America Worker

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Laurie Graham, a professor labor studies at Indians University, has written an interesting insider's study of how the Japanese model of industrial organization and management works in the U.S. With previous experience as a factory worker, waitress, and delivery driver, Graham applied to the Subaru-Isuzu Automotive (SIA) factory beginning operations in Lafayette, Indiana in 1989. Hired on as an assembly line production worker, she spent six months as a covert participant observer. Neither management nor workers were aware of her academic connections or that they were under observation.

Graham was interested in the debate over industrial relations in the American automobile industry, which traditionally have been organized around "what has been termed a Fordist model, characterized by assembly line production methods, direct supervision, rigid job classifications, high wages, and adversarial labor relations." This is contrasted to the Japanese model of lean production centered on work teams and worker input into production improvements and quality. The success of Japanese auto companies has led U.S. manufacturers to consider reforms like greater flexibility in work rules, team production, slower wage growth along with greater job security and increased union and worker participation in business decisions.

The debate over industrial relations also concerns whether the Japanese model based on cooperation between workers and management is rooted in consent or coercion and whether the interests of the workers are adequately represented by adamantly anti-union management.

Graham argues that while the Japanese model has some benefits for workers, worker participation and autonomy exist mostly in theory rather than practice; safety concerns are frequently ignored; and at here the system is based on coercion and incorporates social elements of control as well as Fordist methods.

Worker selection was one mechanism of control. There was an extensive pre-employment screening and testing process that was highly competitive. Emphasis was placed on a worker's attitude and value system rather than on technical skills. Graham found that many successful applicants reported lying on questionnaires and pretending to be team oriented since it was clear that was expected. Factory work paid much more per hour than other jobs in the area so jobs at SIA were highly desirable.

Orientation and training in traditional U.S. auto plants is job specific training in the technical skill needed and information about wages, benefits, and work rules. The Japanese model adds and focuses on behavioral and philosophical components, pushing teamwork and indoctrination in the company's philosophy. The Big Three U.S. auto makers (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) average 46.4 hours of training for new production workers while Japanese auto transplants to the U.S. average 370 hours. SIA training focused on caring concepts, such as safety, quality, trust, pride, and cleanliness. The company emphasized its egalitarian nature with all employees wearing the company uniform, no private offices, managers and workers sharing parking lots, cafeteria, etc. Yet a clear hierarchy existed, and all were aware of it. The official philosophy, however, attempted to blur class distinctions and provide a feeling of company pride and belonging. The company flattered the successful few to make it through the selection process; they now were referred to as "associates," part of the SIA family, whose comments and suggestions would be welcomed.

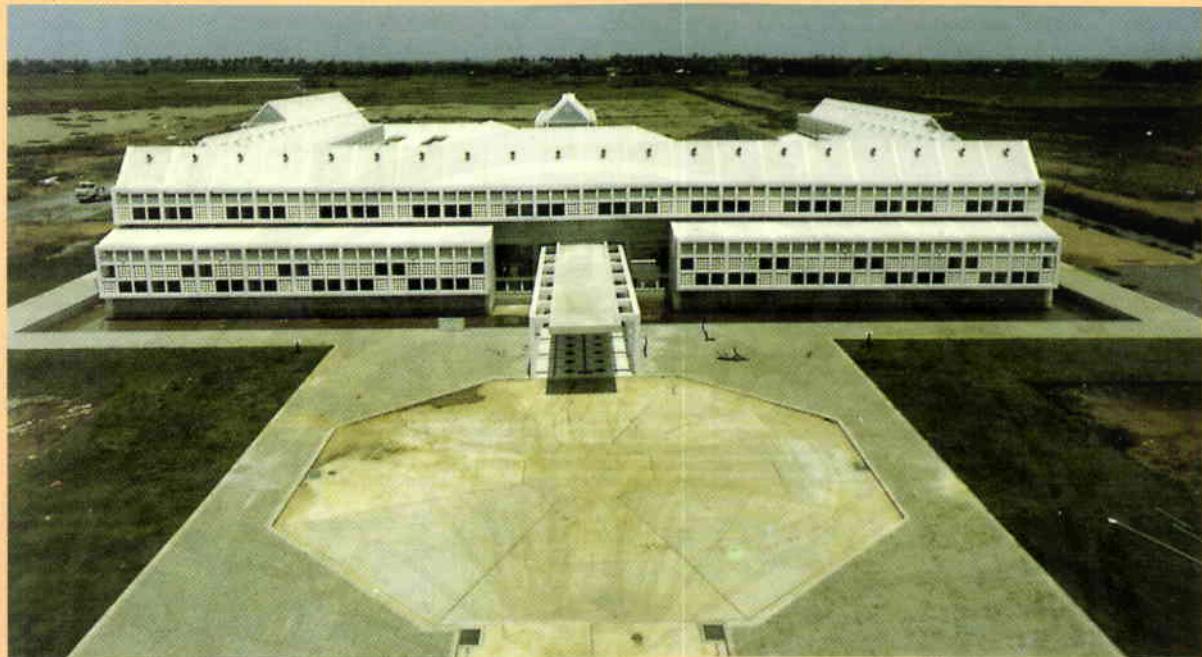
Trainers noted that Japan did not have occupational health and safety legislation and explained, "It is not necessary as the Japanese treat workers fairly." Another trainer mentioned that Japan also had no consumer protection or pollution control laws to limit business, thus the Japanese were more competitive. The workers rarely questioned such statements, since as new employees they felt vulnerable.

SIA used rituals and ceremonies like morning exercises and daily team meetings to create a shared sense of belonging. Training emphasized group work and kaizen, constant small improvements in the production process with input from workers. Once on the job, however, workers generally found their suggestions ignored and the group meeting at the start of the work day a waste of time.

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