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Japanese Company's Cultural Shift for Gender Equality at Work

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ABSTRACT *The article provides an overview of Japanese Prime Minister Abe's womanomics policy for gender equality (GD), and poses a question as to why despite a large amount of GD initiatives, Japan's GD progress has been painfully slow. It then introduces an ethnography of the GD implementation by a Japanese multinational firm (2013–2017). It analyzes the firm's pedagogical effort to correct the unconscious cultural bias to retool the existing habitus of managers and employees. The firm's cultural strategies parallel its human resources (HR) reforms in its attempt to change organizational norms regarding how corporate men and women should work. Deploying theoretical perspectives of cultural neuroscience, semiotics, learning theory and interpretive anthropology, the author then identifies seven strategic foci for this firm's cultural transformation, and terms this habitus-shifting program as MRS-PARC: M = magical messages and messengers; R = rites of passage and rituals; S = signs and symbols; P = rewarding and punishing task performances; A = clarifying alternatives and affordance; R = dealing with unexpected results, resistance and rear guards; and C = communication, complexity and continuity. Once MRS-PARC starts, corporate social drama and critical incidents lead the observer to the nexus of symbolic resistance and representation that in turn helps clarify how to modify the existing accommodation-and-redress mechanism for reform. MRS-PARC offers an empirically derived, action-oriented, process-based, analysis for those interested in moderating the people's referential frameworks and cognitive/emotional orientations for organizational transformation.*

KEY WORDS: Habitus-retooling; gender equality; Japanese multinational; applied business anthropology; industrial ethnography; diversity strategy; organizational transformation

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: Z1; K38; J0

Introduction

Japan lags behind many countries in terms of female leadership both in politics and in business.¹ World Economic Forum that annually ranks nations in terms of gender equality placed Japan at the 111th (below Ethiopia and Nepal) in global gender-equality index, and 118th in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity (2016). An OECD report of 2016 noted that tapping into the underutilized talent pool of qualified women could give companies a boost and foster inclusive growth.

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Achieving parity in labor force participation rates between men and women in OECD countries could boost GDP by 12% in the next 20 years (OECD, 2016). It noted that effective practices for gender equality largely depend on the top management commitment to drive the change, and continuous monitoring within the company for progress (OECD, 2016). It recommended that we must address the complex social challenges undermining women's access to leadership that include skewed perceptions and unconscious biases. It advocated for cultural and behavioral change in company culture.

The present article first provides the reader with an overview of Japan's political and legal environment for gender equality. It then describes the so-called *womanomics* initiated by Prime Minister Abe in 2013 and analyzes the reasons why, despite many legal changes and governmental programs, progress has been slow. The author concludes that if one wishes to transform any organizational culture successfully, one must first deploy various pedagogical tools to shift the unconscious cultural bias held by men and women. In next sections, the author discusses Sekai's implementation of its GD policy. The reader will understand how a major GD catalyst derived from Sekai top leaders' effort to retool the people's *habitus*, in tandem with changing institutional practices. *Habitus*, according to Bourdieu, is a system of embodied disposition, tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it (1980, 1984).² *Corporate habitus* is like an unconsciously held cultural GPS for managers and workers to view, filter, understand, evaluate and guide actions and practices.

In 2013, the author who is a native Japanese professor of anthropology at an American university joined a Japanese multinational, Sekai Foods (pseudonym), as its first female external board member. She conducted ethnographic fieldwork and recorded Sekai's gender-diversity (GD) policy implementation between 2013 and 2017. The final discussion summarizes what one can learn from the *habitus*-modification procedure of Sekai. Deploying theoretical perspectives of cultural neuroscience, semiotics, learning theory and interpretive anthropology, the author identifies key domains of this firm's GD strategies, and terms them as "MRS-PARC", that stands for: *M* = magical messages and messengers; *R* = rites of passage and rituals; *S* = signs and symbols; *P* = rewarding and punished GD-related task performances; *A* = clarifying alternatives and GD affordance; *R* = reading the unexpected and dealing with rear guards and resistance; and *C* = communication, cooperation and complexity. MRS-PARC opens a pragmatic, action-oriented, empirical vista for those leaders who are interested in organizational cultural transformation and who are in search of key cultural elements for realizing gender equality.³

Japan's *Womanomics*⁴

In December 2016, 127 million Japanese people reached a somber milestone when fewer than one million babies (981,000) were born in that year. With declining birth rates and almost no significant immigration, Japan's population is predicted to decrease by 30% to 88 million by 2060, and the elderly ratio will surge to 40% of the total. Facing the grim prospect of shrinking working-age people who will have to bear social security, nationalized medical expenses and tax burdens, Prime Minister (PM) Shinzo Abe announced in 2013 that more women would be encouraged to work.

He set a goal of 30% female leadership rate in listed companies by 2020. Behind the PM's *womanomics* was the relatively low female labor participation rate at around 63% in 2013, because 70% of women quit work when they had their first child, and did not return to work for a decade or more.⁵

After the launch of *womanomics*, several legal measures were introduced, including the Intensive Policy to Accelerate the Empowerment of Women, the new Corporate Governance Code, the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace. The Basic Plan for Gender Equality based on Article 13 of the Basic Act for Gender Equality Society; the Ordinance for Enforcement of the Act for Securing the Proper Operation of Worker Dispatching Undertakings and Improved Working Conditions for Dispatched, and the Positive Action Policies, similar to affirmative action programs in the United States and Europe (Japanese Government, Gender Equality Bureau 2016a, 2016b, 2017).

The government financially helps new mothers, who, unlike American mothers, receive 58 weeks of maternity leave, 26 of which are paid. Fathers are entitled to the same amount of time off, though less than 2% actually take it. Abe also pledged to create 400,000 new daycare spaces nationwide by 2018. Desperate for more babies, the government pays Japanese parents additional child allowances.

By mid-2010s, Japan's economy started to recover, and more Japanese women began returning to work. The number of female workers reached 24.36 million in 2014, up from 15.48 million in 1985. According to the latest OECD data, Japan's female labor participation rate hit 64.0% in 2014, up from 63% in 2013, which was the highest level in the past 15 years (OECD 2016, 2017). At the same time, the unemployment rate for women seeking jobs dropped to 3.5% in 2014, down from 4.4% in 2011. Although Japan's labor participation rate of 64.0% rate in 2014 was lower than those of Norway (75.9%) and Switzerland (79%), it was higher than United States (63%), Italy (55.2%), and South Korea (57.0%). The Japanese employment rate has increased at a faster pace since 2007 than the OECD average. This strong performance largely reflects the rising participation of women and the elderly in the labor market.

The increase of female labor participation appeared all positive. However, there was a major problem because *womanomics* coincided with the amendment of *Rodousha haken-ho* or the Labor Dispatch Law that introduced deregulatory measures for companies to use more flexible contractual arrangements to hire and fire workers, instead of giving them full-time, regular status.⁶ The contract workers with little or no job security are part-timers (who may work up to 35 hours per week), temporary workers, seasonal workers, and those engaged in *naishoku* (work at home). Recent job creation has largely taken the form of non-regular employment reinforcing concerns about labor market dualism. Despite the idealistic rhetoric of *womanomics*, PM Abe's "reforms" disproportionately put women, young workers, less educated and older workers into the category non-regular contract workers. Back in 1985, only 16.4% of all workers were non-regulars. However, by 2010, the number of non-regulars had more than doubled to 34.3%, and to 40% in 2016.

In 2016, for the first time, the number of female workers and older non-regulars exceeded the number of regular full-time male workers. Today, nearly 60% of working women are non-regulars, with little chance of moving up the corporate

ladder. These women earn far less than regular male workers. In 2016, female non-regulars earned only half (50.8%) of the regular male workers. In Europe, the figure was about 80%. Breaking down this highly gendered dualism in the Japanese labor market is essential to achieving better quantity and quality of employment.

Despite the prime minister's 2013 initial goal of 30% of female leadership rate to be achieved by 2020, the fourth governmental plan in December 2015 readjusted the target downward to a rather modest 10%. What happened? You may ask. An ethnographic inquiry by this author reveals social reality behind the above-mentioned statistical numbers. In the next section, let us examine engendered corporate reality in some details, using the case of Sekai Foods.

Sekai's Engendered Employment System

Most large Japanese firms hire fresh university graduates as *sogoshoku* or managerial candidates once a year. *Sogoshoku* receives salaries and semi-annual bonuses, various allowances, benefits, training opportunities, and most importantly, job security (until retirement at age 70). The term *sogoshoku* was created when the Equal Employment Opportunities Law (EEOL) was enacted in 1986. Prior to 1986 most firms practiced blatant discrimination against women because only males were hired as managerial candidates, while women served as their assistants and were expected to quit when they married.⁷ After the EEOL of 1986, the *sogoshoku* category was newly created to give women promotional opportunities and to separate this group of male and female managerial cadres from *ippanshoku* non-careers. Thus, for the first time, a small band of female college graduates were hired as *sogoshoku*.⁸ The 1986 EEOL has been revised twice: the first revision in 1997 aimed at ending discrimination in recruiting, hiring, job placement, and promotion, and the second in 2006–2007 targeted sexual harassment.

Even after the EEOL, however, many companies continued to hire far more male than female graduates as *sogoshoku*. As a result, the available pool of female managerial candidates is quite limited even in large firms. Today most large firms have two paths for women, carrier track *sogoshoku* and non-career *ippanshoku*. From the perspective of an individual female worker, the *sogoshoku-ippanshoku* duality is a classic example of competing devotions, to career or to family (Blair-Loy, 2009). *Sogoshoku* scheme of work devotion (applied mostly to men until recently) requires single-minded allegiance to careers that are supposed to give meaning and purpose to life. *Sogoshoku* is expected to work long hours, take any assignments, transfer to any locations, and work until retirement.

One ex-*sogoshoku* male manager noted that an announcement of job transfer was similar to receiving a military draft letter. One had no choice but to accept the new assignment regardless of personal circumstances. Another male manager noted that as soon as he bought a house, he received an order to transfer to a new location. When the new location is far away from the employee's current residence, it is common, particularly for middle-aged, married, male *sogoshoku* and managers with children, to choose *tanshin-funin* or "single transfer without accompanying family".⁹ While those middle-aged pseudo-bachelors work at new locations, domestic of overseas often for several years, their wives stay behind to look after their children and/or, increasingly, their aging parents and in-laws. *Tanshin-funin* literally splits

the employee's family into two locations with a gendered division of paid and unpaid labor.

Most women do not see *tanshin-funin* as an attractive life choice, and many young female college graduates voluntarily opt for *ippanshoku* or assistant positions, excluding themselves from promotional opportunities even when the company is willing to give such chances. The women's logic to apply for or stay as *ippanshoku* is that they do not want the stress and demand placed upon *sogoshoku* men and women and that *ippanshoku* non-careers could still enjoy secure employment until retirement. A few *ippanshoku* women who want to become *sogoshoku* are single women without familial obligations or single mothers (heads of households) who need income.

Overburdened by the demanding work hours and familial obligations, many *sogoshoku* women get burnt-out and quit their jobs in mid-career. According to the 2016 Kyodo News, 80% of the roughly 1000 women hired as *sogoshoku* after the EOL of 1986 had already quit the job as of 2016. Many women face the unsurmountable hurdles against careers that include notoriously long working hours, chronic shortage of daycare services for their children, and little help from husbands who also work long hours. It is also known that some employers place subtle or outright pressure on women to quit when they become pregnant. Several young female interviewees who were single in Sekai noted that although they actually want to marry, having a husband, children or aging in-laws at home while working as *sogoshoku* means that they would have to endure double or triple shifts, which was not realistic.

Women used to account for about 40% of all regular employees in Sekai before 2011, but among women, only 16% were *sogoshoku*, and only 6% of women were managers, while 78% were *ippanshoku*. The percentage of female managers (defined as section chiefs or above) among all managers stood at 10.6% in 2011, not so different from the 2005 number at 10.1%.

These ratios improved steadily, especially after the company began the GD policy in 2013, and in 2015, 13% of female regulars were listed as managers, 30% were *sogoshoku*, and 57% were *ippanshoku*. The company also doubled the number of female *sogoshoku* recruits to 30% of the total hires in 2015.

Besides *sogoshoku* and *ippanshoku*, there exist a vast number of non-regulars, called *nikkyu-gekkyusha* (full-time, daily workers – who receive salaries and limited bonus), *nikkyu-sha* (day workers, full-time or part-time, on specific contracts, no bonus, with no job security) and *jikankyu* (hourly) workers who work on ad hoc or hourly base.

Nihon Seisansei Honbu (Japan Productivity Center) survey of 3000 companies regarding the women's motivation for upward career advancement (Nihon Seisansei Honbu 2015) indicated that 70% of the companies that participated in the survey replied that women's own attitudes contributed to their lack of career advancement, stating that even though chances for professional advancement exist, many women do not consider career advancement and/or even remaining in employment an attractive or viable option. Thus, they blame the women's lack of motivation, without changing the male-centric working conditions.

A 2017 survey of newly hired workers, by the same Japan Productivity Center, indicated that 30% of newly hired women wanted to become at least section chiefs. This was quite an increase from the previous year's figure of 18.9%. At the same time, however, 29% of newly hired female workers in the 2017 survey did not wish to become managers at all (up from 25.5%). Thus, the newly hired women's attitudes

toward career are being bifurcated. This phenomenon coincided with the attitudes of all newly hired regulars, male and female regarding the work-life. Seventy-four percent wanted to work for companies that offer only a few hours of overtime so that they could enjoy their own free time. When asked about the reasons for them to work, these youngsters replied that they work to enjoy life (41.5% up from 37%). This rate (41.5%) was the highest since the survey started 44 years ago. Only 10% of the young wished to become president. Instead of seeking promotion, they would rather develop their own individual competence (33.2% up from 30% in 2016) (Nihon Seisensei Honbu, 2017).

At the base of the above-mentioned Japanese young's opinions lies a serious critique of the conventional HR management. Until rather recently, large Japanese firms such as Sekai exercised a highly male-centric system of hiring, evaluating and promoting male and female workers, who were also categorically and financially differentiated. Leaving a majority of female workers as non-careers or as non-regular contractual workers, management also valorized (mostly male) *sogoshoku* employees and male managers' total dedication to work. These people had no choice but to accept any task assignments and job transfers, requests for overtime and weekend work, in exchange of long-term job security, tenure, and seniority-based promotion. Those who prospered such employment arrangements to become the executives tended to approve this gendered arrangements, values, and ideas, because organizational norms were also directly linked to societal norms that applauded the masculine validity as a bread-earner, and approved the gendered division of labor in production and reproduction.

Thus, a serious attempt at introducing organizational transformation for gender equality requires a serious retooling of the above-mentioned, entrenched *habitus* of business men and women.

After several *karoshi* (death by overwork) by exhausted workers were reported, even among large firms such as Dentsu, Japan's labor bureaus fortified its auditing power to enforce legal compliance regarding overwork. In 2017, the Ministry of Health and Labor publicly announced a list of 330 companies that violated the labor laws. The Ministry in a typically Japanese fashion launched a "shame campaign" by openly publicizing the wrong-doings of these companies, and declared that it would update the list of "black companies" every month.

In addition, as Japan's unemployment rate declined to 3% in 2016–2017, a severe labor shortage was predicted, particularly in such labor-intensive industries as construction, logistics, service, transportation, and restaurant businesses. These firms had to raise hourly wages, and yet they could no longer find enough non-regular helpers. Under these circumstances, Japanese management has finally begun to pay more attention to improving working conditions for non-regulars and to adopting more diversity-friendly policies.

In March 2014, the Employment Insurance Act was partially revised to facilitate both men and women to take child care leave. The benefit rate for paternity and maternity leave was consequently raised from 50% to 67% of wage for the first six months of the child care leave. These benefits are tax exempt, and social insurance premiums are also waived during child care leave. Therefore, the actual amount paid is around 80% of the pre-leave take-home pay. In addition, the Act on Welfare of Workers Who Take Care of Children or Other Family Members including Child Care and Family Care

Leave was revised in March 2016, making it easier for people to balance their work and child/family care. However, it is still overwhelmingly mothers who take parental leave. Very rarely father takes such leave. In 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launched a “work style reform” panel seeking to make time off more alluring for Japanese workers (*Japan Times*, 2017). The 22-member panel included 9 ministers and the heads of *Keidanren* (The Japan Business Federation), and *Rengo* (the Japanese Trade Union Confederation). In spring of 2017, the panel produced a report that recommended to revise labor laws capping overtime at 100 hours a month and improving conditions for non-regular workers.

In 2016, *josei katsuyaku sokushin ho*, or the Law to Promote Women was enacted. The law that took full effect in spring of 2017 requires firms with more than 300 employees (numbering around 15,000 across the nation) to assess the ratio of women in their recruitment and among the managerial ranks, to set numerical targets to improve the ratios, and to publicly disclose plans to increase the number of women in management.

The government also announced that it is essential for Japanese executives and managers to reform their work culture. The following chapter will show how Sekai Foods in this political environment has attempted to modify its corporate culture, and its members oft-unconscious bias to endorse the status quo, where the male should work long hours to bring in corporate profits, while female workers in general should fulfill supporting functions and stay in the lower rungs of the corporate promotion ladder.

Sekai's GD Implementation

The company began its diversity policy in 2013, partly to respond to the *womanomics* initiative, but more importantly, to improve its corporate productivity and economic performance. The most enthusiastic GD-supporter was its 70-year-old Chairman, Mr Wataru Dote. In 2011, Chairman Dote became an outside board member of a progressive confectionary company that had already introduced GD initiatives and was producing healthy bottom-line results. Mr Dote believed that GD would bring forth productivity improvement, and in 2013 appointed a relatively young 54-year-old Mr Muramachi as Sekai's new President. At the same time, Dote and Muramachi shared the CEO position. Together they began working on new ways of organizational transformation.

Anthropologists tend to view the company that processes a unique web of symbols, images, stories, meanings, lexicons, and myths every day. In 2013, all Sekai executives were middle-aged men who had worked for the same company for many decades. Sekai has been their only employer. The fact that they were executives meant that they had built their career successfully and had developed a more or less integrated schematic frame of reference or the *habitus* as to “how to think” and “how to feel” as Sekai's executives. Most of them saw little reason to change the system that had given them personal success and reward. These Sekai men shared a stable and well-established “how to think/feel” connectivity.

Therefore, in order to transform such a mindset, one needs a drastic and impactful jolt from the environment, such as a major culture shock. It must be compelling, not too repulsive.

In creating such a shock, Sekai leaders had to devise new signs, symbols, metaphors, and tales that played key roles in new learning. First, the leader introduced a tale of crisis and urgency.

The tale of threats was followed by a story of why Sekai needed a break from the conventional mode of managing business. The message of eminent danger must be given by magical messengers, who have to be highly respected and credible. Thus, it is vital for a strong and visible leader to guide the people experiencing the cultural shock.

At the time of collective crisis, the concept of magic is often invoked. When the very existence of the community is threatened, a new level of consciousness can be raised through advocating for “magical” or “unconventional practice”. Common examples of magic are the miraculous restoration of health or protection from danger. In order for magic to work, one must first sense existential crisis or serious threats that cannot be solved by the conventional methods and practices.

Chairman Dote had earned much credibility and respect, while President Muramachi gave new energy to break from the convention. They formulated crisis-magic messages, as well as a new lexicon in their effort to shift the people’s *habitus*. First, they began inserting a new *foreign* word *daiba-shitei* or “diversity” routinely in their speeches and reports. For example, Chairman Dote’s messages usually began with his reflection about how the company was established some 60 years ago in the ashes of post WWII Japan, how Sekai evolved and grew because of hard work of employees, and how it now faced enormous challenges such as fierce global competition, price wars, shrinking domestic markets, and technological shifts. Dote then forewarned about the complacency of managers and workers, raising his tone and noting that if Sekai continued to do business as usual, the company would soon die. After emitting this strong message of crisis, his tone shifted as he introduced reasons why Sekai *men* alone could not save the company and why tapping into the underutilized talents of so many qualified Sekai women could give the company a great boost of productivity and why *diaba-shitei* would foster inclusive growth in the coming years. The chairman urged managers to abandon the old monolithic, male-centric, ways of endorsing the long hours of work, of regarding women merely as their assistants, and valorizing the total dedication to the company, without healthy work-life balance. The leader then asked them to emphasize productivity enhancement instead of overtime, to open up promotional opportunities for capable women, and to reinvent themselves as new human-centric leaders of change. Dote and Muramachi then explained the diversity plan in some details, telling the audience that GD was a readily available and effective measure to revitalize the organization. The new policy aims at improving productivity per hour, eliminating unnecessary overtime, creating a better work-life balance, producing innovative new products. Chairman Dote then gave a message of hope, noting that with diversity plans the company will be able to improve its core corporate values, uplift the ROAs and ROIs, offer challenging jobs, good pays, and job security to all employees, and fulfill its social responsibilities. He painted an idealistic and glorified image of Sekai’s promised land, where the firm would become a successful global food manufacturer and that the next generation of Sekai people will be able to celebrate its 100th anniversary in 40 years.

All Sekai managers had to go through this “diversity” gig during corporate rituals and ceremonial occasions such as the company’s annual ceremony to

welcome new hires in April, weekly executive meetings, power breakfast meetings, regional sales meetings, training seminars, and all-hands gatherings before employees got semi-annual bonuses. The Sekai key people were repeatedly and consistently exposed to the *daiba-shitei* messages, and they were asked to relay these messages to their own divisions and units.

The rank-and-file Sekai people felt that the direction of the company was somehow shifting. However, most of them were not sure which way the company was going in concrete terms. Very early in the following year, the two CEOs introduced two new visibly impactful signs that shaken the existing patriarchal *habitus*, when two new female directors, this author and the vice-director of R&D, were appointed as new board members and walked into the previously all-male boardroom. The photos of these women, their bios, and interview transcripts as well as the afore-mentioned D-speeches by the top leaders were widely distributed via podcasts, home pages, in-house magazines, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) documents, annual reports, and other formal and informal media. Next, President Muramachi sent another ground-breaking news, announcing the new appointment of Mrs Sakuragi to become Sekai's first female Finance Executive Director or CFO. Mrs Sakuragi was a 59-year-old divorced mother of two sons, who joined a small affiliated company of Sekai as a bookkeeper. She was not only a woman but was a mid-career hire. Sakuragi was later transferred to Sekai's production facilities and was soon promoted to the section chief there, before becoming assistant director of the human resource department at the head office two years ago. She was to supervise the compilation of all financial reports, and to add her signature next to that of the president in the official corporate reports and documents. In lieu of the firm's seniority promotion rule, her relatively quick rise was quite unconventional. Several male directors complained in private that she was very inexperienced and this appointment was quite "premature". Nevertheless, the promotion of these three women, one after another, provided a very strong signal of change.

Every repetition of environmental stimuli such as the above-mentioned shocks to the existing *habitus* deepens the managers' learning and strengthens their brains' new pathways of neurological connectivity. This process is called "brain plasticity". Studies of the brain plasticity show that the adult brain is much more flexible and capable of learning and growth than previously thought. Brain plasticity is directly linked with development of new neural pathways and synaptic connectivity related to new cultural learning and task accomplishment. These findings point to a potent device for creating a breakthrough in the Sekai managers' brains, for D-affordance. According to Gibson, "affordance" is an action possibility available in the environment to an individual (1979).

More new signs of change were on their ways. Japan's new Corporate Governance Code encouraged companies to use external board membership. Thus, Sekai in 2015 added two external male directors. One was a US educated professor of marketing, and the other businessman headed an international trading company, both of whom were strong advocates of gender equality at work. The new composition of the corporate board disturbed Sekai executives' conventional *habitus* for exclusively internal promotion of board members. As a result, Sekai's newly created board in 2015 consisted of 2 male and 1 female outside directors, 13 male and 1 female insiders, with 2 internal male and 2 external male auditors.

After the successful reshuffling of the board, Sekai top management identified several junior female candidates and encouraged them to move up at least to the section chief's position. However, this time, they hit resistance and protest, not so much from male managers but from female candidates themselves. These *sogoshoku* women would rather stay as they were doing the same work in the same division in the same work location. They did not want promotion nor job transfers. Many of them did not feel confident deliver an appropriate performance, and/or feel uneasy over the new obligations it would bring. Instead of pursuing careers, they preferred to marry and have kids and to lead less stressful life, they said.

As the result, the following table of the ratio of female and male managers shows that there was a very small increase in the number of female section chiefs, from 8 in 2015 to 10 in 2016. At the same time, one notices a rather dramatic *decrease* of male section chiefs (from 193 in 2015 down to 176 in 2016), which artificially increased the percentage of female section chiefs from 4.0% in 2015 to 5.4% in 2016. The percentage of female assistant directors stayed at 3.3%, and directors, 2.4% (Table 1).

In an interview with the author, Chairman Dote stated that he wished to increase the percentage of female section chiefs to 10% by 2018. However, it turned out to be far more difficult that he had originally anticipated. To address this problem, the company began several career-orientation seminars specifically targeting *sogoshoku* and long-term *ippanshoku* women.

In tandem with the above efforts, Sekai leaders decided to launch a new Diversity Promotion Committee in order to oversee the implementation of the GD task plans. The company internally appointed 14 members from different departments, with HR manager Nishikawa as the committee chair. Nishikawa was supported by four executive advisors including the two female board members. The rest of the committee members came from personnel, CSR (corporate social responsibility), R&D, field operations, and an affiliate firm. There were a total of seven female members. The committee met once a month for two hours, and discussion took more in the form of information-sharing rather than generating strategies. During the first few meetings, the female participants tended to be reticent, not knowing where to turn. Some male advisors on the other hand were vocal. One male advisor even suggested that the GD campaign should focus on units with a large number of female managerial cadres rather than targeting those with few females. Sekai's units with more women were mostly administrative, such as personnel, accounting, R&D, and logistics, while the units with very few female managerial cadres, such as sales and manufacturing operations were considered as the company's core units of profit-making with fast-career tracks. After the initial few committee meetings, some female participants expressed in private that they were shocked by some male managers' lack of understanding of the GD mission. Sensing a potential gender-based perception gap, the committee agreed that the committee's first order of business should be fact-finding. Consequently, it conducted a company-wide questionnaire survey regarding the employee's awareness of the new D-policy, opinions about the work climate, career prospect, and job satisfaction. The committee examined the results by deploying a SWOT analysis, evaluating the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding Sekai people's career motivation and gender equality at work.

The questionnaire surveys revealed that there was indeed gender gap in the above items. Only 40% of full-time female regulars wanted to work until retirement, in

Table 1. Sekai company's numbers and percentages of managers 2014–2016

Year	Total No. of managers			Internal directors			Assistant directors			Section chiefs		
	No. of male	No. of female	% of female	No. of male	No of female	% of female	No. of male	No. of female	% of female	No. of male	No. of female	% of female
2014	295	10	3.0	47	0	0	62	2	3.1	186	8	4.1
2015	295	11	3.6	42	1	2.3	60	2	3.2	193	8	4.0
2016	275	13	4.5	41	2	2.4	58	2	3.3	176	10	5.4

contrast to almost 90% of male regulars. The degree of loyalty to the company by females was about half of that of males. The survey findings revealed that there existed many disparate understandings and methods of D-implementation at local levels and that different units set different priorities, goals, and targets that might not have anything to do with the D-policies that the committee was envisioning. Discussion as to whether the committee should use a centralized approach or encourage local diversify. As for its very core idea of promoting women, they met backlash from different quarters, where a large number of respondents stated that instead of focusing on women, the new D-policy should tackle other key concerns of workers and managers. These key items included: the welfare of the senior (mostly male) workers and single transfers who were done by mostly male *sogoshoku* and managers. They were also concerned about the workers' long working hours and excessive overtime. These respondents argued that before one could reform gender issues for women, there were so many other issues related to how they were asked to work. They proposed that the company should change its habitus to valorize Sekai men who prioritize work for the company over everything else. The staff of some local units also complained that the D-bureaucrats of the head office was overburdening the local unit unnecessarily instead to encouraging them to concentrate their effort in profit-making. They argued that the committee should follow Sekai's conventional way of *genba-shugi* that focused on field operations

While the D-committee, rather unsuccessfully, tried to amalgamate local units' priorities into the organization-wide D-priorities envisioned by the committee,

Months went by as the committee members held a series of brain-storming sessions and discussions to see if there was any way to resolve these issues. A comprehensive GD-implementation plan was slow to materialize as the committee was meeting once a month. Its slow progress frustrated the top leaders.

Despite the initially successful impact of emitting new GD-signs, the leaders realized that among the rank-and-file managers and employees, there still remained much confusion about the main GD goal and its urgency.

The committee since its inception struggled to move forward for one and a half year. Finally, Sekai leaders decided to disband the ineffectual D-committee and the chairman of the committee and Sekai's HR director to an overseas subsidiary. This was the first of GD-related causalities.

Having realized that the monthly committee structure was ineffective, Sekai leaders decided to create a more permanent fixture. In early spring of 2016, the company decided to establish a brand-new Diversity Promotion Office and placed it under the office of President. Sekai also announced that the members of the newly created D-office would be recruited internally through nomination and self-nomination, and that the final selection would be made by a team of the top executives and president. This internal and more transparent recruitment procedure was another sign of change stirring up the conventional climate, where the personnel selection had been more opaque and the final decision had been left to the CEO.

Twenty-four people from diverse units applied with recommendations from superiors. Seven were selected for the positions: They were three male *sogoshoku*, each from personnel, R&D and compliance, and four female *sogoshoku* from logistics, operation, product development and an affiliate company. The staff were headed by newly promoted section Chief Miss Kazuko Sora who transferred from an operation

division; assistant director Mr Yukihiro Sato who came from compliance department, and board director Kiyoshi Kaku who used to be the head of the personnel division. The D-staff enthusiastically began formulating institutional reform plans in a separate, glass-walled office. Their workspace was another new arrangement because other Sekai people continued to work in an open gymnasium-like office space. Their first task was to respond to the Japanese government's initiative for promoting women in business. The new law required that companies with 301 or more employees had to create a three-year positive action plan by April 2016, that they must set numerical targets for promoting women in one of the following four areas: (1) increasing the share of women in recruitment; (2) reducing the difference in the duration of employment between men and women; (3) decreasing overtime and keeping appropriate working hours to encourage work-life balance; and (4) increasing the ratio of women in management positions. The government's request was quite modest as the company need to set target numbers only in one of the above-mentioned four areas.

After several deliberation sessions, Sekai's action plan was completed and submitted to the Labor Bureau. Sekai's action plan focused on increasing female recruitment, setting a new target of 30% of new recruits to be women, a jump from 10% to 15% in the past. In responding to the need to improve working conditions for both men and women, Sekai's action plan stated that the company would dramatically reduce overtime. At the same time, it was noteworthy that the company chose not to submit a target number for reducing the difference in employment years between men and women and that the company set no target number to promote females to managerial positions. The D-office distributed the GD plan company-wide through announcements, newsletters and corporate website.

In order to encourage women to think about long-term career choices, the office began organizing career-design seminars. These seminars encouraged pre-managerial *sogoshoku* and some long-term *ippanshoku* female participants to create career and life-plans as well as potential challenges and rewards. These seminars were well received: Indeed, several *ippanshoku* women decided to apply for *sogoshoku* promotion and two *sogoshoku* women decided to accept section-chief positions offered by the management.

Encouraged by the initial success, the G-office presented several "radical" proposals to different divisions for feedback. The D reform proposals included: (1) abolishment of the *ippanshoku-sogoshoku* divide, (2) reduction of overtime work, (3) enforcement of paid holidays, (4) paternity leave (5) single-transfer reform, (6) new hiring programs to recruit mid-careers from the open labor market, (7) revamping existing allowances, and (8) more career training seminars for female workers.

During the first year of its existence, the D-office identified two major pillars of D-initiatives: (1) to shift the mindset of key stakeholders (women and their bosses) by training and education, by giving new signs and learning opportunities and (2) to change existing human resources systems and programs.

Sekai's conventional norm had been that Sekai men had to work long hours for the company.

In order to give a major shock to the mindset that justified long working hours, the D-office asked the company to create a physical sign of change, in the form of a massive security gate at the entrance that digitally recorded the comings and goings of all employees and managers with ID cards. The data were regularly tabulated

and sent to each department head who monitored the working hours of every departmental member. If the number exceeded the set target, the manager and director in charge had to explain the reasons and to come up with a justification for the overtime. This strategy of having a visible gate with digital recording turned out to be quite impactful. For those working in mobile settings (such as sales people), the log-in/out system of their IT devices began to track their work hours accurately. The top management then evaluated each head's job performance in realizing the professed corporate goal of reducing overtime. Soon after the implementation of this system, overtime began to decrease that also saved the company money.

In addition to linking the manager's evaluation to one of the GD goals of reducing overtime, the company also implemented "no-overtime day" when everyone had to leave the office at the closing time of 5:30PM. Nobody was allowed to stay behind.

Feeling empowered by these successes, the D-office moved to change several key systems and programs that would directly affect the people's work practice. However, they faced much resistance in doing so. Major disputes between D-office and other units were exchanged in the following areas.

1. *Tanshin-funin* (single transfer) regulations and compensations,
2. Paternity (in addition to maternity) leaves,
3. Eldercare and family leaves,
4. Full utilization of paid vacation days,
5. Introduction of flexible work hours,
6. Revision of other various human resource provisions.

Resistance and Rear Guards

Anthropologist Takie Lebra analyzed the Japanese cultural logics in detail (2003).

She suggests that in order to understand the collective psyche of Japanese people in interaction with one another, the field researcher should examine at least four dimensions of their cultural logic and political dimensions, namely the *omote* (front), *soto* (outside), *uchi* (inside), and *ura* (backside). It is common in any organization that back/rear-end stories contradict the formal front and publicly presented tales. A corporate ethnographer must dig out many *uchi/ura* (inside/backside) stories as organizational members make sense of social reality. Ethnography in its rich description must be able to illustrate the relationship between the *uchi/ura* (inside/back) stories with *omote/soto* (front/outside) accounts that organizational members generate.

Despite the apparent calm in Sekai's *omote/soto* stories regarding the GD progress for public consumption, internally and privately loud complaints and sense of antagonism against D-office were expressed particularly from the staff of personnel, general affairs, information technology and from plants and local offices. For example, some personnel staff perceived that new D-kids had taken over consequential personnel issues despite the fact the above reform items should have been determined by personnel department. The personnel experts grumbled that D-staff did not even have a courtesy to ask their advice prior to creating their "half-baked" proposal.

Many local units were extremely busy and they resented when the new D-office in the headquarters repeatedly asked them to provide detailed information. When

local plant managers and sales office staff read the D-proposal, they thought that the proposal did not mesh well with the actual workings of their units. D-proposal did not consider their needs, they complained. While the local unit could have reworked the D-proposal to fit their own needs, they did not have time nor resources to do so. Complaints also came from the people of information technology who were inundated with requests for data from D-office.

Instead of confronting the D-office directly and solving issues, or complaining to the top, some units deployed covert forms of sabotage, by ignoring D-requests as non-priority items. After many months of waiting, the D-staff discovered that the original D-proposal were not even examined or read. While some D-office staff regretted the fact that they did not initiate more effective strategies for inter-unit collaboration, they also realized that many other units saw them as being too aloof. D-office staff felt that such *murahachibu* (excommunication) of the newly created office was totally unfair.

Anthropologist Takie Lebra suggested that the field researcher should examine at least four dimensions of the Japanese cultural logic in order to understand the motivation and the collective psyche of the people. These four dimensions are: the *omote* (front), *soto* (outside), *uchi* (inside), and *ura* (backside) of the Japanese psyche at work when they interact among themselves (Lebra, 2004). It is common in any organization to observe the co-existence of back/rear-end understanding of social reality that may contradict formal front/public explanation. Corporate ethnography with participant observation and open-ended interviews can dig many *uchilura* (inside/backside) stories that members present in order to make sense of the reality in relation to the *omote/soto* (front/outside) accounts that are for public consumption.

In the case of Sekai where schism between the D-office and other units deepened, members spread gossips and rumors throughout the organization exchanging many *uchilura* stories. The author learned that the above-mentioned, inter-departmental disagreement was not only due to sectionalism. In a deeper sense, the above-mentioned turf-battle also reflected a wider *habitus* gap between GD reformers and old-guards defending the status quo. Those managers and directors who had successfully followed the old HR rules to reach their current positions saw less need to changing the convention.

Struggles under the surface continued for almost a year. In spring of 2017, GD Director Kaku was asked to present the progress so far and his future GD plan to the corporate board. His presentation revealed that not a single HR reform project had been implemented and that many reform items were still "in-progress". The board expressed strong dissatisfaction. Two external directors asked Chairman Dote and President Muramachi to explain about Sekai's very slow progress.

The blame went straight to Mr Kaku whose leadership quality was questioned. Soon afterwards in May 2017 Mr Kaku was removed from the GD directorship and was transferred to an affiliated company, a sign of demotion.

President Muramachi confirmed publicly that he would appoint a new D-head within a month and that the D-office would continue its work as before. Chairman Dote affirmed that the leadership had wanted a much faster implementation of GD policies and the new leader would be needed for that purpose. Despite these reassurances, Mr Kaku's removal was a shocking blow to the morale of the D-office staff. They interpreted his demotion as the sign of the victory of other contending units, and felt disempowered. Some became worried about the GD prospect and about

their future career. Outside the D-office many interpreted the fall of Kaku as a new sign of D-trouble. D-sympathizers and female managers became more pessimistic while D-opponents and opportunists sitting on the fence, grinned and waited for the top leaders' next move.

Cultural learning never progresses smoothly or linearly. Rather, it moves with fits and starts, frequently generating unexpected consequences.

About the time when Sekai announced Mr Kaku's transfer in early 2017, an unusual incident erupted among a previously voiceless people in the Logistics Department. The incident initially had little to do with gender at work per se. It was about the company's dress code. Let us examine the background of this incident, subsequent social spectacles, and their symbolic significance.

Background of the *Jimufuku* Dress Code

Like many large companies, Sekai recruited new school graduates annually, instead of hiring mid-careers from an open labor market. After graduating from school or college in March, the newly hired began initial corporate training and orientation sessions together as members of the same corporate freshmen class. However, there were some symbolic differences among the cohort because all male (*sogoshoku* and *ippanshoku*) employees and *sogoshoku* women received a light blue jacket with the company's logo on the chest to wear while working. On the other hand, newly hired female *ippanshoku* received two sets of white blouses, navy-color bow-ties, blue vests, and blue skirts to wear in the office. The HR director stated that these clothes were not really the uniform but work-clothes or *jimufuku*. The company nevertheless encouraged employees to wear the attire inside the company building. If and when an *ippanshoku* woman became promoted to a *sogoshoku* position, she would return the *jimufuku* and received a blue jacket instead. In 2016, the cost of providing the two sets of *jimufuku* was about \$300 per person.

The working day at the Sekai headquarters started promptly at 8:30 AM. When most male employees, managers, and female *sogoshoku* arrive at the company building in the morning, they put on the company jacket over their private clothes. Many took off the blue jacket to go outside, and when they knew beforehand that they would go out, they arrived in private clothes or business suits.

The situation for female *ippanshoku* was more complicated. In the morning most *ippanshoku* women arrived at around 8:00AM or half an hour earlier than the official start of the day, in diverse styles of private clothes. They then moved to the 8th floor locker room where they spent at least 20 minutes changing into the afore-mentioned *jimufuku* and putting on the name tag. They checked their office attires in front of the life-size mirror before going to their respective work floors to start the day at 8:30AM. At the end of work day, they repeated the same dress-changing process in reverse and left the company gate at 5:30PM.

Some liked this engendered *jimufuku* ritual and others did not.¹⁰ For example, Ms Keiko Yanagawa joined the company as *ippanshoku* three years ago upon graduating from a private college. She did not like wearing *jimufuku* but had been tacitly but strongly encouraged to wear *jimufuku* by her male superior and also by her female co-workers.

Ms Yanagawa noted:

Ippanshoku women, regardless of their seniority, had to wear *jimufuku* while *ippanshoku* men did not need to do so. They just put on blue jackets. I don't understand why only women have to wear this old-fashioned ugly uniform as if we were high-school girls. I am a fashionista. I like to wear business attires of my own choice. Wearing *jimufuku* is demeaning.

On the other hand, 50-year-old *ippanshoku* Mrs Takayanagi stated:

I like wearing *jimufuku*. There is nothing wrong with it. Most of my colleagues like it too. We also get them free. Very economical. We do not need to dirty our own clothes. I do not see why some young women make such a big fuss over *jimufuku*.

Social Drama Initiated by Ippanshoku Working Mothers

According to Turner, social drama is defined as “an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs making for regular, orderly sequences of behavior” (Turner, 1985, p. 196). Turner's social drama theory has four phases of public action as follows: (1) The first stage involves breach of norm-governed social relations, followed by (2) crisis, during which the breach tends to widen so that representatives of order had to grapple with such a breach. (3) The third stage is redressive action that ranges from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal legal process in order to resolve crisis or to legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public ritual. (4) The final phase is re-integration of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of “irreparable schism” between the contesting parties (Turner, 1974). With the above theory of social drama in mind, let us examine a critical incident in the logistics department initiated by *ippanshoku* working mothers.

Prior to 2016, Sekai's logistics department had 1 male director, 2 male managers, 1 female section chief, 5 male and 3 female *sogoshoku*, 3 male and 11 female *ippanshoku*, and 4 female *haken* (dispatched) workers, most of who had been working in the same department for several years, each handling 3 or 4 accounts almost independently and expertly. In 2015, three *ippanshoku* women became pregnant and took one-year maternity leave that substantially decreased the staff size. The reduced workforce toiled from 8:30 till 5:30 non-stop with one-hour lunch break.

In November 2016, Director Toyama announced that new *haken-ho* (Labor Law concerning non-regular workers) was enacted in 2015. This law prohibited the company to keep non-regular *haken* workers in the same positions for more than three years without converting them to full-timers. Director Toyama noted that the logistics' four dispatched workers had worked in the same job for more than five years. In order to comply with the new labor regulation, Sekai management had decided to convert only one *haken* into a full-time position, and to dismiss the other three *haken* part-timers. There was an audible gasp among the staff, because these *haken* women, despite their non-regular and part-time status (with much lower hourly wages) had carried the same workload as the full-time regulars, handling more than 12 client-accounts on their own. The dismissal of these persons meant an added workload onto the already over-worked employees. Director Toyama quickly

added in his speech that the company would hire new personnel in April. However, everyone knew that it would take several years of training before such a novice would be able to handle complex logistic operations. When everyone was already overwhelmed with work, who would have time to train these newcomers?

Into this turmoil, three *ippanshoku* mothers came back to work after completing their maternity leave. In compliance with the law, the company had already granted these working mothers to work for shorter work hours (9:30–4:30). There was much work to be done in the logistics department. Afternoon around 4:00–5:00 PM could be quite chaotic when logistics staff answered calls and e-mails from clients, plant shipping departments and delivery companies to complete the last-minute businesses and/or to handle emergencies. Other logistics employees complained in private that they had to cover an additional volume of work left by these mothers, until the official closing time of 5:30. These mothers felt guilty in causing “troubles” to their colleagues. However, these mothers were also pressed time-wise because they had to juggle work-life responsibilities every day. At around 4:10 PM they stopped working, dashed to the locker room to change *jimufuku* and ran to catch a commuter train to pick up their babies at daycare centers. If they were late, these centers charged them penalty fees. It was particularly onerous when their babies got sick, since they did not have any relative close-by to look after the sick babies at home. Their husbands were also working overtime. They said that they were always harried and increasingly stressed. A month after their return to work, the working mothers concluded that the 20-minute *jimufuku* change twice a day was a waste of time.

One day in mid-February, the three mothers arrived at the work stations wearing private clothes instead of *jimufuku*. Old-timers’ eyebrows were raised, sarcastic remarks were murmured. Disapproving glances were cast in their direction. But nobody said anything directly to them. However, female employees spread the *jimufuku* saga as a hot gossip topic throughout the organization, while men were unconcerned about bickering and criticism against mothers among ladies. Working mothers continued to wear private clothes in the office.

In late February, 63-year-old Senior Director Mr Kiyoshi Kawakami happened to visit the logistics department. He immediately noticed the three women wearing private clothes. He called in Logistics Director Toyama and commented on Toyama’s insufficient supervision over his employees. Kawakami stated that Toyama had to draw a line (*kejime*) between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviors at work. Toyama apologized profusely. He immediately called in and reprimanded the three mothers, who felt distraught and humiliated. One cried in public. The publicly displayed drama was witnessed by everyone in the open office.

Soon, through the grapevine, different persons who were sympathetic to the plights of these mothers informed the corporate compliance officer, legal counsels, and the staff of the D-office. The legal counsel then advised Senior Director Kawakami in private and pointed out that the enforcement of *jimufuku* only in a particular segment of workers could be a possible violation of the labor law. Chairman and President also heard about this new development from their own female secretaries.

At the end, Director Kawakami and the top management agreed that the company’s dress code had to be clarified and that *jimufuku* should not be forced on *ippanshoku* women. They requested the HR office to create a new dress code for all employees.

The symbolic revolt initiated by the working mothers led to an unusual collaboration between the D-office and the personnel department. The two units collaborated to create the process of redress and re-integration (Turner, 1974, 1985). Sekai management chose informal mediation, avoiding potential threats of litigation.

The re-integration phase in the logistics department included the recognition of hard-working *ippanshoku* women. Director Toyama re-confirmed that *jimufuku* was not uniform. At the same time, in order to save the face of Senior Director Kawakami and to legitimize the conventional corporate hierarchy, the company went ahead to devise a new dress code, stating that people could wear private clothes with the company's blue jacket, but that the company asks employees to look professional. The new dress code argued that Sekai people should wear appropriate clothes suitable for their politico-economic positionality.

Prior to the above-mentioned critical incident that threatened the status quo, it had been the norm that Sekai's managerial cadres as well as female *sogoshoku* "men-women" wrapped their bodies in business suits or wore a company jacket and that these attires symbolized their higher status in the organization. *Ippanshoku* working mothers in a lower echelon on the other hand had to cover their maternal and lactating bodies in *jimufuku*. They also had to go through the ritual of demarcating work-life garbs twice a day. While in their work time-space, leaking liquid such as milk and tear in public were considered taboos (Douglas, 1966, 1986, Gatrell *et al.*, 2014). In the childless, antiseptic, air-conditioned work time-space, mothers cannot attend to their biological functions such as breast-milking. Professionals do not cry in public.

After this social drama, however, many *ippanshoku* women began wearing private clothes of multiple insignias, showing signs of individual choice and taste. They were quite noticeable in the firm's gymnasium-like open office where everyone could observe everyone else's attire choice, or more accurately everyone learned how to challenge the old rule. The field researcher could assess the degree of shift in the *ippanshoku* women's dress habitus, while they continue to work within the largely unchanged power hierarchy.

And yet an important shift took place after this social drama. Mr Hiroshi Hoshi had been heading the personnel department, who had experienced inter-departmental division that haunted the ill-fated Director Kaku of the D-office. After Mr Kaku's departure, the CEOs observed the staff of the D-office and the personnel department began to collaborate more fully to devise the new dress code. Then the top leaders rather cleverly appointed Mr Hoshi to oversee both the D-office and the personnel department, in their hope to eliminate the old rivalry. The newly organized D-office was incorporated into the larger influence and authority of the personnel department. Mr Hoshi used to be one of the powerful rear-guard forces against the D-office push for GD reform. As he became responsible for the D-office initiative, he earnestly began implementing several institutional reforms. During the rest of 2017, Mr Hoshi and his staff worked earnestly to expand GD reform plans in such key areas as hiring, training, promotion and evaluation, *tanshin-funin*, job classifications, and benefits. At the same time, the staff organized brain-storming sessions with other units of the company as well as establishing new GD training sessions.

Based on the above ethnographic study, we will examine key cultural elements in Sekai's GD-project toolkit in the following discussion. We will identify several key domains for cultural transformation that may become applicable to other projects.

Discussion: MRS-PARC

All of us have acquired certain patterns of neural connectivity in our brains through previous enculturation and socialization through both positive and negative enforcement. The established neural connectivity in our brains allows us to think, feel, express, remember, and act out their culture-specific values, identities, and *modus operandi* in specific ways.

Therefore, it is important to devise new pedagogical methodology to shift the *habitus*. The first method adopted by the two leaders was to create impactful signs and symbols to demonstrate the top's strong commitment to revamp the conventional ways of thinking and doing. New signs must be effectively executed through ideal channels of communication, and the messages must be transmitted by credible messenger-magicians who have already earned the respect of the existing members. Sekai's leaders adopted various new signs that included: the term *daiba-shitei* followed by the company-wide announcement of the new GD policy; the appointments of two female board members and one female CFO to the top positions. The move to promote women to top positions jolted the conventional thinking that had approved the seniority rule, internal promotion and long years of service for moving up the organization. Another big sign of change was the barrier gate and digital record-keepings of unnecessary overtime, recordings of employee work hours tied to managerial accountabilities, creation of D-committee, creation of D-office, promotion as well as demotion of some GD-related personnel, and finally major reforms in institutional practices such as hiring, training, evaluation, promotion, allowances, and benefits. We have noticed the importance of *repeated exposure* to cultural tasks such as GD that actually helped shift the wiring of the brain of the manager. We have also noticed unexpected outcomes and unforeseen developments as the GD policies began taking shapes in the organization.

These will be summarized as MRS-PARC that stands for: *M* = magical messages and messengers; *R* = rites of passage and rituals; *S* = signs and symbols; *P* = rewarding GD task performances; *A* = clarifying alternatives and affordance; *R* = facing rear guards and resistance; and *C* = communication, cooperation and complexity. MRS-PARC is created to identify essential factors for retooling the existing *habitus*.

Magical Messages and Messengers (M)

We have learned that Sekai managers experienced new environmental stimuli in a well *scripted* way. The script contained enough familiar plots and vocabulary to be accepted by the learners' current *habitus*. The magical messengers also had to be credible to the member-learners. In Sekai Foods, magical messages were given mostly by Chairman Dote, and later by his younger protégé President. The message began with a tale of the company's humble origin while acknowledging the virtue of hard work and corporate unity. The script moved to a tale of the looming crises and challenges that could not be solved by the conventional wisdom (and the existing *habitus* of men only). Thus, a more unconventional method (called GD) had to be adopted in order to attain success. The message of a promised land at the 100th-year anniversary was a vital element in stirring up the emotional commitment of the people. In setting the company's long-term

course of action for the future, the leaders declared, “Embrace the magic and let us reach the star!”

Rites of Passage and Rituals (R)

Trainee-managers experienced the same or similar stimuli repeatedly and consistently via organizational rituals and rites of passage. Rites of passage are ceremonies that mark important transitional periods in a person's life, and that usually involve teachings and ritual activities designed to strip individuals of their original roles (ritual deaths) and prepare them for new roles (rebirth). Rites of passages are defined as a step toward a new beginning. During these rites, the participants were encouraged to abandon the old way and embrace the new, to metaphorically die and get reborn.

Signs and Symbols (S)

The same and/or similar signs, symbols, and stories were repeated constantly and consistently. Signs usually contain multiple meanings and connotations, and are open to diverse ways of interpretation and translation. Therefore, the signs and symbols emitted by the leader had to be carefully devised, scripted, and delivered. After issuing these signs, not only formal but informal communication channels were monitored and explored, in order to influence the interpretive activities of messages being circulated throughout the organization.

Task Performance (P)

Managers had to accomplish specific tasks in relation to the new GD-message/stimuli. D-task performance was identified as producing tangible positive or negative results according to the set GD standard and goals. Linking the individual's promotion or demotion directly with GD accomplishments sent a strong message to everyone. The people began to identify new organizational heroes and heroines as well as villains, losers, and jesters, that in turn significantly influenced the individual brain's connectome development that often shifted behavioral manifestation and task performance.

Clarifying Alternatives and Affordance (A)

In order to progress in career, the manager-trainee needs to compare alternative routes or strategies of action or non-action. There is a useful concept called “affordance” in this regard. According to Gibson, “affordance” is an action possibility available in the environment to an individual, independent of the individual's ability to perceive this possibility. Additionally, Norman discusses affordance as follows:

... the term *affordance* refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used. [...] Affordances provide strong clues to the operations of things. Plates are for pushing. Knobs are for turning. Slots are for inserting things into. Balls are for throwing or bouncing. When affordances are taken advantage of, the user knows what to do just by looking: no picture, label, or instruction needed. (1988, p. 9)

Norman defines an affordance as something of both actual and perceived properties. An affordance exists relative to the action capabilities of particular actors. Therefore, to a steep staircase can have an affordance of “climbing” by an athlete but not so to an old person who is physically weak and therefore does not have the action possibility. Likewise, a steep corporate ladder cannot offer an affordance of “climbing” by a *sogoshoku* or *ippanshoku* woman who sees too many pitfalls on the way to the summit. “Hidden affordance” means that, although there are possibilities for action, these possibilities are not yet perceived by the actor. Because hidden affordance contains not-yet-perceived possibilities, such thinking can help change agents assessing the current field with a new vista, to discover and offer alternatives, such as new work-designs, better work-life balance, idea innovations, and possible career outcomes, that are not yet materialized.¹¹

Although originally conceived in individual psychology, this “affordance” concept can be applied to the organizational-level analysis in the present ethnographic study. For example, one could see the usefulness of the affordance concept when one examines how an *ippanshoku* woman wonders if she could afford to apply for promotion to *sogoshoku* or not. In order to persuade the actor (*ippanshoku* woman in this case) to “climb to *sogoshoku*”, one must first give clear information about the degree of affordance of such action against non-action, and their positive/negative consequences over time. If both the employee and her superior could explore her career choice together, they might identify both pros and cons of alternatives, while making hidden affordance more salient. In Sekai’s example, most women did not seek managerial promotion because they thought they could not afford it, due to the company’s original policies for long working hours, male-centric work habits, lack of work-life balance, and disregard for diversity. Because Sekai management was willing to remove some of the existing hurdles, and to encompass more diverse career trajectories, in coming years, new possibilities of affordance can be presented to the manager-trainees, some of who may begin ascending the corporate hierarchy.

Facing Unforeseen Results, Rear Guards, and Resistance (R)

Organizational learning never progresses in a unilineal fashion. It almost always moves with fits and starts. One should expect many unforeseen results, positive and negative, and face resistance and sabotage, often from unexpected corners. In defusing outright resistance, key stakeholders in Sekai identified the most serious areas of contention, while listening earnestly to the oppositional rear guards, in order to reach mutual satisfaction. When a serious and prolonged stalemate took place, top leaders had only a few choices of action – either to change the negotiation platform, to change the key personnel, or to force a top-down verdict on both parties. Sekai’s top leaders used all of the available devices, while maintaining the order of the existing power hierarchy.

Communication, Cooperation, and Complexity (C)

When the GD movement advanced to the next level, more activation pathways and channels were sought, while a larger number of the people were enticed to join the movement through various motivational tools and on-the-job training. Sekai’s three-year-old GD program was to get expanded and to permeate in all units of the

organization. This expansion and increased complexity would require a higher level of communication and coordination among an increasing number of stakeholders.

The new framework of MRS-PARC aims at how the individual manager's brains can accommodate new and firmer neural passages for reformatting their perception of reality and eventually for reconfiguring and reforming GD challenges in organizational practice.

Notes

1. According to the Labor statistics published by the Japanese government, 11.3% of Japanese managers (section chiefs and above) were women in 2014. In contrast, 47.1% of managers in the Philippines were women; 43.4% in the US; 36.1% in France; 35.4% in Sweden; 33.8% in England; 33.7% in Singapore; 31% in Hong Kong; 28.8% in Germany; and 28.2% in Thailand.
2. Bourdieu sees power as culturally and symbolically created, and constantly re-legitimized through an interplay of agency and structure. The main way this happens is through what he calls "habitus" or socialized norms or tendencies that guide behavior and thinking. Habitus is the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them. Through years of service and professionalization, Japanese managers possess certain kinds of habitus shared by fellow managers. Navarro explains that habitus is created through a social, rather than individual process leading to patterns that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Habitus "is not fixed or permanent, and *can be changed under unexpected situations*" (underlined and italic by the author) (2006, p. 16). Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). In this sense, habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously, "without any deliberate pursuit of coherence ... without any conscious concentration" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170).
3. OECD (2017), Labor force participation rate (indicator). doi: 10.1787/8a801325-en (Accessed on 3 May 2017). The labor force participation rates are calculated as the labor force divided by the total working-age population. The working-age population refers to people aged 15–64.
4. I would like to thank Sekai leaders and people for their personal support while I conducted this ethnographic study. Without their inputs, this study would have never come to fruition. My gratitude also goes to the funding agencies for this research, that included the College of William and Mary Faculty Research fund, Reves Center of International Studies, and the International Forum of Business and Anthropology.
5. During the 1950s–1970s, companies "utilized" young women with low pay in assembly and clerical work, who assisted male workers on life-long, and seniority-based employment scale. Young women were encouraged to resign at the time of marriage, before their wages inched up due to seniority. The companies replace them with a new batch of young female laborers. Meanwhile, the newly married women who quit the job moved to "unpaid" family care at home, and they supported husbands who continued to work as sole-bread earners. This highly gendered division of labor worked well for the family who could ride Japan's rapid economic growth in the 1960s to the late 1980s. However, during a prolonged recession that followed, in the 1990s–2000s, even male workers began to find it difficult to obtain long-term job security and steady wage-increase. Many families needed supplementary income earned by wives.
6. The system of long-term job tenure for full-time male regulars was created when the life expectancy for Japanese males was about 70 years old. Today the average life expectancy for men is 80.5, and for women 86.8. Maintaining this system becomes increasingly costly for the firm.
7. The equal employment opportunity Law, enacted 1985 and took effect on 1 April 1986 initially lacked teeth because it only required companies to make efforts against discriminatory treatment in the recruitment, hiring, assignment, and promotion of workers for gender-based reasons. However, a 1999 amendment legally banned such discrimination, while subsequent revisions have also prohibited indirect forms

- of discrimination in promotion as well as unfair treatment for reasons involving marriage, pregnancy and childbirth.
8. Companies usually require women job candidates to commit to a track before hiring. In 2003, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) found this duality created only for female employees was “indirect discrimination”, because it could be used to conceal gender discrimination.
 9. *Tanshin-funin*, transfers continued to increase, and overseas single transfer, already a sizeable number: about 250,000 in 1992, continued to rise, while Japanese production facilities moved to developing countries. While *tanshin-funin* is rarely discussed in official documents, this form of personnel transfers between distant locations is both obligatory and frequent. *Tanshin-funin* is perhaps an ultimate form of paternal sacrifice to feed one’s family, and it disproportionately hits middle-aged men. A survey in the private sector found that 81.8% of *tanshin-funin* men are age 40 or over. There is also a strong relationship between the husband’s age and home ownership, as well as a higher incidence of dependent elderly. In my study of the overseas employees of one manufacturing operation in southern China, five middle-aged *tanshin-funin* men lived together in a condominium purchased by the company. One man brought his wife, but she returned home after seven days. According to my informants, common hazards of being *tanshin-funin* were loneliness, poor mental health, poor diet and excessive drinking. Some also engaged in extra-marital affairs or patronized prostitutes. A survey by the Prime Minister’s Office found that more than half of male employees in their thirties and forties would prefer not to be transferred. However, another survey found a surprisingly high degree of tolerance for the practice among *tanshin-funin* wives: 43% stated that the separation was not damaging to their marriage, compared to 20% who confessed anxiety over the extended separation. Of course, this may reveal a “response bias” (Japanese women are not supposed to complain) and the tradition of *gaman* (grin and bear it). But it may also be that except for needing their husbands’ pay checks, Japanese women find *tanshin-funin* much less stressful than men do.
 10. When this anthropologist entered this firm as their first outside female director, she as part of managerial team was given a jacket, given to male employees. However, she found the jacket’s cut tailored for the male body was ill-fitted to her curvy body, and felt uncomfortable. Thus, she continued to wear her own clothes even in such occasions as corporate ceremonies and board meetings, where everyone (all men) and the other female board member wore the jacket. This anthropologist-board member liked to wear colorful red dresses and pants, and her attire-habitus must have been disruptive to the established Sekai normative practice, and possibly offensive to the eye of some conservative executives, but no executives commented this to her. On the other hand, she was surprised that many younger male and female workers commented on her private outfits. It took a while for her to learn that no one was supposed to wear the company jacket outside of the company, particularly if one meets with important clients or stakeholders. In such occasions, the attire should be a business suit and a tie, or in her case a business suit. She then wondered what rules would apply to *ippanshoku jimufuku* when they need to go out of the building, since it was not that easy to switch back and force *jimufuku* and business attires.
 11. The so-called affordance theory was originally developed in cognitive psychology to explain diverse strategic actions and rationale taken by people. Affordances was defined as all “action possibilities” latent in the environment, objectively measurable and independent of the individual’s ability to recognize them, but always in relation to agents and therefore dependent on their capabilities. When one receives enough information about affordability that one can afford to do something, a direct link can be established between affordance perception and behavioral outcome.

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