

# **An Analysis of Bosses and Subordinates in Japanese Society**

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## **Introduction**

The Japanese Hierarchy system is an extremely important and vital aspect to the country of Japan. I think that it is something extremely important to not only Japanese people but also foreigners who are intending on business or even tourism in Japan. I plan on investigating this system and namely seeing how it affects Japanese people in all walks of life, and if the disadvantages of this system outweigh the advantages. The research questions I developed going into this were firstly “How are Japanese effected emotionally by this system of Hierarchy? (In school/work/etc.)?” Secondly “How effective is this system in business/sports/school/etc.?” I intend on delving into how practical a society based on hierarchy is, and I am extremely intrigued at how this could potentially be an extremely important factor in success or failure in various aspects of Japanese society. The method that I will be using will be through a significant research through books and articles. Through the book *Japanese Business Culture and Practices* (2005) and the article *Has work motivation among japanese workers declined?*, I will delve into the various aspects of business culture, the stiff seniority that is practiced there, and whether the enthusiasm of Japanese businessmen is declining. Through the articles: *Learning to get drunk* and *Bukatsudo* I will be researching how the structural system is present and it’s effects into school activities and sports in Japan.

### **The Clubs, Sports and School System’s Hierarchy**

We can see the vertical structure in Japan practically everywhere in day to day life. A good starting point into how this complex system of the group over the individual begins straight from a child’s education. However, what is very significant in the formation of this group ethos

is the clubs activities. Even though this system thrusts these children into a very strict and hierarchical structure, it does not completely drive away an individual's free will. For instance they can still chose the clubs they want to join, and also be able to individually succeed (Cave, 2004, pg. 385). There is of course always individual success through group related activities. However, a strong saying in Japan is “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down”. So perhaps individual success can be achieved and praised, but in a very roundabout way.

The complete seriousness and commitment these children have to clubs, especially sports clubs in particular cannot be overstated. Students will normally spend most of their day after school finishes practicing in their clubs (Cave, 2004, pg. 385). Whether rain, sun or snow this commitment is held, and I see it as very vital in the mindset that these students have. That the individual's temporary pain is for the sake of the clubs, the groups benefit.

This pain for gain is not so much solely for the sake of the group, but namely for the development of the child’s social identity in the Japanese society as a whole. From participating in these clubs, it is almost a preparation for the children to get into the even harsher reality of Japanese business, no matter what field. They will learn through their “senpai and kohai” or rather, their juniors and seniors that a strict balance of power must always be held (McDonald, “Learning to get drunk”). There is of course a reason why the students won’t simply throw away the system if it appears to be so strict and foreboding. I see from this that this vertical structure has it’s merits, and from the very beginning in schools it’s merits can even be seen. So perhaps to a foreigner it seems completely ridiculous, however it is clear that the benefits outweigh the potential downsides for any system in society to stay in place.

The idea of this hierarchal structure in education has been around since the days of the samurai (Cave, 2004, pg. 386). Within early education seen in Japan there was implemented these idea's of clubs and cooperation in physical education. Almost like nowadays you can see a large variety of clubs, back then, especially going into the Meiji era you could see a move towards these club environments. The reasons behind this of course were not only to train children physically, but mentally and socially as well. They had bonded under difficult training and have had to work hard through a system of hierarchy, a fairly militaristic idea that pervaded the mentality at the time. I believe this for the most part is extremely relevant in today's Japanese education system. This tradition of hierarchy and the many social factors surrounding it are taught to children from a young age.

### **Clubs and Education in a strict Vertical Structure**

Historically, the relationship between the "senpai and kohai" or juniors and seniors in club environments had been pretty much equivalent to bosses and workers in a company (Cave, 2004, pg. 390). The area's where students would train would be considered very important, they would practically treat them as dojo's. The senpai would always be the instructors and teachers in these environments and would normally conduct strict discipline. Physical abuse and hazing was used often and even in these school environments the hierarchy was taken very seriously. I can see this connection very clearly between our modern day clubs in Japanese schools, as there are these ideas of discipline and hierarchy strictly followed. It is very akin to a samurai mindset, with the superiors commanding and punishing the juniors below them.

The Japanese clubs are very akin to many Japanese companies, and the students learn many of the social skills within these clubs to be better prepared for working in a company later

in life (Cave, 2004, pg. 396). There are many structures that are followed at these clubs such as teachers being supervisors at the highest level, yet not being involved as much as the senpai who work the hardest as the bosses and leaders. Then you go down the grades until the lowest level, and everyone can understand their place. I see how this can be connected to companies especially on a social level beyond simple work ethic. For example there is always the formalities involved in business, such as the concepts as maintaining harmony by making tea or using the proper forms of language for your senpai and kohai. As well you see the treatment of others with respect and the proper manners to use in formal settings.

The collectivist mindset of Japan, how we can succeed by working together and helping each other is fostered strongly in the education system and club activities (Cave, 2004, pg. 403). The students not only learn this lesson of Japanese society, however they also learn about themselves. The club systems of course are heavily structured, yet, like companies there is of course periods of rest and companionship. I see that there is a direct link between the Japanese companies periods of drinking and social honesty or “honne” and the periods in which the students can be themselves and express their true intentions. I believe that this is expressed a lot in Japanese society, where even though strict formalities are normally followed, there are always times of rest and have an honest conversation.

### **Seniority in Sports and Society**

Sports clubs are very important in the Japanese school system, they are quite literally the most popular kind of club as well, generally numbering much more than other kinds of clubs (Cave, 2004, pg. 395). Also, the sports clubs make and bring in a lot more money to the schools. I believe that this goes to show how vital the sports clubs are to not only the education system,

but to the fundamental growth of the Japanese students. When you have a system devoting a lot of time and effort to a system in the educational system it is clear that it is more than just an afterschool activity.

In these sports clubs there was a major driver of not only a systemic hierarchy, but as well many of the aspects of Japanese mind that stem off of that. For example, normally in sports clubs there is a substantial lack of competition and rewarding individual merits (Cave, 2004, pg. 407). This is incredibly surprising and quite different than the training styles in other countries such as America. However, it expresses the Japanese mind quite effectively. There is a saying in Japan that “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” and there is a huge emphasis of this in sports clubs, and Japanese society as a whole. The hierarchal system plays a major role in this as well, because even if a kohai is extremely good at a sport they cannot overshadow a senpai. Thus they must allow the senpai to overshadow them following how the seniority dictates. One of the main activities that is done in the Japanese sports clubs is repeating and practicing simple techniques and working to make everyone better at the base level. I see this reflected by much of the Japanese education system, even going back to classrooms where practice and repetition are key concepts followed.

Drinking in these kinds of clubs definitely reflects the business drinking culture seen in most Japanese companies. One of the key comparisons seen is how during drinking parties senpai and kohai titles are not held as strictly, and usually all of the students can express their true feelings (McDonald, 2014). This is incredibly similar to how the drinking culture of business is a chance for businessmen to express their true feelings to their colleagues or superiors, and where much honest comments on projects or ideas can be made. This of course I

see as another facet of the Japanese mind, the concept of Honne and Tatemae or rather the public and private faces. Because the hierarchal system is so strict it's difficult for honest feedback or complaints between bosses and subordinates or senpai and kohai. However, through the context of drinking the workers or kohai can save face by saying they were drunk and could not control themselves. This way harmony is maintained while simultaneously promoting the true feelings between different vertical levels.

### **The Japanese Hierarchy in Business**

To understand the seniority system that is seen so thoroughly in Japanese business, we must also understand the mindset of the Japanese businessman. Many people know that the Japanese work long and hard hours in companies and devote much of their time to their jobs. However the many social reasons behind this are not as well understood. Work in Japan has roots that delve into not only economic factors, but religious and social ones as well. For example, after the second World War the Japanese had to rebuild their economy and since they lacked many resources the Japanese businessman had to work that much harder (Alston, 2005, pg. 71). The mindset was that they were practically saving their country through their work in business, and though the task was difficult Japan managed to prosper. I see this as a deep connection to the samurai mindset that the businessmen hold. With this connection comes the strict discipline and hierarchy that keeps the Japanese businesses together, so even if it appears strict from the outside, I see it as a necessity to the Japanese economy.

There is a very strong loyalty held to the company in Japan, and there are many steps taken to maintain this loyalty (Alston, 2005, pg. 79). This loyalty stems from a need for people to be able to fit into the vertical structure, if a worker isn't loyal to his bosses than he can be



dangerous to the company. The education of Japanese students is very closely related to how a Japanese company will hire new recruits. Instead of other countries where companies search for specific skillsets, a Japanese company hires on the basis that a new recruit should be working at that company for the rest of their life. Thusly when hiring a company searches for “Jacks of all trades” or people who have a well rounded education so that they can fit into many different roles. On top of this Japanese companies look for people who will be loyal and trustworthy to the company. I see this as the vertical structure demanding people who can follow the strict boundaries, and be able to be integrated into the “uchi” or the group.

Now of course the Japanese system is generally based on seniority, however recently various companies in Japan have started moving towards a more merit based system. The merit based system however did not in all situations increase the motivation or enthusiasm that would be expected all around by a merit based system (Nakata, 2007). I see this as how well ingrained the Japanese concepts of seniority and the many courtesies that come with it are in the Japanese business setting. When you spend a majority of your life in an environment where you are unable or are criticised for outshining others and especially your senpai, this is definitely a difficult change to make.

### **Business Interaction in a Vertical Structure**

The first meeting and meetings are vital to maintain harmony through different vertical levels. The seniority structure has an immense role to play in the maintenance of this harmony. An example of this would be how in the first meeting and meetings in general between companies the majority of the talking is done by the subordinates, while the bosses say very little (Alston, 2005, pg. 79). This is a way for the bosses to express their intentions and ideas while

giving the work of talking to the people under them. By doing this it expresses the importance of understanding and harmony between boss and worker, so that everyone can be on the same page. Instead of the bosses saying everything and leaving the workers with no input.

Negotiation shows the roles of bosses and workers in a company as well. In a very similar way to meetings there are a number of presentations that take place during these negotiations, and it is the duty normally of the lower ranking workers to present and express the ideas of their bosses (Alston, 2005, pg. 114). This is done to firstly maintain harmony during these presentations by limiting the interruption or questions during a speech. This is because normally the presentation ideas are not particularly that of the person presenting, and they wouldn't be a prime person to consult on the topic. I see this as expressing the idea of the "older brother, younger brother" concept. The superiors are letting their workers have a chance to present ideas on their own, and gives them the opportunity to get more experience in meetings.

### **Systems of Business under a Strict Hierarchy**

The job security in Japan is far above that of other countries. In Japan it is very common for a person to work at the same job for their entire life, this is rooted in the idea that workers will be much more loyal to a company that they never expect to leave (Alston, 2005, pg. 81). A reason for this is that it promotes the hierarchal structure, by implying that if a worker stays at a company long enough and is loyal enough they will get a promotion. Another reason I see would be that it maintains harmony. For example, if an employee had to work with many of the same people everyday for the rest of their life, they wouldn't try and make grudges that would last with them and instead try and foster good relations.

The arrangement of an office in Japan is very fundamental to the hierarchal structure, where you have the lowest ranks sitting near the door, and at the opposite end you have the highest ranking superiors in the nicest chairs (Alston, 2005, pg. 86). This hierarchal structure while strict in appearance, aims at achieving various important Japanese social concepts. There is a strong group connection in Japan, where cooperation and teamwork is fundamental to the running of a company. I see this as well as promoting harmony among a group atmosphere. Since it is not only the job of a superior to command, but it's also to keep and maintain harmony. By having all of the members of a team next to each other, and team leaders can easily talk to other team leaders, it makes for very easy for information to flow throughout the office. As well it helps the enthusiasm and harmony when the workers are all literally working side by side as opposed to being in their individual desks.

In the Japanese corporations two fundamental traits are cherished more than any other, and that is "kiai and seishin" or will and determination (Alston, 2005, pg. 76). This is another facet of the vertical structure in Japanese companies. Since seniority dictates that employees need to practically work at a company for a lifetime in order to be promoted, traits like willpower are much more needed traits opposed to many technical skills. This ties in with the idea in Japan that if you can work hard enough and have the determination to do something you can do it. In the vertical structure this is a key driver for the superiors to make sure that their workers under them will do whatever is asked of them and never slack off.

### **Conclusion**

From much of where and how the hierarchy is seen in Japan, much of the Japanese mind comes out of a vertical structure. This can be seen this in the school settings and in the work

settings, how through the strict structure in place there is a strong need for many of these social concepts. Such as humble and honorific language between senpai and kohai, or boss and worker. Or the honne and tatemae seen in the office and in the bar. As well there is an immense focus on harmony to be kept in the vertical structure through lifetime employment and businesses that are practically family. Also seen is an “older brother younger brother concept” and the strong bond between superior and subordinate. All of these important facets of the Japanese mind are strongly rooted directly from this vertical structure.

There are many difficulties in life for the younger generations in Japan, as they have to deal with the most stress and are practically at the bottom of the social ladder in Japan. They are bossed around in school and in work, and simultaneously get the least amount of reward for their work. However on the other hand, younger people are more suited for this sort of hard life as opposed to older folk who can't work as much. So therefore the system is strict, but is very logical in how it treats the many generations. Younger people can work more so they earn less, and older people can't work as much and earn more. As well, the hard labor by younger folks pays off when they get older themselves, and have some authority of their own.

The vertical structure is a way of life in Japan and has been there for centuries, it is fundamentally tied to most aspects of Japanese society and is probably going to remain that way. It's not a perfect system, but if it's not broken don't fix it. Especially when it is tied to so many fundamental concepts of the Japanese society and culture, it is a great way to see the Japanese mind at work and how it functions throughout life.

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