A Day in the Life of a Japanese School Business Manager

By Richard H. Weeks

Tokyo—Unryu Haku emerges from his morning meeting with the bankers. He has just successfully negotiated an $18 million loan to purchase 1.5 acres of land adjacent to St. Mary's International School. The lot is scrappy but happens to be located in the city with the world's priciest real estate. Next, Haku will secure approval for the complex transaction from his headmaster and Board of Education, all of whom are members of the Brothers of Christian Instruction. The Christian Brothers will then ask their North American headquarters in Quebec for approval. From there, the request must receive the blessing from the order's home office in Rome.

The Christian Brothers desperately need the land for foreign language classrooms and athletic facilities for their Catholic boys' school. The Brothers of Christian Instruction, an order founded in 1817 to educate youth, established St. Mary's International School in 1954. Their fledgling day school of 30 students has grown steadily to more than 900 students. St. Mary's is 1 of about 30 international schools in Tokyo that educate the sons of both Japanese nationals and resident expatriates. It has the spirit and character of an American preparatory school.

Haku works between 80 and 90 hours a week as St. Mary's business manager. In recent weeks, much of that time has been devoted to various phases of the school's expansion project. Soon, Haku will lease three portable classrooms to ease the school's enrollment crunch. He will prepare construction documents with the school's architect and will meet with the school's attorney to draft legal documents. Haku commented, "The legal papers will be on about two pages. We are Japanese doing business with other Japanese. There is considerable trust in our relationships. If there are any problems, we will resolve them later, amicably."

Nemawashi is a Japanese business term that refers to the endless discussions between managers and workers before even the smallest changes are made to the way business is done. It is similar to consensus building elsewhere. "Nemawashi is
good, but sometimes it is easier to beg forgiveness afterward than to ask permission beforehand,” said Haku. Such was the case with Tokyo building inspectors after he constructed a third floor to one of the school’s buildings to house an elementary library.

Recruited in 1965 while still a student at Tokyo’s Sophia University, Haku was trained as an economist and had planned a career very different from school business management. While remaining with the same employer for 35 years is not unusual in Japan, it would be a remarkable tenure for a school business administrator elsewhere. After graduation, the Christian Brothers promoted Haku to business manager. He stated that his job description has never been changed: “My office is in the center of the school and I’m called upon to do everything.”

For Haku, “everything” includes meeting with newly recruited teachers each year and devoting several days to helping them find apartments suitable to their lifestyles. It also includes working closely with the school’s computer teacher to upgrade instructional technology without cumbersome bureaucratic planning. And it extends to maintaining good relations with the school’s neighbors—something he demonstrated recently by having the athletic field’s fence raised to 100 feet to prevent baseballs from breaking neighboring windows.

St. Mary’s headmaster, Brother Michel Jutras, is the school’s chief executive officer and is frequently on the road recruiting students and faculty. Haku serves as chief operating officer and works closely with staff, students, and parents in Brother Michel’s absence. “Parents of Japanese students are comfortable resolving problems with teachers directly. Non-Japanese parents want to go right to the top first,” Haku remarked. Haku serves as ex officio dean of faculty and students, meeting regularly with the non-union teachers’ association about faculty concerns.

“We’re very respected as educators in Japan. On the other hand, nobody really understands what I do,” declared Haku. The boys of St. Mary’s are probably unaware that Haku is responsible for their noontime meal. The school lunch program became a challenge several years ago. Haku finally contracted with an outside food service to feed the students from 72 countries, representing 30 religions and numerous cultures. “I can’t just print curry with rice on a menu. I must state beef curry, or chicken curry, or pork curry with rice.” One solution to the occasional crisis in the kitchen: “We always have backup sandwiches and spaghetti.”

Everyday more than 10 million commuters journey into the same general Tokyo business district in which St. Mary’s International School is located. Haku lives nearby in the Sengakuji neighborhood and walks only 5 minutes to work. The school owns 10 buses and transports most students to and from school. Busing is a big issue for Haku. It is a challenge to plan routes to cover Tokyo’s 150 square miles. Parents complain to Haku about the boys fighting on the buses and the limitless numbers of foreign expletives that they teach one another on the 1- to 2-hour ride home. And if a student misses the bus, Haku is the one to drive the student home. “I seldom finish work before 9:00 or 10:00 at night,” said Haku.

The administrative team at St. Mary’s consists of the headmaster, business manager, and three school principals. According to Haku, “Brother Michel and I enjoy the autonomy we have. The Board of Education does not micromanage our jobs.” Haku also works closely with St. Mary’s Mothers’ Association on numerous social functions and activities, but has been able to delegate budget preparation and bookkeeping to his assistant, Kunihito Takamichi.

Japanese professionals are measured, to a great extent, by their professional affiliations. Haku is one of several ASBO International members in Japan. His local ASBO affiliate includes Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and other Pacific Rim countries. The disparity in cultures and the geographical separation make it difficult for affiliate members to meet on a regular basis or find common ground. For instance, Haku laughs at the uselessness of such things as teacher wage-scale comparisons between Japan and South Korea. And at this point, there is no formal organization for business managers in Japan, although they do occasionally get together to socialize and share information.

As another busy day concludes for Haku, he is left drafting the $18 million loan proposal for the Board of Education while 10 million Japanese commuters head home from Tokyo, and 3 recent graduates of St. Mary’s International School drop by to visit their alma mater and greet its ever-present business manager.

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