



Numbers

So, it's January, and we begin another year of work here at Mokuhankan. There is a very large pile of work on my desk at the moment, so much that I wasn't able to perform one of my traditional turn of the year 'rituals' - creating the first draft of the summary spreadsheet of the closing year's income and expenses. Each year on January 1st (or the 2nd at latest), I finish entering the data on the final expenses, close off the previous year's bookkeeping, and am then able to see the important 'numbers'.

Now our overall situation is quite clear even without that spreadsheet: all our bills are paid, we have a comfortable little pad in our bank account, and we can't see the bottom of our order book. For the big picture, the 'numbers' are fine!

But what is being disguised by that overall positive outlook is a very severe imbalance in the productivity of the two major groups of printers working for us - those coming here to train and work, and the 'hired guns' who do our jobs in their own workroom. It's night and day between them. We are almost certainly losing money on every job that our printer trainees take on, and the fact that we are profitable overall is a demonstration of just how astonishingly efficient the professionals are.

None of this is a secret to the people working here, and it simply reflects the natural situation in any business of this sort. Beginners are not so productive - experienced workers are. The presumption is that the beginners gradually move up the ladder and take their place on the 'black' side of a ledger, rather than the 'red'.

But honestly speaking, I really have to wonder if that will actually happen in our case. One of the experienced printers visited here over the break, on a day while nobody else was here, and he and I swapped war stories and had a good long talk about the print publishing business. He told me some astonishing things ...

I have always known that we treat our beginners a lot more 'gently' than they did in the old days, but I was astounded to learn from him that on his very first day as an apprentice - when he had never so much as seen printer's tools, let alone practiced with them - he produced more than 400 prints for sale by the shop. None of our workers here have ever produced as many as 30 or so in a day. And we are speaking of prints of comparable complexity in terms of size, number of impressions, etc. etc. How can such a huge difference be explained? Were they supermen back in the old days?

It's all a matter of expectations. On that first day, they sat him down in front of a large stack of prepared paper, with blocks, pigments, and tools all ready. He was given a two or three minute demonstration, and then told to get to work. "You don't go home until they are done. Oh, and by the way; the cost of any spoiled sheets comes out of your pay."

He got to work, spying over at the other printers to try and figure out what to do. He told me about how he got started at it, very slowly at first, and a bit later - after beginning to get the hang of things - watching the clock, counting how many seconds it took him for each impression. He calculated that he would still be at it long into the night, so began to pace himself, and to adjust his movements, trying to figure out how to trim a second here, and a second there.

He got it done - 400 sheets, of a multi-coloured print. On time, and with a minimum of spoilage. On his first day.

But what is more astonishing than these raw numbers is what he said after I asked him what it had been like to work under such a horribly strict master. "Horrible? No way; he was a kind and gentle guy. We all liked him a lot."

When he and I then discussed whether or not I was being too soft on our trainees, he pointed out that in another workshop in which he has been working in recent years, and which - like me - treats the trainees with kid gloves, none of them - not one - has stayed more than a couple of years. There are currently two senior workers in their 60s, none in their 50s 40s or 30s, and only a couple of new trainees in their 20s. That place is like a tall tree in the forest, completely hollowed out, just waiting for the next storm to knock it over ...

Has there really been such a fundamental change in people over these short few decades? Or is it we - the leaders - who have changed?

Truly, people are capable of doing extraordinary things, given a few assumptions. There has to be a basic foundation in place, on which work can be done. There has to be a basic level of competency present, and of course suitable tools and resources. But most of all, there have to be clear goals, and strong motivation. The motivation may be internal (as it is these days for that man), or external (his master on that first day), but if this is present, there are no limits on what we can achieve.

I'm thinking that when everybody comes back for work in a few days, they might find a sheet with a few new 'guidelines' posted on the wall.

Right next to a new clock!

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