



Top Dog

We are now buried - and I mean that almost literally - in the construction work on the new shop we are planning to open this fall in downtown Tokyo. The first stages of the project involve taking down some walls and other 'deconstruction', so we are making a ridiculous mess. There have been a number of previous renovations done on this building, and it seems that each one simply built on top of the one before. As we take down a wall, we get a lesson - in reverse chronological order - in traditional Japanese construction techniques.

There are three of us doing this work: myself, my son-in-law loan, who has come over from Canada to help me out, and Lee-san, a young man who has done various jobs for me in the past couple of years, most notably helping make a batch of storage cases for my woodblock prints.

As we start each day's work, we have a little conference to plan out what to do, and the two of them naturally defer to me in the planning. After all, I am the owner of the business, I am the one who has created the 'master plan' for this whole venture, and I am the one who signs the cheques.

After I give a basic outline of what needs to be done, the three of us then set to work, sometimes individually on specific jobs, and sometimes working together on a task that needs more man-power.

loan has had plenty of experience with this kind of work back in Canada; he is a home-owner, so of course has done all kinds of work tearing out walls and building new ones. Lee-san hasn't done this before, but he is a good sharp guy, and catches on very quickly. The upshot is that I don't need to do any kind of 'hand-holding' here; these two guys just get the instructions, and get to work. Before I know it, they are looking for the next job.

This is a great relief for me. I'm trying to balance so many different jobs here at the moment that to have this kind of support - to be able to 'let go' and trust somebody to get a job done properly - is a fantastic help.

But there is a bit of a downside to this. Yesterday we were discussing how to get around a problem that had come up. I had thought about this in advance, and had 'Plan A' and 'Plan B' already drawn up on paper. I stood there mulling over the two, trying to decide which way to go, but Lee-san jumped in, "What if we do it this way ..." and outlined 'Plan C'.

It was clear instantly that his proposal was a much better way of tackling the problem that faced us, but what is a (Japanese) manager to do in this situation? You can't lose face by admitting that an 'underling' is smarter than you! That manager would probably say something like, "Well, I don't know; let's think about this part later ..." And of course when the time to make the decision comes around, somehow this new solution is now being presented by the manager ... Everybody is happy, and everybody is in the proper place.

But of course I'm not Japanese, and at this stage in life, am not in the slightest bit worried about pride or 'status'. I need all the help I can get! So when I heard his proposal, I lit up my face, punched him in the shoulder with glee, and we then got busy on the details of how to implement the new idea.

I may be the nominal Top Dog on this project, but hey, even Top Guns need good wingmen. With this team, the sky's the limit!

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