



♪ Going Home ... ♪

We all know a certain phrase that all parents use to their children, and which inevitably the children completely ignore: "Don't do as I do; Do as I say!"

We want our children to behave in a better way than we ourselves do, and we thus hope that they will follow our instructions, even though such instruction may contradict our own behaviour. But the end result is - of course - that the children follow the *model* rather than the spoken directions.

Well, recently I'm finding myself in the same situation here with our printmaking business. I have no children here to give instruction to, but I do have employees, and in just the same way that a parent hopes for 'better behaviour' from the kids, so do I hope for my employees.

It's about working hours. When I worked in a music shop back in Canada, so many years ago, the shop hours were clearly delineated; we were open from nine to five-thirty. And nine to five-thirty was also the working time for the employees who worked there. I was the manager, and I arrived maybe ten minutes before nine, unlocked the doors, and turned the lights on. Over the next few minutes, everybody strolled in, and the day's activity began, with the phone beginning to ring pretty much exactly on the stroke of nine, followed immediately by the first customers through the door.

In the late afternoon, the situation played out in reverse. On the stroke of five-thirty all the employees disappeared in a flash, except some unlucky one who might still be dealing with a customer. One of us hung the 'Closed' sign on the door, and - as soon as that final customer had left - I myself shut off all the lights, locked the door, and headed for the bus stop.

Japanese readers have of course heard such stories before, and consider them fantasy, but this was no fantasy; that was simply the way that the culture operated. People were hired and paid with the expectation that they would provide a certain amount of labour, and that's the amount that they gave. They all had other things to do in the evenings and weekends, and hanging around the shop after closing time was simply not on their menu.

Now - speaking in general terms - Japanese work culture expects more from employees. In the corporate world, anybody who watched the clock and tried to run off home at the 'official' time would be ostracized, and would certainly not last long with the company. We've all heard the stories: offices full of workers sitting at their computer screens late into the evening, each person unable to be the first to leave. Only when their section chief calls it a night can they also think about going home (or worse, being obligated to go out drinking with the colleagues.)

Here in Japan, I 'should' be basically operating by Japanese rules, and for the most part I do so, but this is one hill on which I am going to take a stand. I'm writing this on a Friday evening. I have just left the shop, spending the last few hours working there by myself after seeing off the young man who is helping with the final stages of construction.

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He hadn't wanted to leave, knowing that I would still be working late, but I sent him home anyway. An hour or so later he phoned: "Soccer practice for my son has been cancelled tomorrow. I'll head for the shop to help you ..."

I very much appreciated his gesture in offering to come in, but I said 'no', and when he pushed a bit more, I said 'no' even more firmly. We have an absolute ton of work to do, and he knows that, and I know that he knows that. But we will *a/ways* have a ton of work waiting for us. If I crack now, and let him start doing extra hours, there will be no end to it, and he will become a typical Japanese salaryman, only seeing his kids on Sunday (just as was the case with my next-door neighbour all during the years that his children were growing up.)

'When in Rome ...' they say, and perhaps that's good advice in general, but I'm going to try as hard as I can to make sure that the clocks in at least *one* building on our street tick-tock to a different rhythm!

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