

MARK LEE FORD

“We Japanese”

(or “How to Liberate Yourself from Foreigners at the Office”)

SECOND EDITION



“WE JAPANESE”

(or “*How to Liberate Yourself from Foreigners at the Office*”)

In this narrative *apologia* based on true events, a rising star manager turns to her *senpai*—her senior and mentor—for advice on how to solve an unyielding “foreigner problem” at their office.

His advice to her is resoundingly effective, but it comes with a devastating revelation. In a series of searing and penitent inward confessions, the veteran salaryman confronts the illusions—the religiosity—of the modern Japanese workplace that he was raised in, an institution in which he has become one of its high priests, and she, unknowingly, his acolyte.

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MARK LEE FORD

“We Japanese”

(or “How to Liberate Yourself from Foreigners at the Office”)

A NARRATIVE APOLOGIA

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY

LENNOX SAMUELS

THE MONEO COMPANY

“We Japanese”
(or “*How to Liberate Yourself from Foreigners at the Office*”)

Second Edition

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FOREWORD

Foreword by Lennox Samuels

INTRODUCTION

On its surface, “*We Japanese*” might read like a piece of dark workplace satire—a late-night conversation over tea in a quiet Tokyo office building, where a cynical corporate veteran attempts to steer a younger colleague, Shiori, through the shifting currents of corporate politics. Others might interpret it as an anti-Japanese polemic, and a hopelessly world-weary one at that. Yet to read this work as dramatic fiction or Japan bashing is to overlook my intended design.

“*We Japanese*” is a problem definition of a pivotal moment in Japan’s history. I based it on a true story, and decided that a structure loosely resembling the ancient narrative *apologia* is best for my purpose: to stimulate debate for creating solutions.

In it, a searing confession by a Gen X senior executive—the *apologia* (“The Defense”) and Shiori’s mentor—is taken under the crushing weight of institutional inertia. The setting of the executive’s office serves as the court, more like a crucible, where young Shiori functions as the *kategoria* (“The Attack”), the accuser from Gen Z whose frustration demands an explanation. As the drama unfolds between the *apologia* and the *kategoria*, Shiori’s mentor reacts to her incipient extremism, shrewdness, and even naïveté by unbosoming himself to the reader in a series of soliloquies.

The second edition pushes the text into the realm of a contemporary social critique about the mechanics of institutional and societal decline. Though much of what is revealed in the soliloquies can apply to cultures and eras having nothing to do with 21st Century Japan, I integrated current

Japanese sociopolitical shifts to give this version an immediate relevance to Japanese people, as well as to foreigners involved with Japan. After thirty-two years in Japan, I think (perhaps mistakenly so) that I am sufficiently familiar with Japan to dare the attempt, but I do not claim to be an expert on Japan or on any other country, including the one of my birth.

By linking Shiori's generational posturing to the political momentum of Prime Minister Takaichi's "Make Japan strong. Make Japan prosperous." platform, the text illuminates how young corporate climbers adopt nationalistic rhetoric to mask deep-seated workplace anxiety, especially from the standoff between the younger Gen Z and Millennials and the older Gen X and Boomers. Meanwhile, the senior mentor's macroeconomic cynicism regarding "stimulus package #36" punctures politicians' current heroic fiction of economic revival, exposing it for what it is: generational theft disguised as policy. The *dramatis personae's* conflicting sentiments about Article 9, not merely as a constitutional clause, but as a guardrail to hold back historical impulses, adds ideological weight to what might otherwise have been a simple office feud.

Beyond the political exploration, I think the reader will find a harder edge in the character dynamics. A genuine tragedy emerges with the mentor's realization that he accidentally created a zealot rather than a fellow pragmatist. Shiori no longer merely complains about her expat bosses, but embraces corporate feudalism as her patriotic duty. The mentor's candid admission of cowardice—that keeping Shiori in the dark is the only thing protecting his own pension and status—prevents him

from coming across as a preachy moralist, cementing his role as a complicit insider.

In his confessional, the mentor lays out Six Lies—The Japanese Way, Consensus, Inscrutability, Harmony, Fiefdom Ownership, and Rules as Justice—leading into an ending that, I hope, lands a darkly ironic punch for the reader. After all the posturing about “liberating” the workplace from Americans and preserving the “Japanese Way,” the American company simply cuts its losses and sells out to a powerful Chinese private equity firm. Shiori’s utter dismay at discovering the firm’s national origin, paired with the mentor’s ultimate takeaway that “He who has the pesos, has the say-so’s,” highlights the futility of sticking to cultural dogmas as a weapon against the tide of global capital.

As you read the story, Shiori might seem like only a foil for the mentor. Indeed, his soliloquies rather than their dialogue dominate the page count, which will seem odd for those who are masters of the narrative apologia, me not being one.

But Shiori’s bursts of surgical, sharp strikes are what keep the narrative firmly grounded in realistic office friction. Her bluntness exposes the mentor’s hypocrisy. For all his intellectual brilliance and deep understanding of the ideological lies, the mentor remains cowardly and passive. He is out for himself, and her ideological fervor actively exposes his moral paralysis.

She is not just asking passive questions to keep the monologue going; she pushes an aggressive, nationalistic, and moralizing agenda. Her frustration elbows the mentor into a corner.

The mentor's defense and response is complex because it is split. Publicly, he placates her with passive agreement and manipulative "advice" to protect his own position. Privately, his soliloquies dismantle her arguments line by line.

Despite having far fewer lines of dialogue than the mentor, Shiori carries significant agency in the exchange with him. She represents a shift of power between generations. Her embrace of modern political rhetoric gives her clout in the office, making her a genuine threat to the mentor's power and status.

The mentor realizes he created a monster. He taught her how to use cultural dogma as a weapon to climb the ladder, and now she is using those exact tools against him and her foreign bosses. Shiori is not just an opponent; she the mentor's own creation on the brink of turning back on him.

That said, "*We Japanese*" is, at its core, one man's apologia so there is no winner per se. By the time the reader reaches the Afterword's *Prælectio de Apologia*, I trust that its formal theory of "cognitive contagion" feels fully earned and concrete.

"*We Japanese*" offers no comfort or sentimental resolutions. Be prepared for a gut-wrenching and accurate testimony written directly from within the machinery of corporate and societal decline. Ultimately, this work is my attempt to define a problem correctly. Many will find it objectionable. If the attendant controversy stimulates debate toward creating solutions, then I will have achieved my goal for having written "*We Japanese*."

Mark Lee Ford

August 6, 2026

Tokyo & Hong Kong

“WE JAPANESE”

(or “*How to Liberate Yourself from Foreigners at the Office*”)

“They’re at it again!” cried Shiori, a rising star manager at the Japanese local headquarters of a large American financial institution. Hands on the doorframe, she leaned forward into my office space.

My *kōhai*’s¹ usual protest sounded this time like a plea for help. Flummoxed by the bungling of her foreign co-workers, she bore a whiff of futility.

Shiori crossed the threshold and continued, “We Japanese bend over backwards, but they won’t meet us even halfway. Foreigners can never understand the Japanese Way.”

Shiori craves to cleanse herself of foreigners. She has been stewing in a pot of office battles between the foreign and Japanese employees for months. Arguments about direction and execution have delayed projects. Cost overruns have been accumulating; performance bonuses and promotions are starting to hang in the balance.

When it comes to speaking English in the office, she feels put upon. All of us Japanese do. After all, this is Japan. But she also feels frustrated because she can neither get her point across nor fully understand what is being said around her. Or so she thinks. Just brushing shoulders with English-language situations makes her anxiety flare like hives.

¹ A junior colleague (the counterpart to *senpai*)

Quitting is not an option for any of us, if not for our ages and financial obligations, then because of the ever-sagging job market.

Ten years ago, straight from college, Shiori joined us in a prestigious Japanese insurance company. I hired her, then trained her, and all in a fully Japanese office environment. Fiercely independent and ambitious, she was a royal pain at first. She questioned and challenged everything about our ways of doing things. I doubted she had long left in the Company.

But we found ourselves to be kindred spirits. She eventually took up my lessons well and has been since rising steadily through the ranks, on track to become one of the youngest directors in the Company's history. Everything was stable for her, with a brilliant career seemingly set in stone.

So when news came last year that one of the world's financial services behemoths—an American insurer headquartered in New York—bid to buy us, she was particularly shocked, as were most of the Japanese employees. Nobody *should* have been surprised. We had been in the red for years. But getting paid every month regardless of one's value or corporate performance deludes one into thinking *ashita mo aru*—we always have tomorrow.

Shiori did not know what to think of this development at first. Soon after, under a foreign boss, an expat new to Japan at that, came the radical promise to her of an early promotion and to an unusually high position, leapfrogging over many others. “We need more Japanese women in positions of power,” he virtuously and unoriginally proclaimed.

But with the DEI leg up came the demand that she work in teams integrated with Japanese and foreigners. Par for the course, English is inescapable as the lingua franca.

The changes came too fast even for Shiori. Without so much as a honeymoon period, she began to drown in her new position almost immediately.

Any Japanese person who has worked in a foreign company having substantial operations in Japan knows all too well about the changes and attendant problems that foreigners whip up.

Americans in particular try to revolutionize everything overnight without first taking time to understand why things are the way they are. Rules and precedent are their enemies. The American approach tends to be high-handed; teacher has come to correct the Japanese in the errors of their ways and to straighten them out. And even when some of the lessons are sound, Americans have a lousy record of leading execution in Japan anyway.

They kick up a dust storm, then run away to America, leaving us holding the bag. How many times have we seen this? We have to clean up their mess, just in time for the next batch of expats to drop on our necks. No matter how one slices the problem, the Americans always come out ahead.

“I am loyal and hard-working,” Shiori asserted, as if she had to plead her case to me. “I’d get onboard if they’d come up with a plan once in a while that worked. Their ideas are bunk.”

I sympathize with Shiori. All of us Japanese feel the same way. Expat bosses saddle us with new projects while demanding that we do not fall behind in our everyday work. We were hired to execute processes, keep stability, and comply, not to

transform the Company. Nothing that I taught Shiori could have ever prepared her for the cultural gulf.

“Workloads are doubling. My pay hasn’t increased, and we won’t be getting bonuses this year,” Shiori lamented. “They squeeze blood from a stone to line their pockets, fire people to cut costs, then get fat bonuses. And we are still losing customers!”

Shiori’s barbs about money sting because of the chasm in compensation between the regular Japanese employees and the highly paid foreign expats, be they executives or not. Pay inequality is an open wound for the Japanese employees, one that never heals, and a bitter reminder that it is “us versus them” in the Company...in our homeland. We often talk among ourselves of how the situation would be if the shoe were on the other foot—that is, if we were the expats in the New York headquarters and the Americans had to take orders from us at a tenth of our compensation.

My mind began to wander from Shiori. Her rising voice caught us a furtive glance from a co-worker passing outside my office’s open door. Eying the passerby, I nodded enthusiastically at Shiori in hopes of bringing her soliloquy to an end. Spare me the embarrassment of attracting attention.

In fairness, her comments were accurate albeit emotionally expressed. Righteous anger. But such a well-trodden path begs no reminding. Every Japanese employee, including me, is in the same boat. Grumbling without resolution has become as demoralizing as enduring the zaniness of the expats.

Shiori began to wrap up, as most of us do, by reciting the litany of the expats’ ostentatious benefits.

“Our CEO gets ten times my salary. Ten times! Plus the perks: bonuses, a sports car, a palatial condo, family membership at the Tokyo American Club, The American School for his kids. He comes and goes as he pleases. Even the foreign non-executives are on expat deals. They’re pushing us deeper in the red.”

I was about to commiserate with Shiori for the umpteenth time as had become the habit of all Japanese employees with each other. But a memory of life in the Company before the Americans stopped me. Having worked with foreigners elsewhere during my career, I have seen the gamut of outcomes, from successful to disastrous, though mostly mediocre, as presumably is the case in most companies be they Japanese or foreign.

Shiori’s face inadvertently telegraphed that she had picked up something from me. Perhaps she sensed that our conversation was going to turn into something more than a round of quasi-therapeutic commiseration with a comrade-in-arms. Or maybe she worried that I secretly disagreed with everything she had been saying; if so, she would be wrong.

She trusted me as her *senpai*: senior, mentor. I was fond of her from the outset and proud of the career she had forged as my protégé. Unfortunately, somewhere in the story, who knows when, we lost the sensible iconoclasm that we once had in common.

Cupping my tea cup with both hands, elbows on my desk, I leaned forward and peered intently into her eyes over the rims of my eyeglasses. She knew that the first thing I had taught her was never to raise a problem unless she had at least one

solution to go with it. She ducked my stare, allowing a more rational Shiori into the conversation.

“Please. I’m on the mat,” she softly admitted, laying her vulnerability bare before me.

This was the ring for Shiori’s prizefight. The lines were drawn between the foreign and Japanese employees. And my *kōhai* was getting clobbered.

Yet, I hesitated to enter the ring to rescue her. I am coasting into retirement. Employees, be they foreign or Japanese, are free to change whatever they want to change in the Company after I retire. I do not want to strengthen the inter-generational deadlock, but the Company offers me no upside to do anything. Being all things to all people is keeping me sane and free of conflict. Some of the foreigners use me as a sounding board, even as a confidante, to get the pulse of the Japanese staff.

Above all, doing nothing preserves the monthly cash flow from the Company to my wallet. I have two children in college. My wife has demands.

Not sure myself if I was joking or had finally found the guts to risk my neck to upset the status quo, I reassured Shiori that indeed, yes, she could liberate herself from foreigners. She might even be able to get even. Revenge? Why not. They will beg to be transferred, or even sell the Company!

“How so?” she asked, tinged with excitement.

Shiori listened keenly as I began to outline her game-plan:

1. harangue the foreigner into giving us allowances just because we are Japanese;
2. condescend—never miss a chance to tell him that Japanese business is too complex for him to grasp;

3. stymie anything he wants to do in the Company no matter how small;
4. agree with him publicly, then quietly hold an all-Japanese meeting to decide what we will really do; and
5. marshal all resources to preserve the status quo.

And for the coup de grâce:

6. wallow in process.

“Aw, come on!” she recoiled. Shiori’s cheeks flushed, ear lobes glowing like Rudolph’s nose, the same as when she has had only a few belts of saké.

“None of this sounds familiar?”, I mocked.

She was chuffed, knowing full well that I caught her red-handed.

“Don’t feel embarrassed. But don’t flatter yourself either. You didn’t invent how to manipulate foreigners. All the seniors do it, if not by design then by instinct. I did it at your age in my first company, a *gaishikei*².”

Shiori looked relieved, as if I just gave her misconduct my imprimatur.

“Ever wonder why it works so well?”, I pushed.

“Like I said, they don’t—no, can’t—speak Japanese. They can never understand us as a people.”

I went on to tell her that when the foreigner arrives in Japan, he is consumed with settling his family in their new life. Setting-up a bank account, renting an apartment, helping his children enter school, picking furniture. The flood of wearisome chores typical of moving station. A string of social

² A foreign capital company operating in Japan

bookings and touristy outings fill the remaining nooks and crannies in his diary, all of which distract him from penetrating our office antics early on.

Deep in his honeymoon period with Japan, we charm him with our fulsome helpfulness and politeness, programmatic for us but which he swallows hook, line, and sinker. An easy sucker for our *omotensashi*³, he reciprocates by taking a light touch at the office, trying to be culturally sensitive. The foreigner sincerely wants to understand us, the Company, and everything else that is new around him so he can do a good job. He has a boss, after all, and his promotion to regional big shot or global director is in the cards if his Japan assignment ends well.

But as the honeymoon wanes, he starts to notice contradictions between what we say and what we do. How do we really work? How do we really treat each other? Our explanations about things Japanese, and our tall tales to justify our lack of progress at work, crumble.

“So we’re lying,” interjected Shiori defensively.

I fell silent. Mild frustration welled up inside me as I politely endured her stale topic of conversation that was keeping me from the stack of paperwork on my desk. Odd. Whatever happened to the promises of the paperless office? Computers were supposed to have taken over all of this when I joined decades ago. Odder still, why does meaningless paperwork compel me so? And why am I noticing this only now?

“Not to them,” I mouthed, staring at my desk, becoming more of a captive audience to the papers than to Shiori.

³ Hospitality, wholehearted service, or selfless care

Teetering on blowing the cover I had carefully woven for thirty-five years, I bit my tongue to halt any trace of a confession. I felt like an atheist priest, fighting the urge to scream the heresy of truth at my own flock.

“I am only following the Japanese Way,” she said, deflecting with the practiced ease of a theologian explaining why the Eucharist is not cannibalism.

**Lie, the first:
“The Japanese Way”**

I do not have the nerve to confess to you, Shiori, that I taught you to do wicked things imperfectly. A miscalculation. A botch of the first order. Call it what you want.

You were supposed to be immune to the liturgy. One of the select few closeted atheists destined to wear the priest's robes, like me. I trained you to master our dogmas so you could rule the machine, not become a brownshirt enforcing its scripture. I made you dangerously imperfect and, now, I am losing control of you.

You saw through the con from the get go. That is why you were such a pain to the senior staff when I hired you. All but you in your *dōki*⁴ accepted the ideology without question. You had the audacity to challenge what others blindly espouse.

But in my haste to pass the mantle of power to you, I ended up bending your mind unintentionally. I gutted your rationality

⁴ A cohort of employees who join a company at the same time, typically after graduation from college.

and replaced it with zeal. I turned you into a true believer, like those in your cohort, and now it is too late to tell you what I truly believe. Keeping you in the dark is the only thing that stops you from usurping me.

If I could, I would tell you that Japanese people are of diverse cultures. There are as many Japanese ‘ways’ as there are Japanese people, never a single “Japanese Way,” certainly nothing of the kind that the Japanese nationalists spout, the demagogues with whom your generation is now besotted.

Yet, at the drop of a hat, we invoke the name of the great Japanese Way—malleable enough to use as a cudgel in any situation—to stymie foreigners and, more so, to manipulate our countrymen.

Our culture gave you the cudgel, Shiori, and I showed you how to swing it mercilessly against your peers, then against your seniors, as you stand on their necks to climb the corporate ladder, as I had done before you. And they willingly stick out their skulls with cultish dutifulness for you to crack in the name of our ineffably sublime Japanese Way—bah!

All the while, I used you as my sword in the Company to expand my own fiefdom. I love you like a daughter, but as a Corleone would have said, “It’s not personal, Shiori. It’s strictly business.” More than business. It is a way that is far bigger and older than your limited understanding of what you and most of the employees call the Japanese Way, one that I had believed that you would control someday, and from which now you are forever barred. You actually think that you are my *only* sword?!

Japan’s story is not a seamless history of some kind of homogeneous “Japanese people.” We are peoples of many

customs and heritages, foreign and domestic, who have been busily smashing ourselves together in countless ways over millennia in the islands that are called—for now—“Japan.” The true story of the people in the archipelago bears no resemblance to the nationalists’ boring fiction of “We Japanese.”

We constantly disagree with each other. But when it comes to arguments with foreigners, we band together to accuse them of not understanding us as a people. Why must we see our disagreements with foreigners so clumsily, through the sham lens of the monocultural Japanese Way?

For the lazy minded, “Japanese versus foreigners” is a crutch. No introspection is needed to use it. Ironically, we—not the foreigner—create a caricature of ourselves every time we pick it up. We cripple ourselves by abandoning our diversity in favor a clown’s costume for foreign consumption: “We Japanese.”

The Japanese Way is an insidious self-deception. Many blindly believe the ideology. Others know the scam; the more astute among us exploit the zealotry of dimwit ideologues by means of The Japanese Way for selfish gain⁵.

“Shall we freshen up?”, Shiori offered, gesturing with an up-faced palm at my tepid tea.

I swirled my cup to catch some Golden Hour sunlight behind my shoulder on the remaining turbid, moss-green liquor. It had started to oxidize and was becoming bitter.

“Un.”⁶

⁵ See the Appendix.

⁶ Yes

Head down, perusing the papers I had been haphazardly collating, I presented my cup to her commandingly, without looking up, left arm fully outstretched. Unable and unwilling to meet my eyes in the moment, she bowed the minimum amount required and, cupping her hands, took the cup, pivoted, then went to a hot water dispenser near the other window of my corner office to steep a fresh pot.

“You have a mountain of requisitions for your approval,” smalltalk she offered with her back to me as she pushed the plunger on the dispenser looking out the side window.

Approval? *Approval!* I scolded her in my mind. As I heard the rising pitch of gurgling hot water filling the tea pot, I felt a fleeting twinge of disdain for her.

I removed the cap of my bamboo *hanko*⁷, eyed the artistically engraved glyph on its base with some nostalgic fascination, then the pile of forms on my desk with resignation. My so-called approval would be either the last or second-last on these forms, each one having at least five other seals from subordinates before having reached my desk. Being my subordinate, Shiori’s seal would already be on some of the requisitions.

“Agh.” I caught myself aimlessly rolling the cylindrical *hanko* between my fingers too late.

Shiori drew a tissue and passed it to me while placing the cup of fresh tea on my desk, away from my immediate workspace. I tried to wipe away smudges of old red ink that my

⁷ A seal that is used to sign official documents

fingers had rubbed from the hanko, then flipped open the lid on the ink pad, fresh for today’s batch of “approvals.”

**Lie, the second:
“Japanese decide in consensus.”**

We never stop trying to convince ourselves and foreigners that Japanese people make decisions as a group, even though our guts prod us otherwise. We preach consensus. Foreigners go so far as to study *nemawashi*⁸ in an attempt to work better with us.

What we are actually doing is confusing “deciding in consensus” with “laboring in consensus.”

When have we ever made consensus-based decisions of any importance? When did you ever have the spine to withhold your hanko from the string of others already on the approval sheet?

A senior strongman always decides the direction, and we dutifully follow him. We know the price of disobedience. Sure, we put on a conspicuous show to keep up the appearance of objectivity. We swim in discussions about the direction of a project, wringing our hands over minutiae, protracting time and increasing cost.

But at the end of our song and dance show, why does the conclusion of our grand consensus-building effort always match whatever the boss had “suggested” weeks or months beforehand—a direction from which we veer at our peril?

⁸ Lobbying behind the scenes to secure support before making a formal proposal

Our theatrics befuddle the foreigner. He probably believes our ideologies more than we do. Every book that he has read and training that he has attended about doing business in Japan espouse them. Nobody tells him that he is working in a feudal hierarchy because we do not see it ourselves.

"About foreigners not understanding us," I continued while affixing my seal to the requisition forms.

"Yes?"

"...how much, do you think, has to do with language?"

"I daresay all of it. They don't understand Japanese. But even if they were fluent, how could anyone expect people coming from a country only a few hundred years old to understand us."

I butted in, "We have the oldest continuous dynastic monarchy in the world."

"Exactly," she said resolutely, plunking herself down in a chair beside my desk.

I had served Shiori a perfect, self-contained explanation on a silver salver. An argument from authority, bereft of logic. No further explanation was necessary in Shiori's mind nor mine. We were standing on opposite ends of the planet with different interpretations of the same explanation.

Lie, the third:

“We are inscrutable to foreigners.”

Our people have been stuck on an island for a long, long time.

Only recently in our history have the masses been free to travel and live anywhere in Japan or overseas. Centuries of isolation and central control of information have instilled an exaggerated opinion of being inscrutable to outsiders. Despite a freer press, the Internet, and our prosperity to go abroad, this opinion is still a monkey on our back.

But our English illiteracy is what scuppers us. We take a twisted delight in not knowing English. We have deliberately severed ourselves from the free flow of ideas of the world, cutting off our noses to spite our faces.

Our offices are littered with proud salarymen who cannot string two sentences in English together properly; our tongue-tied political leaders are sidelined at global summits. We bury our heads in repetitious processes for our entire careers, not even talking to other departments in our own companies in our own language, let alone with people around the world in English.

Yet, we have the arrogance to boast that we are too inscrutable to be understood by foreigners. Instead, we should be asking ourselves “Do we understand the 21st Century world?”

What happens whenever a foreigner comes up with an idea that the rest of the planet can grasp instantly, but confounds us? We feel threatened. Our pride is stung. So we wrap ourselves in fallacies about our identities, chiding the foreigner about his

supposed ignorance about Japan, then ridiculing him among ourselves when he is out of earshot.

If we explain ourselves properly—rationally—to the foreigner, he can understand Japan. Anyone from any culture can understand Japanese processes, systems, regulations, customers, and practically everything else about us, as we can about them. Foreigners can and do understand our culture. Foreigners can and do learn our language.

Savvy foreigners end up understanding all of these things better than us. Our obstinance frustrates them, feeding their cynicism and discrediting us. We become their laughingstock.⁹

“Global financial centers?” Shiori’s quick eye glanced a copy of this year’s rankings that was hidden under the last requisition in the pile I had been sealing.

“It’s in English,” I teased.

“Very funny.” She snapped up the report.

“New York, London, and Hong Kong tied for first. Singapore, San Francisco, and Shanghai made the top ten.”

“Tokyo?”

“Fifteenth,” I replied.

Shiori was non-plussed.

“Six years ago, we were in the top three,” I gently pressed.

“Prime Minister Takeichi is changing that.”

I gave her a puzzled look.

“You know, ‘Make Japan strong. Make Japan prosperous.’”

⁹ The inept foreigner who wants to curry favor with us further deludes us. He becomes our sycophant and spouts the same ideologies to other foreigners as we do.

“Oh, of course,” I deflected.

“It’s inspiring. Something that my generation is really getting behind. And it took a woman to do it, too! Not some old fogey. We’ll be back on top in no time,” she said rather pompously and immaturity.

Make Japan prosperous. Thirty-five stimuli packages in as many years to the tune of 950 trillion yen¹⁰. Yes, Shiori, we are so prosperous that you cannot afford to have a baby. And Takeichi is borrowing and spending for stimulus package #36. How original! How marvelously innovative!

One word succinctly describes us, all our strengths and all our weaknesses: predictable. Among our shortcomings, stubbornness shares first prize with cowardice...my cowardice. Why else would we do the same things that produce the same bad results for thirty-six years straight?

But there is another reason, a carefully veiled one. All along, someone has been and is prospering. And someone will prosper because of Takeichi’s handlers. But it is not going to be *you*, Shiori. At Japan’s speed of decline, hell, it might not even be me!

“Old fogey, eh?”

“You know what I mean,” Shiori parried with a smile, then became serious. “Anyhow, Japan didn’t stumble on my generation’s watch.”

“But on mine,” I pled with feigned guilt.

¹⁰ USD 6.1 trillion, inflation adjusted for June 2026.

“Didn’t say that. True, Gen X hasn’t helped. But you guys showed up late to the game, anyway. The Boomers had already started milking Japan dry when you were my age.”

You got me there, kid. “But she’s a Boomer.”

“*Betsu ni*¹¹. She’s a rebel first!”

“A rock guitarist,” I meaninglessly interjected with fake naïveté, playing an old man slightly off the beat.

“Drummer,” Shiori flatly corrected, then resumed her inspired rise: “She gives us something to believe in. Everybody’s getting off their butts for once and moving in the same direction.”

Lie, the fourth:

“Harmony”

*Wa*¹², disguised as “harmony,” is the most injurious of our ideologies.

Wa comes gift-wrapped in a Japanese-style package, but *wa* is not specific to Japan. A chameleon of a thousand faces, *wa* is a weapon of despots in all cultures and eras, whether they run a country, a company, or a family. For those who know its purpose and how to use it, *wa* is the penultimate justification to usurp another’s freedom of choice.

¹¹ Doesn’t matter; irrelevant

¹² The peaceful unity and conformity within a social group, in which members prefer the continuation of a harmonious community over their personal interests

Society cannot have values. Groups cannot have values. Only individuals can have values because only individuals can choose. Values begin and end with the man who is free to choose.

We are inundated by exhortations to do things “for the good of the group,” “for the harmony of the group,” and so on. Annual reports are crammed with CEOs’ pronouncements to promote “social values,” as preposterous as they are pompous.

Wa empowers a few people, often only one, to reap all the benefits that members of a group eagerly sacrifice in the wrongheaded belief that it is good for everyone. That is the mark of a true ideology with ardent ideologues. Believers are injured, see the injury, but believe it to be good and then promulgate the ideology to their ruination.

Japanese society is replete with destructiveness from wa: in companies, hospitals, schools, government, universities, and, sadly, in many families too, where the mindset is cultivated and passed from generation to generation.

Just as we confuse laboring in consensus with making consensus-based decisions, we confuse harmony with order.

Shiori, you look, but do not see it everywhere around you. Open your mind! Japanese offices are filled with broken people: abusive seniors, bullies, disgruntled workers, power harassers, sexual harassers, and their countless victims. Mental illness and depression are rampant. Japan tops the suicide rate in the G7, fourth in the OECD. Men kill themselves at double the rate of women. Half of the desks on this floor alone have antidepressants tucked away in the back of a drawer.

Despite this chaos, Japanese offices are remarkably orderly, the most orderly in the world.

Whereas an American will file a complaint, strike, or sue, we suffer in silence. We are brainwashed that quiet endurance of suffering is a virtue, necessary for the sake of wa.

The reality is that our lives are governed by process, and proper execution of process demands order and obedience above all. We have been programmed to turn off our brains—our humanity—to follow the rules, even if the outcome will be disastrous. Break a rule to do the right thing, however, and a black mark will be put on our name. We willingly sacrifice our freedom of choice at the altar of order every day.

Yet, for all the sacrifices that we make for the so-called greater good of the group, how many of us can claim that we enjoy a state of harmony with our peers or even contentment for ourselves, let alone freedom? Our vaunted *omotenashi* is as ostentatious as a Riedel bordeaux glass. Thin, transparent, and hopelessly fragile, *omotenashi* shatters in the face of rules. Pity, just a modicum of sincerity makes it shatterproof, but we have not even that much in our hearts for one another.

Like many of our ideologies, we inherited wa from millennia of feudalism, designed to preserve the status quo of class, not to safeguard the humanity of you and me.

When we throw a foreigner into this environment, especially one that has a bully, then berate him with how he is out of tune with Japanese harmony, of course he will stridently resist us. The pain is more acute for him than us; we gave up our freedom ages ago in our youth, whereas he still has his.

“Changing topics for a minute. HR is asking for nominees for a training on innovation and global leadership. I want to propose you as a candidate. Rising star global leaders. I heard great things about it from last year’s group.”

“Innovation? Why not. I’d like to learn about it. But the senior management always rejects our ideas. Or they take credit for them. No offense.”

“No, no. I get it. And it’s in English, too. But it might count favorably toward your next promotion.”

“Still on about the English,” she rebuffed.

“Give yourself more credit,” I softly chided while looking away from her, slightly shaking my head with genuine condescension, returning my attention to the papers on my desk.

The weak breeze from a small oscillating fan near the tea caddy lifted the corners of a few of my papers, then settled.

“Nah,” she smirked, palms frozen to hips, head tilted in consideration.

I continued to look at my papers, pretending to ignore her. The breeze passed again.

“Well, when do you need to know?”

Shiori, you *can* see objectively when you want to. You know the status quo. The inter-generational deadlock between the old Gen X and Boomers against the young Gen Z and Millennials. I know you too well, Shrewd One. You are keeping one leg in the world of your *dōki* and one leg in mine. You will join the course and give everyone a run for their money.

I wonder if I can still pull you into my world before it is too late for you, our Company...our country.

For four decades, piece by piece, we slowly dismantled what powered Japan's ascent after the war. Innovation, entrepreneurship, sensible iconoclasm. We did it by apathy, and by the insecurity within ourselves for stability at all costs, not by conscious self-immolation. And our descent has been all so orderly because we have conducted it under the auspices of wa. We started before you were even born, Shiori. Indeed, taking the path of least risk turned out to be the riskiest of all.

Japan now lies at the bottom of the global rankings on entrepreneurship and innovation, a sole fish content to wallow on the sea floor, flat as a pancake with two googly eyes gazing at all the interesting goings on above our head.

Our domestic market is shrinking because your generation cannot afford to have children. An existential crisis? Hardly hyperbole. The customers literally do not exist anymore.

Your Gen Z has no dreams, no natural curiosity, and the attention span of a gnat. Every two minutes, twenty- and thirty-somethings need to knock on the doors of seniors to ask what to do and permission to do it. Disgusting timidity.

Blame us, not yourselves. We groomed your generation for fecklessness while mine fed at the trough, wringing the last drop from the system on our way out the retirement door. Now both our generations are precariously sitting on a tottering foundation of legacy process and technology from the 1970s and 1980s. As long as our horns are locked, we can never give birth to bright ideas of the kind we both desperately need.

The bureaucratic mindset has escaped its masters' control to commandeer almost every cell in the body, metastasizing to every corner of society—a massive tumor of ever-increasing

aggressiveness. No one grasps its length, breadth, or depth. We have only a piecemeal understanding of its myriad, autonomous workings. The malignancy presses down on the pillars of our prosperity, oozing over and around them, nourishing itself by sapping the vitality of our remaining self-reliance, resilience, and natural curiosity. Value is consumed by the cancer faster than we can create it.

Shiori, you and your kind are an accelerant to the malignancy, like fire-starter gel.

Your precious Prime Minister has expelled and barred the only people who have the resilience, brains, and courage to innovate on your behalf—foreigners. Like little children, you believe her tale that there is a Chinese bogeyman hiding behind the curtain or waiting under your bed to slit your throat.

How long will it be before the Americans cut their losses and sell the Company? Be careful what you ask for, my dear Shiori-san. You have no say as to who will be the next buyer.

Lie, the fifth:
“This is my company.”

Unless you own stock (and plenty of it), “your” Company is not yours nor will it ever be. You are an expendable tool—a human resource—that the owners use to run their machine. You are expected to produce far more wealth than what they pay you.

Do not be seduced by the trappings of lifetime employment and benefits. You buy those things many times over by sacrificing your liberty daily in the abnormality of your work. Think of the priceless hours of your finite lifespan that you

squander daily: two hours on an insufferably crowded commuter train, marathon meetings dominated by garrulous senior strongmen, the bullying of yourself (or your bullying of others), and a plethora of other purposeless miseries, large and small.

“Going back to what you said earlier. The Prime Minister’s strategy...”

“Make Japan strong,” she interjected.

“Yes, yes. Make Japan strong. America has about 50,000 military personnel here...”

“It’s high time that we stand on our own two feet,” she broke in again. I found her increasingly informal, maybe even rude, since the election sweep of Takaichi. “We value our partnership with America, but we’ve got to be independent of Washington.”

“Independent?!” My incredulity leaked out. “We have our own constitution and...”

“Which they wrote! That’s the first thing that’s gotta go. Article 9. The world has enjoyed our money for years. We need to be respected. China for example.”

OK, Shiori. Let us talk about China, for example.

Our postwar rehabilitation and prosperity could have been the model throughout Asia, the Middle East, the world. But nobody took it up. Taking lessons from a people who did not have an iota of moral authority was repugnant to them. This is why, in no small reason, We Japanese gave rise to two despotic communist states as neighbors. Do you think they simply popped-in out of thin air? And this is also why there is an

‘Article 9’, to protect others from us as much as it is to protect us from ourselves.

Seeing how your Gen Z has allied with the eldest of the Boomers in support of Takaichi tells me that Article 9 has never been more needed.

“We’ve enjoyed peace with the whole wide world for eighty years, Shiori.”

“But not justice.”

Lie, the sixth:

“Obeying the rules = Justice”

Even after the bitter lessons from WWII, the individual freedoms from a new constitution, and the rise of Japan as an economic superpower, we are still mired in a society that runs on honor and shame.

The elite use this to do as they please without a sliver of remorse, paying no price for damaging the everyman, just as their ancestors did. Though we are awash in comfort, most of us suffer from the demons of honor and shame running amok in our daily lives.

Societies that aspire to run on justice try to apply the law equally to their peoples. Individuals keep all their rights other than the ones they choose to forfeit to the state through a political process. With guardrails of checks and balances, power is kept more or less in line. America tries to operate this way and, at least on paper, so does Japan. Unlike the Americans’, ours is just a parchment promise.

People of societies that operate on honor and shame hold social standing and reputation above all else. The lower classes draw the short straw when it comes to matters of honor with the upper classes. The reverse, not so. “Justice” is meted out according to emotion and class so injustice flourishes. The powerful do as they please; the ordinary must always ask permission to do anything.

Japan is such a society. Corporate cultures are rife with honor and shame, and the largest companies are fiefdoms within the larger, dystopian feudal landscape.

So you see, Shiori, the constitution that you revile already operates the way you it want to, except for one clause sticking in your craw: Article 9. Damn inconvenient, *ne*¹³. Article 9 is what you and your kind are gunning for. My generation paved the road for you to revoke it. We denuded what made Japan truly great and deprived you of the character to continue the awe-inspiring renaissance begun by your great-grandparents.

Why should I care anymore? Everything is teed up for you. Get it over with. Take the final shot to send us back to February 26, 1936.

“Criminal justice?”, I challenged.

“That’s part of it.”

A 99% conviction rate. In the land of quality, we have applied our manufacturing prowess to the judicial system. We replaced the rubber hose with *kaizen*¹⁴ in the confession process. Now *that* is innovation! A culprit can always found, even if he is

¹³ “isn’t it?”

¹⁴ A Japanese business philosophy meaning “continuous improvement”

an innocent man. Funny, did we not use to poke fun at Americans for their western movies where the good guys always wear white cowboy hats and the bad guys black? And the sheriff always gets his man for a happy ending.

Honor and shame served.

Fairness, equal treatment under the law, and justice *do* exist in Japan, just enough to give the impression of having them, but they are fragile. Yes, injustice exists in America, too, but at least half of Americans can recognize it and will do something about it. We simply roll over.

Ask any salaryman, any office lady, any employee—ask yourself: “Will you obey an order from the CEO if it hurts someone?” You might feel a smidgen of sympathy, but you will follow the order because you can hide your shame in the anonymity of the group: “I was just following orders.” Shiori, perhaps your generation might be excused for not knowing about Nuremberg—mine cannot. We point at institutional guilt to save our skins, breathe a sigh of relief, then pat ourselves on the back for having dodged a bullet. A despicable slight of hand to redirect our culpability toward a humbug. Fear of punishment for disobedience outsizes our humanity for succoring the injured, especially a stranger.

The Minamata Disease travesty and Fukushima Nuclear catastrophe are the grossest examples. There are plenty more, if at least not in scale, then in spirit and practice.

Chisso Corporation, The Ministry of International Trade and Industry, The Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Kumamoto Prefectural government, and the Industrial Bank of

Japan¹⁵ are the poster children for what happens when societies operate on honor and shame. They conspired in the killing and grotesque deforming of generations of babies by outright aiding and abetting Chisso's continual mercury poisoning of Minamata Bay since the 1920s. Chisso's more fanatic employees eagerly did the mafioso-style leg work of serving the coverup, intimidation, bullying, beating, denigrating, and shunning of the victims and their families.

Jail time for the culprits? None. Chisso only paid a few victims *miimai-kin*¹⁶—chump change. After decades of denial, the ministries, Diet, and Cabinet, and the mega-banks that were the major shareholders palmed off their liability to the everyman, forcing the taxpayer to foot the bill, and which is still outstanding. Many victims died ages ago.

But honor was, and continues to be, preserved for those who control Chisso, the ministries, and the financiers. They are neither empathetic nor sorry, only irked that they were careless enough to be exposed.

Because the mindset is ubiquitous in Japanese businesses, government, and elected offices, cronyism flourishes. We loathe those who fail or are victims more than the failure itself: no second chances. As with the “backward” castes in India (as the Brahmins call them behind closed doors), the function of victims in Japan is to be dishonored and shamed, by design.

¹⁵ Part of Mizuho Financial Group, today. Sanwa Bank and Dai-Ichi Bank, large postwar investors, are now part of MUFG Bank and Mizuho Bank, respectively.

¹⁶ Sympathy money to dodge lawsuits and criminal liability

Failure and victimization of the weak nurtures the solidarity of the powerful. Without victims, the status quo collapses.

In this regard, Chisso has plenty of company. Olympus. Toshiba. Kobe Steel. Takata Corporation. Nissan. Mitsubishi. Morinaga Milk. Tokio Marine. Nomura. The list goes on and on. The problem is endemic because the operating system of honor and shame is endemic. Government bureaucrats and politicians always get a free pass after shedding crocodile years. It is faster to list the organizations that have kept their noses clean.

Obeing the rules equates to neither justice nor fairness. Since “doing the right thing” in the long term is good for business, trouble is inevitable for a company—a society—that runs on honor and shame.

“What’s the other part?”

“You know.”

I looked at her wide-eyed, eyebrows raised, pleading in my mind that she would not say what I knew she must.

“China.” She coldly looked away.

Crestfallen, I cannot remember if I even tried to hide it.

What’s next for Shiori?

Shiori’s pride, born from her insecurities and false ideologies of Japanese identity, compels her to lash out at foreigners. But foreigners are merely the provocation. Shiori’s problems originate within herself.

Peace for Shiori and productivity for the Company depend on whether she can understand herself and her predicament. She then must have the courage to do something about it, and long before she tries to tangle with any foreigner.

Liberating ourselves from foreigners is really about how we must free ourselves from the yoke of our ideologies. We must refuse to take a role in the ancient and absurd theater of Japanese versus foreigners. This is true even if we never meet a foreigner in our lives because the ideologies are more pathological for Japanese dealing with Japanese than they are between Japanese and foreigners. The foreigner eventually goes home; we, however, are stuck with each other.

Can you break free, Shiori? Can you create a fulfilling path for yourself by doing the right thing? Do not wallow in the slovenliness of the office bureaucracy, filled with intellectually lazy individuals who use the ideologies against you for personal gain at the cost of your freedom.

“Do you hate your country or something?” she blurted with patriotic disdain. My head snapped from her sudden shot across my bow.

I was careless. My glancing remark about the constitution was enough to have tipped off the brownshirt in her. Maybe she somehow could read in my face or body language about what I had been thinking during our entire conversation.

I halfheartedly shrugged my shoulders and pushed out a bit of a conciliatory wince, knowing that once she spread the word about my heresy against the religion of the Japanese Way, my Japanese colleagues will label me an eccentric at best, a traitor at worst. Maybe a folk hero to some? Wishful thinking.

She cocked her head slightly while leaning back with a sigh, arms folded. I let the awkwardness of a long pause marinate both of us.

“Maybe I get what you are trying to tell me with your game-plan,” Shiori conceded with a glint of affection that told me our relationship was still intact. Were my emotions muddying my objectivity?

Her cohort, like most of the employees, are pawns in our system, but she was special to me. Could I pull her back from the abyss into which I had inadvertently been pushing her for years? Even more for my sake than hers, preserving the status quo of my power is paramount. It would take time, more than what I had left in the Company.

Perhaps worried that she might be branded a heretic with me, she quickly doubled back, but without teeth. Still, it was another jolting reminder of how precarious my situation could quickly become if the inmates take over the asylum.

“But I feel that you are not telling me everything.”

Speaking my mind would feel liberating, if only for short term gratification; I was bound to pay a political price in the Company for releasing years of pent up frustration, having toed the party line and been a willing lackey to the inane religiosity of the mob for decades. The tool that my generation—my elite upper echelon—had created, which worked brilliantly in our favor for decades, was now at risk of bringing the whole ship down.

I squirmed knowing that I owe my *kōhai* the truth; my catharsis aside, it was a worthy price for me to pay to help at least one person from the younger generation avoid what mine

has gone through...what theirs is going through. I might be blackballed and lose my power and social standing, but my pension would be intact. And maybe this could be the first small step toward breaking the inter-generational deadlock that cripples the Company and the country.

“How can I—you and me, any of us—change foreigners? They are beyond reach. But we can start with ourselves. At least we can come clean with ourselves.”

Her eyes dodged mine in a way that let on that she understood far more than she dared to admit openly, at least for now. Most of us know the con game that is played on us, and that we play on ourselves, especially someone as sharp as Shiori, but are too scared and ashamed to call it out. At some point, what child doesn't struggle to admit that Santa isn't real?

As Shiori's mind started to open a little, I couldn't help but feel futility at being able to put a dent in anything in the office. Maybe this sense of futility is why we end up grinning and bearing “We Japanese” during our entire careers, irrespective of whether foreigners are part of the story. The status quo is too heavy to cast off, and our self-confidence and moral courage are the first things that it strips from us in our youth to protect itself.

Either be a cog in the machine or control the machine, but know that the machine is indestructible and eternal. I chose the latter, and with it came power, prestige, and money. As Milton's Satan said after being cast into the pit: “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n.”

But maybe there is another way of looking at it. Every few generations, our stubbornness, our irrational escalation to a

committed course of action, crashes the entire country. World War II. The Meiji Restoration. In the aftermath of the destruction and sorrow, we re-discover not We Japanese, but we mankind. Me, the individual. And then we rise to inexorable heights. Not that the ideology of We Japanese is eradicated. It lingers like a dormant virus in each cell, in each Japanese person, only to flare up again. The cycle repeats.

So maybe Takeichi, or the next version of her, is doing exactly what has been prescribed by her handlers in the cycle, as are we and everybody else.

A few months later, Shiori got an opportunity to put her new awareness to use. The American parent decided to cut its losses and jettison the Company, selling it to a powerful private equity firm from mainland Asia. Shortly afterward, Shiori’s marketing team received a token gift of sweets from the new executive management team installed by the firm.

“Damn,” she muttered under her breath as she tore open the wrapper. “I *hate* Chinese mooncakes. You want them?”

Our electric conversation of a few months ago ended up bringing Shiori and me closer. Neither of us complained less, but we had become more candid with each other and, perhaps, tended to bow more often to the absurdities around us with a sense of humor.

Taking one, I chuckled to myself, thinking of the one card in business that trumps We Japanese, We Americans, and yes, We Chinese too: “He who has the pesos, has the say-so’s.”

* * *

AFTERWORD

Prælectio de Apologia

We are indoctrinated with ideologies about ourselves from childhood, long before we have the rational ability to neutralize the infection—a cognitive contagion or “virus of the mind,” as is popularly called today, passed from generation to generation from time immemorial.

And because the contagion is so old, we succumb to arguments from authority about its correctness as it pertains to our self-identities. Beyond being simply authentic in our minds, the ideologies infuse us with an instinctive righteousness about who we are and how we should act. Without even so much as a stray reflection, we shut out logic and objective truths whenever they run contrary to the ideologies.

All people in all cultures are infected by this cognitive contagion to various degrees. Japanese people are the same as any other person from anywhere in the world, and from any time in the world, be they from modern Nigeria or ancient Greece. As *homo sapiens*, how could Japanese people be otherwise? No group is immune, yet each considers his group special—usually better—than all others. We can easily see the contagion at work on people of other cultures, but because of the contagions’ deceptive nature, it is next to impossible to see it in ourselves.

To overcome this viral ideological indoctrination, one has to develop the ability to recognize the ideology, then have the courage to do something about it. Few people can do the former; almost nobody, the latter.

The practical ways to overcome this situation are limited. One way is to remove oneself from one's own ideological environment and immerse oneself in someone else's (i.e., live overseas) so as to neutralize the cues of constant reinforcement of the ideology. Another is to be exposed to someone from outside our ideology—a foreigner, especially one with power over us, in our Japanese office.

Whenever the foreigner does not seem to understand us, we become frustrated, and we project our frustration onto him. We end-up blaming him, perhaps even go so far as to demonize him, his race, or his culture.

The foreigner is, however, merely a catalyst that inadvertently (and usually clumsily) debunks our ideologies before our eyes. We sense that something is wrong, yet we are so besotted with our ideologies, and our judgement so clouded, that we jump to the incorrect conclusion that the foreigner is wronging us. The foreigner's illumination of our ideological falsehoods, and our inability to reconcile the incongruity between objective facts and our quasi-religious beliefs, frustrate us and the foreigner. Conflict at the office arises.

Who exploits the ideologies for personal gain?

They come from the ranks of senior strongmen: directors, general managers, and their zealous protégés.

Such men have grown up in their companies and have hired most of the staff in their departments. Employees look to them

for leadership, wisdom, and guidance. Strongmen stand the most to benefit from the status quo of office feudalism, and guzzle the prestige and power in their fiefdoms. Their identities are derived largely from their corporate lives.

The foreign boss is the single biggest threat to a strongman's status and psyche. The strongman does not fear change per se. Rather, he bristles at the prospect of the rationale for the change being revealed. The reason is that, for decades, he has enjoyed a fat salary and benefits, yet accomplished nothing, and all at the expense of his staff. He is far behind his global competitors.

It is profoundly unsettling for the strongman to discover that he has squandered his life for naught, slogging at the office daily while sacrificing a relationship with his family. But the real comeuppance is the potential for him to lose control of his staff. When a foreign boss uncovers the situation, the strongman feels humiliated and vulnerable.

The strongman retaliates by stalling any initiative for change proffered by the foreigner and establishes a covert autonomous Japanese organization within the organization. He takes on a crusader's sense of righteousness. Intellectually lazy followers are all too eager to rally behind him or his middle-management protégé, thoughtlessly nestling in the ideologies. Meanwhile, staff morale tumbles, as do the company's finances. The personal agenda of the instigator prevails at the expense of everyone around him.

If you are looking to preserve your empire until you coast into retirement, this is the way to go. The strongman usually

prevails at the expense of the company and his staff; the foreign boss eventually repatriates.

You also become the target for firing by the foreign senior leaders when they uncover the situation and have the courage to take action.

