

Closing the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality in Human Resource Management Strategy: The Case of a Japanese Manufacturer¹

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Abstract

This study describes how a Japanese manufacturer was able to close the gap between the rhetoric and reality of its Human Resource Management (HRM) strategy. By drawing from the studies in tacit/explicit knowledge in Knowledge Management and “actuality/reality” in Information Systems, I trace the processes used by Company A to deal with the tacit and explicit dimensions of the individual’s job so that HRM strategy could be re–interpreted and implemented and as a result “actualized.” The study also raises some issues to be considered in HRM, namely; (1) that management needs to target job roles in order to interact with both the tacit and explicit dimensions of the employee and (2) that the process of “accommodation” presents a useful way of managing diversity amongst employees and creating synergy for the company.

Keywords: Human Resource Management Strategy, rhetoric, reality, actuality, tacit, explicit, accommodation, diversity, job role, omoi, ba.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Company A–Outline of the Case
3. Interactions with the Implicit & Explicit–Nonaka’s Theory of Knowledge Creation
4. Actuality and Reality–Uchiyama’s Model
5. Actualizing HRM Strategy–A Map of the Processes Used by Company A
6. Implications for HRM
7. Conclusion

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1. Introduction

Human Resource Management (HRM) strategy is an integrative approach to managing people to achieve the goals of the organization (Armstrong 2003). Employees need to be able to understand, accept and implement HRM strategy at both an explicit and tacit level if the strategy is to be effective. When employees do not appreciate HRM strategy at both levels, a gap can occur between the proposed strategy and what actually happens in practice: a gap between rhetoric and reality.

“Company A”², the company that forms the case study in this paper, was faced with such a gap between the rhetoric of its HRM strategy and the reality in which the strategy was (or rather, was not) being put into practice. To position itself competitively in the global market, the company needed to obtain ISO-9002 certification. To achieve this, top management unveiled a new corporate strategy incorporating a revamped HRM strategy and HRM system. However, despite the clearly articulated goals, the needed change was facing strong resistance. An employee survey confirmed what top management had sensed from the beginning. Not only had their employees not understood the new strategy, but also the whole mood throughout the company was so “stagnated” that implementing change would be major challenge, even if the strategy were properly understood.

What makes the story of Company A’s journey in overcoming the hurdles to ultimately reach its goals so notable is the way in which top management dealt with the tacit dimensions of its employees. Through a process of accommodating the aspirations, expectations and experience (or what the Japanese call *omoi*) of the employees, and making the *omoi* explicit through the employees’ attachment to and enactment of their “job” (*shigoto*), or more precisely their “role” (*yakuwari*), each employee was able to make corporate strategy a tacit component of their work and working environment.

Studies by Ikujiro Nonaka (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1999) and Ken-ichi Uchiyama (2003) have looked at the approaches and processes used by management in Japanese companies to transform implicit knowledge into the explicit. Although the studies are specific to Knowledge Management (KM), and Information Systems (IS) and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), respec-

2 In compliance with the company’s request for confidentiality, the pseudonym “Company A” is used. All the details and events discussed in this paper are actual and were drawn from interviews with top management and employees, visits to the company sites, and internal and external documentation.

tively, and draw from Japanese philosophy, the models they have developed are universal and thus can be applied to a diversity of business contexts throughout the world. In essence, they use Japanese philosophy and thought as a lens through which to reframe and rethink their understanding of the business organization.

In this paper, I attempt to trace the way in which Company A was able to transform the tacit dimensions of the individual and group job and role to an explicit component of HRM strategy. In essence, it is an appreciation of how HRM strategy is *actualized*. In order to trace this process, I turn to the studies of Nonaka and Uchiyama and thus provide a brief outline of their thinking. I conclude with a discussion on the further implications of this study for HRM.

2. Company A—Outline of the Case

Company A was established in the mid-1950s and currently has a head office and factory in the Kanto region and is involved in the research, development and manufacturing of surfactants – the raw materials used in the production of cosmetics, pharmaceutical, textile, and food products. The company is part of a larger group of chemical companies that have branch offices in Japan and domestic and overseas affiliates. The company does business with most of the well-known domestic cosmetic companies as well as big-name overseas manufacturers of end-user cosmetic and health-related products. Ranked by the Toyo Keizai Data Bank's Taxed Profit Ranking in the top 20 in 1998 amongst "synthetic detergent, oil and fat manufacturers", Company A continued to show strong profits despite the economic recession in Japan at the time. Although the company has since fallen a few ranks down as of the present (2004), it still remains a force behind the climb of the group's overall ranking in the top 30–35 to the present (2004) ranking in the top ten. At the time of my first visits to this company (1998–9), the total number of *seishain* (regular employees) was close to two hundred, but the company was also actively making use of a growing number of employees under different employment conditions as well as outsourcing.

The force behind Company A's attempts to implement a new corporate strategy and related HRM strategies, systems and procedures, was one of survival. Overseas customers, especially those based in Europe, who themselves were manufacturers, advised that they would only be able to continue doing business with Company A if the company had acquired ISO-9002 certification. The ISO-9002, as part of the ISO-9000 series, is a quality assurance model made up of nineteen sets of quality system requirements that cover not only the quality control of the products manufactured, but also management/leadership responsibilities, purchasing, product trac-

ing, handling and storage, documentation, and the training of employees, and so on.³

To meet the ISO standard, top management presented a strategy that embraced not only production and quality control, but a comprehensive HRM strategy and a vision for a new corporate climate as well. In a previous paper (McDonald 1999), I outlined the main tenets of Company A's vision and the corporate strategy referred to as the "10 Year mid-term Planning/Business Strategy." In summary, the 10-Year Mid-term Planning/Business Strategy contained a product (marketing strategy), production strategy, and HRM strategy. Top management also articulated a corporate vision statement and a guiding philosophy of how it would utilize its human resources. Planning was broken down into shorter terms of one year and was supported by a "7-Point HRM Plan". The HRM plan was focused at a more operational level and dealt with HRM systems—(1) Job Status/Qualification (grade up and promotion) (2) Personnel Evaluation (3) Education and Training (4) Job Transfer and Rotation and (5) Reward System. In way of articulating the gist of the strategy, top management created a special document titled "Company A Revolution" and listed the purpose, policy, and goals of the new strategy. They also announced the slogan, "Making a bright workplace and a sure future possible with Company A Revolution."

Top management sensed a major hurdle in trying to implement the "Revolution"—that their employees had not really understood what the strategy was about and that the whole mood of the company was what they later termed "stagnate." This was confirmed in an employee survey⁴. According to the survey results, 92% of the employees indicated they did not completely understand the strategy. The employees also painted a picture of a workplace in which communication was stifled, leadership was failing to provide the necessary guidance, and the existence of large "barriers between divisions" (such as lack of information sharing, communication, and so on) or "divisionalism". Employees lacked pride in the company and felt the company had no future. However, the employees also believed that they were making a positive contribution to the company through their work, although poor working relations with their bosses inhibited their potential for greater contributions. Management had confirmed that in the minds and practice of

3 Detailed information about ISO-9002 and the other standards can be found on the world wide web at <http://www.iso.org>

4 This survey, conducted by the company, consisted of 40 questions and was completed by a total of 95 employees in non-managerial positions. Questions included such areas as; comprehension of the business strategy and objectives, managerial vision, improvement of work practices, enactment of job functions, openness in communication, sharing of information, divisional segregation (divisionalism), performance & evaluations, human resource development, contribution through work, pride in the company, sense of company future, interest in the results of the survey, and the degree to which the answers were made honestly.

the employees the “Company A Revolution” was mere rhetoric.

The President decided to take drastic measures, which even involved closing down the factory’s operations for longer than a month. First, the President translated the Revolution into a 5S program⁵. He then gave each individual employee the task of making proposals on ways the program could be implemented. The President presented himself as very charismatic in introducing the program; he was genuinely excited about the changes to come, creating an atmosphere in which all employees wanted to be actively involved in the change. The proposals were to be developed in a team, be very specific and related to the employee’s own job and immediate work environment, and include a clear designation of each individual’s role and responsibility in carrying out the proposal. Teams usually consisted of employees from the same section or work area. However, all the teams came together periodically to present their proposals. At these meetings, proposals were critiqued and improved on by the other teams and top management. As the proposals were specific to the team’s workplace, any suggestions for improvement needed to be worked on further by the team back at their workplace and the new–improved proposal presented again later– representing a continuous cycle of learning and improvement.

After each proposal was approved by a company–wide democratic vote, the employees put each proposal into action. Besides the improvement to quality control, management facilities, and the way the employees their work, top management had sensed a very sharp improvement in the whole mood of the company. In my visit to the factory, the President told me one story that had become so widely shared inside and outside of the company that it had become legendary⁶. The employees decided that one way of improving the work environment was to design and make their own office furniture to enhance a shared working space. No one was to have any individually–segregated working area, which meant that individual tables and chairs were disposed of. The employees even threw out the President’s own table. The President closed down the factory and each team came into work to make their own furniture with the lumber and paint the company supplied. Activities like this had improved communication and developed a stronger sense of solidarity. Visits to each work area also confirmed the sense of pride each employee

5 The “Five ‘S’ Program” is named after the five main terms: *Seiri* (filing and sorting), *Seiso* (orderliness), *Seiton* (cleanliness), *Seiketsu* (tidiness) and *Shitsuke* (discipline) and is utilized by a number of Japanese manufacturers to improve productivity and reduce waste, especially at the production line.

6 Schein (1999) refers to this type of story, legend or myth about people and events as a “secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanism” (p. 98) used by leaders to embed cultural elements in corporate culture.

now held in the achievements of each team when they started to share their own stories too. The company successfully obtained ISO-9002 certification and later ISO-14001.

Although the wording of the HRM strategy remained unchanged, the employees were able to translate the policies and systems to their own individual work and enact them in conjunction with, or even as an integral part of, the proposals they made for the 5S program. Top management had created an environment in which employees were able to make corporate strategy a tacit component of their work and working environment.

To appreciate the dynamics of this environment and the processes in which top management were able to actualize HRM strategy, I turn to the studies of Ikujiro Nonaka in Knowledge Management and Ken-ichi Uchiyama in actuality in Information Systems and Soft Systems Methodology. In the following two sections I outline the main tenets of their thinking.

3. Interactions with the Implicit & Explicit- Nonaka's Theory of Knowledge Creation

Ikujiro Nonaka's major contribution to studies in Knowledge Management is his theory of knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). According to this theory, the creation " ... of new knowledge boils down to *the conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge.*" (p.11) The motivation for understanding how implicit knowledge is made explicit comes from the realization that " ... having an insight or a hunch that is highly personal is of little value to the company unless the individual can convert it into explicit knowledge, thus allowing it to be shared with others in the company." (p. 11) Nonaka describes explicit knowledge as that which can be "expressed in words and numbers, and easily communicated and shared in the form of hard data, scientific formula, codified procedures, or universal principles" (p. 8). Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, includes "subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches" which are difficult to formalize and share. Of particular note is that tacit knowledge is grounded in *action* and *experience*.

In terms of how managers approach the processes that turn tacit knowledge into explicit, Nonaka highlights three main characteristics: the use of figurative language and symbolism, the sharing of an individual's personal knowledge with others, and the role of ambiguity and redundancy.

The concept of *ba*, first proposed by modern Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida (1990), is fundamental to the theory of knowledge creation. Nonaka (1998) describes *ba* as " ... a shared space for emerging relationships." (p. 40) Knowledge is "embedded" in *ba*, " ... where it is then acquired through one's experience or reflections on the experiences of others. If knowledge is separated from *ba*, it turns into information." (pp. 40-41) As a 'phenomenal' place, *ba* becomes

the platform for the emergence of knowledge in individuals, and work groups. Nonaka provides the SECI model (socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization) to explain the process in which tacit and implicit knowledge are “exchanged and transformed.”

4. Actuality and Reality– Uchiyama’s Model

Complementing Nonaka’s theory of the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge is Ken-ichi Uchiyama’s (2003) application of the notion of “actuality” and “reality” to Information Systems and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). Uchiyama (2004) builds on the work of Japanese phenomenological psychiatrist Bin Kimura and explains that “ ... ‘reality’ belongs to the cognitive side of the real world, while ‘actuality’ belongs to the active side.” (p. 103) Kimura points out the distinction by referring to the Latin roots of the two words. “Reality” comes from the Latin root “*res*” meaning “things” or “objects”. “Actuality” comes from “*actio*” which means “action” or “doing”. Both terms are close in meaning to the Japanese terms *mono* (reality) and *koto* (actuality).⁷

Kimura’s notion of reality/actuality is founded in his practice as a psychiatrist with patients who have what he terms “de-personalization” or “de-realization”. Those with “de-realization” have a loss of feeling or texture of things and events, especially as it pertains to distance and time. Uchiyama (2004) goes on to explain that:

... although patients with (de-realization) have no disturbance of intelligence and perception, they lose their feeling of the real world entirely. For example, ... they can recognize the distance between the car and the wall as *data* when they drive the car into the carport, but due to the loss of *feeling of distance* they crash the car into the carport wall. (Emphasis added)
p. 103

Kimura’s distinction between actuality and reality is purely analytical. For most people, actuality and reality are intertwined in our dealings with life. In fact, it is actuality that enables the perception of reality.

Uchiyama translates the notions of actuality/reality to Information Systems equating the attempt to connect data to action as trying to connect reality with actuality. However, Uchiyama argues, the shortcoming of the positivistic approaches used in IS is that they deal only with data and thus only on a reality level. Failing to deal at an actuality level means that there can be no connection between data and how the data is used in action.

⁷ For a philosophical discussion on *mono* and *koto* in English, refer to Raud (2002).

For Uchiyama, Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), developed by Peter Checkland (1999), provides the means to make the connection. This is achieved by SSM's use of "human activity models" as an expression of action relevant to actuality. This model is then used to look into the real world (reality) at which time (an epistemological) learning takes place from recognizing the difference between the model and the real world. The learning is based in a movement from the tacit to the explicit and reflects Kimura's notion of how the perception of reality is enabled through actuality.

SSM is also a methodology of action research; research concerned with action (or takes place in action), as opposed to the research of action. Therefore the learning that takes place is one of reflection in action, or "actual learning." When the learning is gained from doing, (or "learning by doing") by carrying out an action plan, the learning becomes tacit. Uchiyama points out the two learning directions— from actuality to reality and then reality to actuality— following parallels with Nonaka's model of interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge.

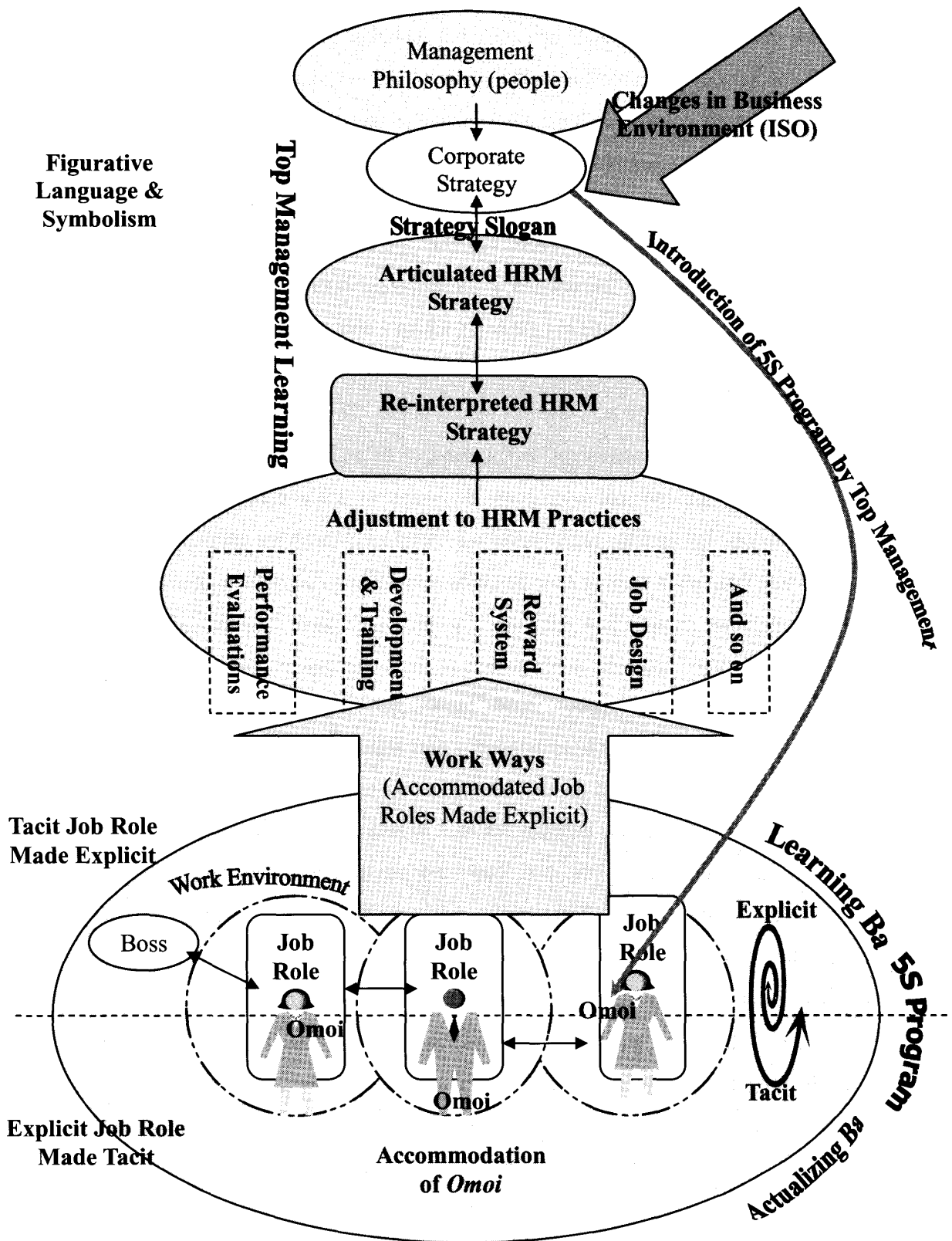
Another important notion that Uchiyama has presented is his development of Checkland's concept of "accommodation." According to Checkland (2004) accommodation refers to " ... the process that creates an environment of co-existence, whether it be at work or home, where each worker or family member retains their own different way of looking (or thinking) at the world or worldview." (p. 42) (translation mine). To make this possible, it is necessary for those involved to find a version of the shared situation that they can live with. Checkland stresses it is the maintenance of different thinking and worldviews that distinguishes the concept of accommodation from consensus. Uchiyama (Checkland 2004) builds on this notion by asserting that different worldviews are accommodated on the basis of shared tacit knowledge (or *omoi*⁸). In this way, Uchiyama draws a parallel with Nonaka's model of knowledge management in the *process* of migrating from "socialization" to "externalization".

5. Actualizing HRM Strategy – A Map of Processes Used by Company A

Drawing from the notions presented by Nonaka and Uchiyama it is possible to trace the

8 The concept of *omoi* deserves deeper consideration than can be provided in this paper. However, as a brief explanation, *omoi* can be thought of in relation to actuality in which " ... the feeling or sense –of–being ... can only come from interactions with the real world (the world outside of self). It is in this sense that objects, events, etc, in the real world speak to us, or provide the context in which we can realize the manifestation of our selves." (Uchiyama 2004, p. 112) Uchiyama describes this understanding of actuality as being similar to Michel Henry's (1993) notion of "auto-affection".

Figure 1
Map of Actualization of HRM Strategy in "Company A"



process in which Company A was able to actualize its HRM strategy as per Figure 1.

In response to changes in the business environment, namely the need to be ISO compliant, top management developed a corporate strategy that included a HRM strategy. Top management also released a special document outlining the goals of the corporate strategy that features a slogan. This document used colorful and emotive language that reflected the *omoi* of top management and thus is similar to what Nonaka (1995) refers to as “the use of figurative language and symbolism”. (p. 12)

Having learnt through an employee survey that the employees did not understand the corporate strategy, top management introduced a 5S Program through which each employee was able to translate corporate strategy to his or her own job and work environment. The President was a very charismatic figure in the introduction of the 5S Program, becoming a symbol of the excitement in the positive change he believed would come. This enhanced the *ba* as the employees became infected with the excitement and wanted to be actively involved. The President had each employee develop and present a proposal for ways to achieve components of the 5S program in their own job. By having each individual employee think up proposals, the employees were drawing from their own tacit or hidden skills and abilities as well as personality and *omoi* and including them in an explicit new job role. The proposals were then brought together as one group proposal to be shared with the other groups in the company. As such, the 5S Program triggered a *ba* in which where it was possible for the employees to reach accommodation of their *omoi* (the actualizing *ba*). Proposals underwent continuous improvement and interpretation as each employee adjusted the proposal to his or her job role and the work environment— a continuous cycle of learning that forms the learning *ba* that is also a continued interaction with both the tacit and explicit dimensions of the job role. The work environment included a complexity of relationships between the boss and fellow employees that were viewed through the job role and thus the job roles also went through a process of accommodation with each of these actors. When these accommodated job roles were enacted they became explicit as work ways.

Based on the new work ways, management made adjustments to HRM practices including performance evaluations, development and training, reward systems, job design and so on. For instance, in keeping with the employee need for continuous self-improvement to reach their work goals, management developed a cafeteria-like training/development system. The employee's self-initiative to participate in the training/development program was also recognized in a performance-based wage system, indicating the overall integration of HRM practices.

As the HRM practices were formed within the HRM strategy articulated by top management, the adjustments to the practices represent an employee interpretation of HRM strategy. In-

volvement by top management in making these adjustments also represents a process of continuous learning for top management. This learning becomes part of management's experienced-based knowledge and is fed back into future action plans for corporate and HRM strategy.

6. Implications for HRM

The way in which Company A was able to actualize its HRM strategy raises a number of issues to be considered in approaching HRM. I would like to look at two issues: (1) the need to focus on roles as opposed to jobs, and, (2) accommodation and managing workforce diversity.

(1) *Focus on Roles*

If HRM strategy and practices are to be effective, they need to target *roles* rather than traditional notions of a job. The traditional view of the job is as “... a unit in an organization structure that remains unchanged whoever is in the job.” (Armstrong 2003 p. 337). As Armstrong goes on to point out, this view is mechanical and does not equip the individual in meeting the day-to-day realities of organizational life. Reworded within the framework of this paper, the traditional view of the job only deals with the explicit dimension of work.

A role concerns “... the part people play in carrying out their work.” (Armstrong 2003, p. 337). As Ling (2002) notes, a role is a much broader definition than job because of the focus of “*carrying out* work.” (p. 46) (emphasis mine) This focus encompasses management of work styles and the broad range of ways in which employees work together. In this paper, we can describe a role as referring to the *process* by which an individual's *omoi* (the tacit dimension which, besides the general notion of *omoi*, also includes hidden skills and abilities, personality, and so on) is transformed into work ways or work style (explicit dimension) in a workplace with interaction and relations with others (*ba*), including superiors and co-workers. As a process that incorporates a set of relationships with others, the job role is situation-specific; meaning that job roles only have meaning for the situation and circumstances under which they are developed. The process component of job role is autopoietic (Maturana 1980) in that the development of job roles is more about transformation than output.

The focus on job role is made more crucial when considering the large number of employees who view and express themselves in their companies through their job. Oota (1999) describes these types of workers as “*shigoto-jin*” or “the job-orientated worker” as opposed to the “*soshiki-jin*” or “the organization-orientated worker”. Oota explains that *shigoto-jin* make a distinction between their job and the organization. *Shigoto-jin* seek fulfillment of their wants

through their job and thus indicate a stronger commitment to their individual job than to the organization. To the *shigoto-jin* the organization is important in that it provides the source of support (whether in terms of finance, information, or so on) to carry out their jobs. To effectively interact with these workers at a tacit level, management therefore need to target job roles. Company A was able to achieve this by having their employees develop work ways to reach the goals of the 5S Program and then adjusting HRM systems to support the work ways.

(2) *Accommodation and Managing Diversity*

When focusing on job roles, management needs to be concerned with creating work environments (*ba*) that *accommodate* differing work ways. “One-size-fits-all”-type HRM approaches apart from representing one dominant worldview treat employees as a “generic category”, failing to recognize and draw upon the diversity amongst employees (Benschop 2001).

As Checkland (2004) has noted, accommodation refers to creating environments in which differing worldviews can co-exist. In addition, Checkland had noted that “... the achievement of accommodation legitimizes diversity and difference. People who have taken part in the (process of accommodation) can tolerate difference and diversity.” (personal communication, June 9, 2004). It is within this environment that companies can draw from the diversity of their employees and bring forth organizational synergy. Uchiyama (2004) notes the greater depth of accommodation in its basis on shared knowledge at a tacit level or *omoi*. This enhanced notion of accommodation provides clues in how companies can pursue both tacit and explicit dimensions of managing diversity.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I traced the way in which a Japanese manufacturer (“Company A”) was able to actualize its HRM strategy and thus overcome the gap between rhetoric and reality. The process involved top management creating an environment (or *ba*) in which employees were empowered to develop their own individual work style. Top management then adjusted its HRM practices to fit this. Guiding this process was the interaction of top management and co-workers in a Total Quality Management program (5S Program.) Through this process, the rhetoric of HRM and corporate strategy was re-interpreted, and the strategy pursued at both a tacit and explicit level.

Fundamental to understanding the process of actualization were Ikujiro Nonaka’s model of knowledge creation and Ken-ichi Uchiyama’s application of actuality to management studies.

These models gave us the lens to appreciate the interaction between the tacit and explicit, actuality and reality in the context of work. The implications of the insights for HRM were: (1) that management needs to target job roles in order to interact with both the tacit and explicit dimensions of the employee and (2) that the process of accommodation presents a useful way of managing diversity amongst employees and creating synergy for the company.

The experience of Company A when viewed through the lens of a different philosophical framework (namely the philosophy of Kitaro Nishida and Bin Kimura) opens the way for a new understanding of organizations and managing people. Company A has shown us that gaps between management rhetoric and reality can become as a positive opportunity for organizational learning and change. Further, Company A's attempt to unleash the hidden dimensions of its employees shows how companies can work with human diversity to turn it into a driving force towards both individual empowerment and corporate success.

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