

## **Waseda Business School Intensive Class in Singapore:**

### **ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES OF SERVICE INDUSTRY IN ASIA**

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February 2014 was “the” month. We Nanyang-Waseda Double MBA participants were finishing our courses in NTU (Nanyang Technological University), preparing for final exams and papers and packing up to leave Singapore to spend our third and final term in Tokyo.

It was a balancing act, one which I relished and learned many valuable lessons from.

During that first week of February, Professor Reiji Ohtaki came to Singapore with a group of Waseda University MBA students for a 4-day course on Organizational Strategies of Service Industry in Asia.

It was quite an interesting session. Professor Ohtaki introduced Johari’s window, a fun and unique way of self-introduction through adjectives and sharing of experiences with stuff one knows and stuff people know about oneself. We had this little sheet where we wrote things about ourselves, our hobbies and our curiosities on what others enjoy doing too. We did the rounds in the classroom and it made us bond with one another as well as understand ourselves more.

My poster:

TELL:

*I am from Cebu, Philippines.*

*I was a banker prior to this MBA.*

*I am a middle child =)*

*I enjoy music, eating, travelling and trying new things.*

ASK:

*Anyone enjoy music, eating, travelling and trying new things? ☺*

After this exercise, we formed groups and the class agreed on what topics to discuss. We decided to learn more about service quality, talent management, cultural differences between Singapore and Japan, and why Singapore for business – these were to be presented on the last day of class.

It was a light day. My classmates had an orientation of sorts on Singapore, how to get to the school, what to see and do etc. After, we huddled with our groupmates and came up with how and what we wished to share in class.



L-R: - Ethan Hsieh, Yusuke Nakanishi, Vivek Sharma, CkSang, Ayami Okada and Professor Reiji Ohtaki

In the afternoon, we had a speaker, Mr. Seki Yasuji from Cross Coop. His



company provides incubation / serviced offices and real estate space for small and medium Japanese enterprises as well as supports Japanese businesses looking to expand overseas.

He shared why many people choose Singapore as their hub in Asia (good location, network, infrastructure, government support, talent, among others); as well as the changing demographics in Japan which has pushed many industries to look to outside markets to grow. Asia is a prime spot, with its young population and growing market.

He stressed the need to be observant and to cater one's offering to the needs of the market. He cited Tonkotsu

Kazan, a stone bowl ramen concept with a red funnel cover to simulate volcano eruptions. This inspiration came from Japanese noodles (ramen), the novelty of



Korean rice stone bowls (coming from the prevalence of K-pop dramas and entertainment) and the creativity of giving customers a "show" or some sort of performance through the mock production of volcano waves. Admittedly, this set-up might shock ramen purists, but then again, he said that this is because the market they serve are the locals (i.e. Singaporeans) and not the traditional Japan noodle clients. Since the company specifically tailored itself to suit the taste and preferences of the Singaporean market, Tonkotsu Kazan has been doing quite well and has been able to create a name for itself in the ramen business. The strategy - Not being everything to everybody, but focusing on who the real customers are.

When we think of the word "service", it conjures up images of sales people or attendants at a hotel or restaurant. It is so much more than that. It is, as

Professor Ohtaki said, *a function of goods or system or activity (of human being) that one offers another, in return for some direct / indirect benefit.*

Service comprises 70% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the world's developed countries. It is that which makes things better, satisfies a need and fulfils a demand. Despite this figure (70%), the service sector is in dire need of productivity improvement, strategies to address customer retention, flexibility and solutions for the market.

Mrs. Yoshimi Nakajima talked about her experiences with AMEX Asia (American Express International Inc.) and the meaning of world class service and personal recognition on Day 2.

AMEX (headquartered in New York, USA), is over 160 years old and started out as a freight company, diversifying into credit cards, travel and financial services. It is one of the world's top brands and most admired companies. Throughout its existence, the company has stuck to 3 Pillars: Leadership, Empowerment and Measurement – factors which have made it successful to this day.

She shared the challenges they faced in the 2011 earthquake in Japan, and the dedication of her team to ensure that their clients were taken care of. Mrs. Nakajima highlighted the importance of vision in an organization and stepping out of one's comfort zone. She revealed that while it certainly is no holiday making an organization work, what with all the complexities and tasks and things to attend to - a growth mindset will overcome obstacles. Keep working at it till it comes through. Another lesson: Tell people what you want. You can be nice while doing it and they will understand you better for it.



Group picture with Mrs. Nakajima of AMEX (Photo courtesy of Takeshi Hayashi)

Ohtaki-sensei discussed about cost and service level and actual customer experiences with Ritz Carlton, holding true to their credo of "We are **Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen.**" Excellent service by everyone in the firm.

Service is not just about price or location, but is a function of various factors (enhancers and enablers) like staff attitude, customer relationships, ambience, skill and convenience.

It is not just relegated to industries like hotels or department stores, but even in government as well. A visit of the Ministry of Manpower MOM proved this. I was impressed by how the Ministry transformed itself, despite it being a government organization.

Their goals: engage and connect with citizens, understand and manage customer needs and award and recognize exemplary service. To succeed, structures and standards were put in place, workshops, orientations,

benchmarking (best practices with other countries) and even managing expectations were optimized for more effective processes. The result: a totally new and fresh organization, with people, service and culture as their mindset. This decision to change came through across all levels – national, the ministry and the departments themselves.

The afternoon saw Mr. Choong Huei of Jobstreet, an online job portal started in the 1990s and currently Southeast Asia's largest online recruitment firm. He is quite bullish on Southeast Asia particularly the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia - with emerging talent, technical skills presenting challenges and at the same time, opportunities for growth. English proficiency, learning and computer literacy, speed and accuracy are essential. It is said that Jobstreet disintermediated the traditional newspaper ads at speeds and matching successes unheard of before. What he said about going against the tide, the rising economies of Asia and the service industry and doing what you love to do were inspirational.



Group With Choong Huei Sew of Jobstreet (Photo courtesy of Takeshi Hayashi)

On the last day, we had the group presentations. I was pleasantly surprised to observe that my Japanese classmates were quite active and imaginative (acting out skits and plays unlike the usual reporting) and expounded on their thoughts too – far from my preconceived notions of seriousness and timidity in Asian classes. =)

### Lessons:

- leadership is integral
- there is room for growth in the Asian service market
- government support is crucial (a key contributing factor in Singapore's case)
- changing mindsets even more vital
- with customers getting more vocal and demanding, understand and manage customers' needs = service at reasonable cost (customer sensing / insight)
- measure service, adapt standards and recognize achievement (service alignment)
- competency training (training, design thinking)

All in all, I enjoyed Professor Ohtaki's class. It was four days and time well spent at that. Ohtaki-sensei was brilliant – I liked the pacing and content of the discussions, the live interactions with the guest speakers and company visits. It gave us a feel of how the industry really is and how things work. I learned many things and had a lovely time connecting with my Japanese friends. I look forward to my stay in Japan and continuing this learning experience.

