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BOOK REVIEWS

Why Asians are Less Creative than Westerners, by Ng Aik Kwang. Published by Prentice Hall: Singapore, 2001 (230 pages).

Ng Aik Kwang is an Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. He obtained his doctoral degree at the University of Queensland, Australia. He is also the author of *Liberating the Creative Spirit in Asian Students* (Prentice Hall, 2004), and has a deep research interest in issues related to child creativity, especially from a culture-motivated perspective.

In his book, *Why Asians are Less Creative than Westerners*, Kwang points out that the challenge of being creative is intricately connected to the type of society and culture in which one lives (p. 79). This is because the psyche of an individual is shaped by the culture in which they live. In turn, this affects the creativity of an individual either positively or negatively (p. 183). Hence, Kwang's major claim in his book is that generally, Asians are less creative than their Western counterparts due to the culture to which they are exposed from childhood.

To substantiate his claim, Kwang compares how Asians and Westerners typically behave in their respective societies and how this impacts creativity. He elucidates five major reasons, rooted in culture, why Asians are typically less creative than Westerners.

First, a typical Asian society is more tightly organized, with many social rules that regulate public behavior. This does not allow people to express themselves creatively in any way that deviates from the established societal rules and patterns. In contrast, the Western society is more loosely organized, with fewer social rules and norms to regulate behavior in public. This allows people to express themselves in any way they deem creative.

Second, a typical Asian society is collectivistic, putting greater emphasis on the social groups than on the individual. This controls the psychological freedom of the individual to think and be creative. In contrast, a Western society is individualistic, putting greater emphasis on the individual than on the social groups. This leaves the individual much psychological freedom to think and be creative (pp. 24-25, 155-172).

Third, as a result of Asians' collectivistic society, they tend to be more concerned with *mian-zi* ("face"—gaining or winning the social approval of the group). The behavior of a face-conscious, ego-involved Asian is controlled by the desire to enhance his/her "face" in the community. This behavior prevents them from being creative. In contrast, Westerners are less likely to be concerned with winning the social approval of the group. They are more concerned with realizing their personal goals and creative potential in life (pp. 24-25, 80-87).

Fourth, the conception of selfhood differs greatly between Asian and Western societies. This contrasting conception of selfhood is reflected in the child-rearing philosophies of the two societies. The Asian self-concept which is Galilean (we-ness or collectivism) in nature, trains the child to be psychologically dependent on the social group. Consequently, the average Asian student lacks creativity and passion in what they study, is silent and passive, criticizes himself or herself, and strives to avert failure at all cost by adopting a *kiasi* (afraid to try or die) attitude to learning which avoids risk-oriented and adventurous activities in the process of learning. In contrast, the Western self-concept which is Ptolemaic (I-ness or individualism) in nature trains the child to be psychologically independent or self-reliant. As a result, the average Western student is more inclined to self-enhancement, more open to experience, more extraverted and hedonistic, and thereby more creative (pp. 26-51, 95-114).

Fifth, the typical Asian society puts great emphasis on social order and harmony. This promotes avoidance of conflict, thereby making the Asian less confrontational. In turn, this inhibits creativity since the individual lacks the will power to confront a challenging situation. In contrast, the typical Western society emphasizes the open and democratic exchange of ideas and does not focus on avoidance of conflict. This makes the individual more confrontational. In turn, this promotes creativity since the individual has the will power to confront and overcome a challenging situation (pp. 24-25, 121- 146).

The author concludes that Asians can become as creative as Westerners if a suitable environment is put in place to facilitate their creativity. This can be done if Asian parents help their children to develop a positive self-concept and nurture the autonomy of their children instead of over-protecting them. Also, the family should be the playground of life, where children can become resilient adults (pp. 183-207). This is because "creators are made, not born" (p. 12). Finally, Kwang advises Asians not to emulate Western society blindly, because between East and West, neither is best.

Kwang's effort is commendable in that his book is well laid out and readable. The language is clear and simple. Also, each major discussion is illustrated by a story, a typical characteristic of an Asian writer. His call to Asians to reconsider their attachment to the culture of saving the face and the fear of failure is noble, since these two factors inhibit creativity in almost every

culture in the world. Moreover, while it would appear at first as if Kwang advocates that Asians completely abandon their cultural heritage for Western culture so that they can be more creative, on the contrary, he maintains a balance and cautions Asians not to blindly emulate what he calls the Western “free-for-all” society (p. 202). Finally, Kwang does not just stir up the water, leaving it to settle by itself. Instead, he offers ten guidelines which can help Asians become more creative (pp. 208-212).

This book is highly recommended to anyone who desires to gain invaluable insight into the Asian cultural milieu and its impact on creativity. Also, this book can serve as an eye-opener to parents and educators of societies other than Asia or the West on how to help people in other settings become more creative than they are at present.

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When People Are the Problem, What Will You Do? by Harvard Business School Press. Published by the Author: Boston, MA, 2005 (178 pages).

When People are the Problem, What Will You Do? is a collection of fictional case studies culled from the pages of *Harvard Business Review*. This book is a product of the several contributors, who are introduced below.

Jeffrey C. Connor is the executive director of Seacoast Mental Health Center in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; a lecturer in Organizational Behavior at Harvard Medical School, and a partner at Spectrum, a consulting firm that specializes in organization and executive development in Brookline, Massachusetts. He presented the case study on racial discrimination in a multicultural organization and provides expert solutions to those problems.

Diane L. Coutu is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review*. She specializes in psychology and business. She presented the case study on mental disability that befalls a good employee in the organization. Through the help of experts in psychiatry, she presents practical solutions to deal with the situation.

Alden M. Hayashi is a former senior editor at *Harvard Business Review*. He cited the case study of how some organizations tend to give more leverage to working mothers but tend to over-work those without children. According to him, employers should embrace each worker's diverse claims and seek to support their unique passions. He believes that human resource managers should also integrate the work, home, community, and self of their employees.

John Humpherys is associate professor of management at the College of Business at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, and is a former executive in the financial services industry. He presented the dilemma managers face when dealing with assigning roles to employees from different races.

Julia Kirby is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review*. She wrote the introduction of the book in which she outlined the various contributions and drew the ideas together into one unified collection.

Joan Magretta is a management consultant, a writer, and a past winner of *Harvard Business Review*'s McKinsay award. She presented the case study of a woman in a managerial position who received unwanted sexual advances from a very important client. This lady had a problem informing her boss about the issue, because she feared her boss or some of her colleagues might think instead that she had seduced the client.

Byron Reimus is a Philadelphia-based writer and consultant on workplace communication issues. He presented the case study of two large international companies merging into one, and the clash of cultures that the new company would be likely to face in the process.

The book seeks to address six challenging management situations that managers may face in an organization. As the world becomes more of a global market, the challenge of dealing with diversity will be an increasing problem for managers. As a way of addressing these thorny issues, *Harvard Business Review* is spending a lot of time and resources in research, seeking experts' council to help new managers wanting to expand their skills or experienced managers hoping to stay on top. This solution-oriented book offers managers excellent possibilities for improving their personal performance, and the overall performance of their organization.

Harvard Business Review has engaged itself in publishing several books that provide highly practical advice for managers at all levels. *When People are the Problem* is the latest of these publications.

I found this book to be extremely helpful both for managers, and managers to be, anticipate, understand and manage the needs and issues emerging from the diversity which has come to stay in our world. Organizational behavior would be easier to understand if businesses were more like an assembly line. Since human beings are not machines, however, there is a need for varied approaches to handling an array of issues, while also investing more time and effort in learning how to improve the work environment.

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Web Design Workshop, by John Tollett, Robin Williams, and David Rohr. Published by Peachpit Press., Berkeley, California, 2002 (372 pages).

Robin Williams, a teacher of design and computer technology, has already published other award-winning books. Together with co-authors John Tollett, a designer and art director with over thirty years' experience in graphic design and David Rohr, an experienced print and web designer and the creative director of the 2001 award winning web development firm www.panoramapoint.com, he has written an excellent book about effective web design. This book provides a clear evaluation of the elements of web design, and detailed information for beginning through advanced students who wish to learn web design from those who know.

The book contains 3 sections that will guide the readers on a practical journey of principles of creation and evaluation of web site design.

Section 1 the Prelude, deals with some basics that every web designer should know and the terminology used in web design. The Prelude includes different elements such as the use of Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML), photographs, clipart, animation, etc., that can enhance web design, along with some perspectives to be considered in creating web sites. This section is a very important link to bridge the readers' understanding to the process of web designing which is discussed in Sections 2 and 3.

In Section 2, the authors give practical details on the process of web creation. The authors caution enthusiastic novice to plan carefully before beginning. "As tempting as it may be, design is not the first step in this process. Before you create visuals, you need to create a plan" (p. 76). This section includes practical processes, constructive techniques, useful tips, and valuable information on enhanced functionalities that can be used in web designing. Accompanied by clear visuals and easy-to-read instructions, this section provides an inclusive evaluation of the web creation process, which needs to be considered from the beginning to the end. The suggested processes in this section are from planning the site, considering enhanced functionality, organizing the content and the work flow, to the designing and development process, and finally testing and maintaining the web site.

At the end of this section, the authors suggest a very useful idea on maintaining a web site. "The site may be built and launched, but your job is not yet done—a web site is never really complete. It needs to be promoted and maintained to realize its full potential and reach its target audience" (p. 152).

Section 3 is a source of ideas and a medley of information that can be useful in web design. In this section the authors address several points of view, techniques, and trends in web designing, and discuss the usability of each idea. This includes slicing and dicing techniques, background methods, friendly

navigation systems, the use of buttons and fonts, the magic of rollovers and image swaps, helpful site map and index search structures, powerful cascading style sheets (CSS), creating dynamic pages, designing web sites using frames, moving graphics with gif and flash animation, and the creation of forms. Each of these elements is valuable for the details on how to create them and when to use them without disrupting the design.

The book does not attempt to teach using any particular software, but rather shows how the authors apply their ideas using different programs. The authors have thoroughly evaluated all the major perspectives of web design in a very simple and practical manner. Aside from being a useful information source and a handy guide for beginning or advanced web designers, this book is also a complete evaluation tool for good web site design.

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How to Manage Performance: 24 Lessons for Improving Performance, by Robert Bacal. Published by McGraw-Hill: New York, 2004 (58 pages).

Robert Bacal holds a Master's degree in psychology from the University of Toronto, which he applies through training programs, assisting organizations in solving both business- and performance-related problems in the workplace. He has produced a number of publications arising out of his consultancies, of which "How To Manage Performance: 24 Lessons for Improving Performance" is one. Following are the 24 lesson topics: Modernize your thinking; identify the benefits; manage performance; work with employees; plan precisely with clear goals; align employee goals; set performance incentives; be approachable all year; focus on communication; make it face-to-face; avoid rating perils; don't rank employees; prepare for the appraisal; start reviews on the right foot; identify causes; recognize success; use cooperative communication; focus on behavior and results; be specific about performance; manage conflict with grace; use progressive discipline; document performance; develop employees; and continuously improve your system.

People get confused in differentiating between performance management and performance appraisal. Performance management deals with the on-going follow-up of jobs, and solving the job-related problems of employees while performance appraisal is the evaluation of the deviation of actual performance from the standard or set objectives and goals. These lessons are suggested guidelines to help employees to be creative and understand what is expected of them, but they are "not a recipe for success" (p. ix). One of the challenges of making performance management and appraisal work involves leaving behind older ideas of how work gets done: the manager must adapt to more modern ways of thinking. This requires the need to "invest time and effort, share responsibility and seek out employee's wisdom" (p. 2). The benefit will be in minimizing the time needed for supervision.

Working with employees is of high value. Give employees the information they need about the goals and challenges of the work unit, then, use more questions than statements; and listen, respond and act. "Don't ask for participation and ignore what the employee says" (p. 8), rather, listen attentively before responding. Help the employees know what they are supposed to accomplish by planning precisely with clear goals, linking "employees' goals and job responsibilities . . . [directly] to the goals and mission of the work unit, department, and organization" (p. 11). Incentives should also be set for performance. Incentives are a bit different from rewards. "An incentive is something specified in advance [while] a reward is received after the fact" (p. 13). Bacal suggests that the plan for incentives "should be part of the performance planning process" (p. 13).

A climate that supports employees and encourages them to communicate with management face-to-face needs to be created. Communication plays a great role in performance evaluation too. When performance appraisals are initiated, relying on ratings alone needs to be avoided, for there are other reasons for levels of performance that are not explained in ratings. Ratings are limited in giving a true picture of the evaluation. Communicate with employees, as they might have reasons for not explaining their feelings on an evaluation form. Similarly, avoid ranking employees where there are no expected results to be measured because this can hurt the feelings of employees and eventually hurt the future performance. Preparation for the appraisal is also very important; this involves thinking ahead and background work. Communicate openly with employees by sharing feelings, helping them to feel important, and clarifying any vague aspects of the proposal.

Performance problems will inevitably arise in any organization. Avoid treating the symptom instead of the disease. In order to minimize errors, consult with the employees. When communicating with employees to treat the problem, it is recommended to avoid giving unsolicited advice or overstating a point. While work overload has a great effect on increasing performance errors, recognition for achievement is also very important for improving staff morale.

Finally, following the performance appraisal, skill development is appropriate when it is believed that it could help improve employee performance. Continuous improvement of the performance management system is also vital, through ongoing evaluation.

The overall theme of *How to Manage Performance* is to foster and develop workplace intelligences from different perspectives, especially in giving guidelines to managers on how to value and communicate with their employees. Bacal has made a significant contribution to business practice through this book, which provides helpful information for both employers and employees at the strategic management, functional, and operational levels. The information will assist them in gaining a clearer understanding of their roles and in developing clear and realistic expectations of each other.

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