

## American vs. Japanese Culture and Accountability

05/14/07

I recently got a call complaining about a truck driver's carelessness, which nearly caused an accident; on the side of the truck was my company's name. The truck's description didn't exactly match any one of our trucks. Frankly, I'm shocked. This is not something I would expect from anyone in my company. Could the caller have been wrong? What if the caller was right? What should I do?

Cultural differences affect how businesses respond when accidents happen. A recent Columbia Business School newsletter article, by Professor Michael Morris, talked about differences in leadership between Japanese and American companies. It seems to me that a little bit of both cultures may be called for here.

In American society, according to the article, people are assumed to act on their own, as individuals. Think of it as free agency. When something goes wrong, we search for an individual to blame. The individual most closely connected to the wrong is the person most likely to receive blame and consequences.

In Japanese culture, the organization is a primary driver of action. Individuals within the corporation function as a unit of that company. Therefore the company is to blame, rather than the individual. However, the company cannot atone for

wrongdoing as personally as an individual. A representative of the company steps in. If the offense is serious enough, the company's most senior officer – the President, Chairman, or owner of the company, is the one to step up and take personal responsibility.

The advantage of the American way is a culture of individual accountability and responsibility. There is a very direct connection between wrong doing, wrong doer, and personal consequences. An important part of unraveling what went wrong in any given situation includes understanding who was involved, what they did or did not do, and holding the individuals accountable for fixing the problem and learning to do things differently.

The advantage of Japanese culture is recognizing that individuals do not act alone. They function within a set of boundaries that come from the organization they serve. Something contributes to wrong behavior, beyond the free agency of one or more individuals.

Searching for blame and accountability, in the Japanese culture, follows the food chain to the top. The top executive is responsible, and is expected to be the first to apologize and atone for the wrong doing. In U.S. culture, individual accountability means the individual at the

bottom of the food chain, closest to the act, is wrong, and must make amends or suffer the consequences of their individual actions.

We can probably benefit from combining both approaches. In this case, since it is not certain who might have been involved, with only one complaining witness, I would suggest the following.

Start by apologizing to the caller. As owner of the company, you are responsible for your company's behaviors, regardless. Getting into an argument about whether it was, or was not, your company's truck is likely to get you nowhere. Instead, be gracious, and deal seriously with the complaint.

Then, pull all of your drivers together. Explain the call you received. Tell them you have accepted personal responsibility for the encounter, and that you have apologized to the caller. Then, ask everyone to accept responsibility for insuring such wrong-doing will never happen again.

Treat this as a serious internal matter, between you and your employees. Explain to your drivers that such driving is not acceptable, and will not be tolerated, in case anyone had any doubts. Reinforce that their individual actions matter, and have consequences. Explain that



Trusted Advisor to Business Owners

## American vs. Japanese Culture and Accountability

05/14/07

poor driving can have consequences, up to and including termination, if repeated complaints arise, that you are taking this opportunity to clarify the situation, and the rules. Express your confidence that this will be the last time you will ever hear of such a complaint.

Then look within your company. Look for root causes. What may have contributed to such behavior, if, indeed, it happened. What policies, practices, and codes of behavior could have led to a complaint of careless driving?

Ask employees to come to you with suggestions or observations. If they think there is anything within the company policy that they believe might have contributed to this incident, ask them to let you know. Listen carefully to any suggestions, and consider whether you need to make changes, to prevent something similar in the future.

Whatever you choose to do, do not behave casually. This type of complaint is serious. It deserves a careful and measured response with all parties. Consider this as an opportunity to pay attention, and to make things better for the future.

Looking for a good book? Try Journey To The Emerald City: Achieve A Competitive Edge By Creating A Culture of Accountability, by Roger Connors and Tom Smith.

*Business owners regularly turn to Ask Andi and Strategy Leaders for advice on how to grow profitable, successful companies. They find what they need time after time. Specific advice is available at [www.AskAndiBlog.com](http://www.AskAndiBlog.com). Ask Andi is also published weekly in the Westchester and Fairfield County Business Journals and Hudson Valley Business. Written by Strategy Leaders President, Andi Gray, the Ask Andi column is a rich source of advice for owners of established, privately held businesses.*

*If you are a business owner and you have a question or would like to discuss some aspect of your business, call [1.877.238.3535](tel:18772383535) or send an email to [AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com](mailto:AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com).*

O: 914-238-3500. • F: 914-238-2529  
AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com • [www.StrategyLeaders.com](http://www.StrategyLeaders.com)  
Strategy Leaders, Inc. • 5 Crossways, Chappaqua, NY 10514

