

## Drive Japan Study Tour

By Brian Heymans

### **FIREFIGHTING**

We all know, or at least we think we know, how to make things better. Yet we fail to make things better. We say we know what we are doing, but the evidence proves that we spend most of our time correcting things that have gone wrong, without really fixing the process that could prevent the problem in the first place. We call this firefighting, and we are experts at it. We hear about someone else who seems to make things work so easily and wonder how they do it. So we visit them where they produce their goods, but they fail to show us how they work to make their products in a timely manner, without defects. They fail to show us how they organize and facilitate everyone's work so that nothing goes wrong. So we come away still bewildered about what we have seen, while failing to understand how and why what we have seen actually works so well.

### **WHYS BEHIND THE WHATS**

This is actually the "norm".... but it does not need to be so.... we need to find a way to get to the mystery of how the best companies in the world do things so well, and why they seem to be able to sustain those successful practices. To be honest, it's not really that difficult. We need to change how we observe things. We need to learn how to ask the questions whose answers explain the "whys" behind the "whats." A typical visit to a factory consists of someone in front of a Power Point presentation telling you about his/her company. Upon completion of the presentation, you tour the facility in which your guide politely shows you how they make the widget they make. Your guide may even show you how clean and orderly the place is, as well as present to you all those confusing charts that tell you that this company is doing great. You marvel at all this, yet forget to ask those vital questions about how leaders work, how communication happens, how ideas for improvement originate. You wonder why these people seem so skilled, when your people are not. From our experience we have found that very few manufacturing companies in the USA can be classed as world class. There are some, but they are few and far between. When you find one, you simply must go visit. But go armed with a learning plan in place that sets clear learning goals. Goals which delve into the hearts, minds, and behaviors of the leadership corps of that company. Here are some tips.

1. Understand your own company's weaknesses and needs. Know what you need to fix. Knowing what you need to fix which means you must understand something about continuous improvement, lean, or whatever you call it. Know that these strategies are part of your solution, even if deploying them may still be a mystery. Know the competitive, strategic, and operations problems you face, so that you can make a list with which you can build a needs analysis.



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2. Make a list of the things you want to learn that go deeper than just the operations of the business. Test what you see against this list all the time.
3. Ask, “Why?” all the time. Also ask how that company sustains operating practices.
4. Don’t concentrate on what or how they actually make their product, concentrate on how they manage the flow of materials through all the process steps. Focus on how problems are addressed, how the organization responds to deviations, and how they upgrade processes to prevent deviations.
5. Their information boards show data. Look for how they use the data to solve problems and manage the reliability of the processes.
6. How do they set goals, organize for improvement, and establish systems to sustain that improvement? How do they use the data to ensure the continued predictability of the process?
7. How do they communicate between vertical and horizontal relationships, especially those between functions to ensure alignment of goals and actions?
8. What is the structure of meetings, the data they talk about, and how do they deal with suggestions? How do they communicate from the meetings to those who need to know?
9. Examine the types and frequency of those meetings and why they are so effective.
10. Examine the daily routines of leaders of all levels, trying to define their time allocations for dealing with problems, maintaining standards, and sustaining continuous improvement activities.
11. Ask about all people development strategies and activities, especially shop floor leadership or leader standard work training, plus skills training for operations people. Find out the methods used to train for new skills, and how first-line supervisors are involved in executing that training.
12. The experience of seeing Toyota at work includes observing how Toyota deploys its philosophy via the **Toyota Basic Principles** which have been in existence since 1937 and are updated regularly. This is the core culture driver that ensures that every employee is fully engaged in all continuous improvement activity. So find out what those Basic Principles are if you visit a Toyota Plant or their exciting museum in Toyota City, near Nagoya Japan.

## UNDERSTANDING IS KEY

It’s all about understanding the “soft” elements of change in action, rather than just seeing the hard physical evidence of the deployment of change. What you see are the physical results of the leadership, organizational and culture development work that goes on that is visible, but you need to discover what behind-the-scenes work has created those results. So building up a list of the right questions is important for any benchmarking visit.

## VISIT JAPAN

We have said that finding a company to visit in the USA may be difficult, so why not visit factories in Japan, where much of this is so starkly evident. Oh, you might say, their culture is different, which makes it easier for them to operate at a world class level. Yes, some of their operating cultures are different, but much is also the same. One advantage of visiting Japanese companies in Japan is that geographically, the best companies, including Toyota, their suppliers, and others like Nissan, Hitachi



etc, are in close proximity to each other. You can see a lot in a few days without doing much travelling. In the USA, the best companies are several long flights apart.... costly and time consuming.

## JAPAN TOUR

DRIVE Inc offers an outstanding opportunity to visit several world class plants in Japan in May 2017. These visits include meeting with senior executives who have many years of experience deploying the best leadership practices that deploy and sustain improvement. We have organized the visits to allow participants to get some hands-on diagnosis of operations, and working in small teams to build improvement ideas to share with the host companies. This forces learning at a deeper level.

- The presentations by experienced executives focus on those leadership and human management skills essential to building and sustaining a new culture.
- Participants are coached to develop personal learning goals before the trip, and these are tested during each visit.
- Team and individual learning projects are created for each company visit to ensure that participants are guided to look for those deeper systems that are often “glossed over.”
- Each day is evaluated for what was learned.

This is an exciting experience, not just to see world class operations but also to learn the HOW from those who have developed much of the essence of lean practices over the years. DRIVE is pleased to announce that we are hosting Japan study tours to AVEX, Toyota, and other manufacturers in Japan. The next trip is the week of May 7, 2017, with an October 2017 trip following. If you are interested in this facilitated learning event or want more information, [click here](#). You can also contact Paul Eakle at 865-323-3491 or via e-mail at [Paul.Eakle@DriveInc.com](mailto:Paul.Eakle@DriveInc.com).

