

HOMER SARASOHN . . . THE MAN WHO MADE JAPAN SUCCESSFUL

I was introduced to the work of Homer Sarasohn by Myron Tribus when he and I were sharing a taxi across London in the late 1980's. Myron was a new found protégé of the statistician W Edwards Deming whose work I had been studying over the previous five years. Myron told me the remarkable story of three young American engineers who had been charged by General MacArthur in 1945 with helping the Japanese to rebuild their communications industry. They were Frank Polkinghorn, Charles Protzman and Homer Sarasohn.

In due course I made contact with Homer and invited him to visit London (in October 1991) to present two papers about his work in post-war Japan to a Management-NewStyle seminar. He spoke on the subjects of 'Post-War Japan - The Birth of an Industrial Power' and 'The Evolution of Japan's Market Success'. We spent a very enjoyable week together during which time his remarkable intellectual charm reminded me more of a European count than an American engineer. Some years later he revisited London, with his wife Shirley, and we were able to enjoy further discussions about business management.

It was as a direct result of a recommendation by Homer that Dr Deming was invited to Japan by the Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers in the early 50's to lecture on the work of Walter Shewhart regarding the importance of understanding variation in successful business process management. Japanese engineers were convinced that they had lost the war to America because to their inability to master high-volume, low-variation production of war matériel. Mastery of such techniques would therefore be essential if they were to return to the centre of the world stage in peacetime - as they eventually did, more quickly than expected, in the 1960s.

Since learning of Homer's work I was interested to discover whether Sarasohn and Deming had ever met. Deming's visits to Tokyo did not overlap with Sarasohn's time there so any such meeting would had to have been in America after 1950. My first opportunity to enquire came at Ashridge Management College when working with Dr Deming in a research group I raised the subject, and Homer's name, during a coffee break. I got short shrift . . ."Who?" he queried, sharply. It was as if the question were an impertinence! I was surprised, to say the least, but let the matter drop and events moved on as we debated with him various aspects of what he was calling his System of Profound Knowledge.

Two years later when driving Homer to Gatwick to catch his flight home, after the seminar and our subsequent joint consulting work, I tentatively broached the same subject. As ever Homer was straightforward and direct. No, he had never met Deming. Asked why, he said that Deming had never made any effort to contact him or asked to meet him (despite knowing of his previous work in Japan). Further, with modesty typical of the man with whom I had spent such an enjoyable and enlightening week, he added that he did not feel inclined to seek a meeting with a man who was not interested in his work. Such is the way in which great men silently pass. Pride and modesty sadly combine to rob us of deeper insights into the qualities of great leaders.

When asked how he would define leadership Homer told me that "the duty of a leader is to be the finest example of what he expects in those he leads". Homer certainly was just such a man.