A Japanese company and a North American company decided to have a canoe race. Both teams practiced long and hard to reach their peak performance before the race.

On the big day, the Japanese won by a mile. The North Americans, very discouraged and depressed, decided to investigate the reason for the crushing defeat.

A team made up of senior management was formed to investigate and recommend appropriate action. Their conclusion was the Japanese had eight people rowing and one person steering, while the North American team had eight people steering and one person rowing. So, the North American management hired a consulting company and paid a large amount of money for a second opinion.

It advised that too many people were steering the boat, while not enough people were rowing. To prevent another loss to the Japanese, the rowing team’s management structure was totally reorganised to four steering supervisors, three steering superintendents and one assistant superintendent steering manager. They also implemented a new performance system that would give the one person rowing the boat greater incentive to work harder.

It was called the “Rowing Team Quality First Programme”, with meetings, dinners and free pens for the rower. There was discussion of getting new paddles, canoes and other equipment, extra vacation days for practices, and bonuses.

The year after, the Japanese won by two miles. Humiliated, the North American management laid off the rower for poor performance, halted development of a new canoe, sold the paddles, and cancelled all capital investments in new equipment. The money saved was distributed to the senior executives as bonuses and the next year’s racing team was outsourced to India.

By ZOE LIM
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THERE’S this funny joke that goes around WhatsApp family chat groups and it jokes at the Western approach to problem-solving: it goes like this:

"A Japanese company and a North American company decided to have a canoe race. Both teams practised long and hard to reach their peak performance before the race. On the big day, the Japanese won by a mile. The North Americans, very discouraged and depressed, decided to investigate the reason for the crushing defeat.

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**EAST VS. WEST**

My immediate response to these type of chain texts is usually "lol Dad." Of chain texts is usually "lol Dad."

The reality for Asians is that, traditionally, their social interactions rely on pre-set queues rather than feeling. Everyone has a predetermined reaction for a culture that has upheld hierarchy above all.

Once, in an interview for a company that had a very forward-looking reputation, I was asked what I valued more, discipline or passion. I answered passion... Justifying that passionate workers believe in what they are doing put more value into their work, resulting in a discipline that is conscious as well as creative.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t received well, in the interviewer’s eyes, discipline and order provide a sure expected outcome, passionate people however are unpredictable and constantly require stimulation to keep the fire alive.

**The EQUITATORIAL EQUATION**

There is a theory by psychologist and professor, Philip Zimbardo, which touches on how a person’s acceptance towards change is correlative to how close they live to the equator. The closer you live to the earth’s equator – where seasons more or less remain the same (rain or shine) – the least likely you are to be accepting towards change. You stay present-oriented, focusing on instant gratification; if you do this now, you get this immediately.

Following this theory, then the farther away you live from the equator, the more open you are towards change. Through the changes in the four seasons, you plan and take into account what can and cannot be done in each season. This makes you more future-oriented because of your familiarity with change in seasons. You understand the need to plan to sow in order to reap later on. Countries like the United States, Germany, Canada, and Switzerland all live in this cycle.

Westerners are bigger risk-takers. There is no blanket procedure with social interactions. They value individualism, therefore making each situation with each person unique. In that way, they respect that everyone has individual opinions and this cultivates a better environment for discussion and democracy. It is taken as good initiative when you ask questions and challenge the standard operating procedures (SOPs) to adopt better procedures. Conversations are straightforward and factual – backed by logic and reason – further supporting evidence to it being a future-oriented culture focused on the goal.

This reason was because of the Asian way of using polite words in private conversations to subtly give hints to disagreement, to convince superiors or even peers to make another decision. Asians would rather beat around the bush in order to “save face” for themselves and the other party than to put them both in an awkward situation.

Asians tend to train their staff with “How” (i.e. this is how things are done) and Westerners tend to take the “Why” approach (i.e. this is why we do things this way). The “How” method provides instant gratification, and “I say, you do” reaction, with no questions asked. The “Why” method, though more tedious, creates a more motivated workforce. If there is no clear definitive of hierarchy, independent workers get overzealous, conflicting methods arise, and chaos ensues.

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**BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Like the North American Canoe team – typically having too many mid-management staff and too little labourers – independent thinkers can spend more time arguing about the problem, discussing it intensively, rather than fixing it. So the “How” is still important.

The balance between both cultures could be to adopt solid SOPs that are trained to staff with a focus on the “Why,” but at the same time encourage staff to innovate and propose new efficient methods to managers that can improve the way things are run. Some of the most innovative companies around the globe thrive on this method like Google, Apple and Facebook to name a few. They provide a clear avenue for executives to communicate with directors, a bottom-up approach instead of top-down. Yet, at the same time, uphold values of hard work and order of management. With the strong and steady rise in globalisation, we are sure to be seeing more of these Asian-Western hybrids of company culture fuse together. A move that can benefit the global economy greatly. Just remember, the next time you’re on a canoe race, plan beforehand and think of the “Why” and then enforce the “How.”