

The Extended Team

It was obvious in the Netflix documentary ‘Jiro’s Dreams of Sushi’ that Jiro Ono doesn’t work alone in his pursuit of excellence, the Shokunin Spirit. His team goes beyond his sons and his apprentices who work in his small eatery.

Jiro Ono relies heavily on his trusted partners in his ecosystem. For example, one of the shrimp sellers said, ‘This (shrimp) is worthy of Jiro (I’ll reserve it for him). It’s not just about the money’. Another, a rice trader said that he turned down The Grand Hyatt Japan’s offer to buy his rice, his reason being, ‘Your chefs won’t know how to cook this rice unless they were Jiro’s disciples. We will just be wasting the rice’.

It was the same for McDonald’s when Ray Kroc and his team revolutionized how they could achieve consistent taste for their French Fries wherever they were served in the world. Jim Simplot, a supplier of Idaho potatoes to McDonald’s proposed to freeze the potatoes as Idaho potatoes were only available nine months in a year. His idea was initially laughed at by the then President but on a handshake deal with Ray Kroc, Jim Simplot went ahead to experiment his

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idea. Along the way McDonald's executives chipped in their R&D efforts and together they perfected the potato freezing process. McDonald's scored a huge win and Jim became a billionaire, win-win!

McDonald's didn't give Jim special treatment; this was how they operated, documented from the book 'Vision, Values & Courage - Leadership for Quality Management' -

'Nowhere is the McDonald's unusual supplier dedication more evident than in the development of the new or improved products. Over the years, suppliers have become almost extensions of McDonald's product development.....The carrot has always been the knowledge that if the new product or process worked, McDonald's would give its developer all the new business it could handle.'

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A research by Hoon-Seok Choi and Leigh Thompson (of Sungkyunkwan University and Northwestern University respectively) published in 2005 showed that groups that added new members generated more ideas and became more creative. Similarly, a recent article published by MIT Sloan indicated that instead of being hobbled by their lack of history and relationships in an organization, research shows that outside contractors actually often succeed because of their outside status.

Shokunin is charming not only because it is a pursuit of excellence; it is beautiful because it is a collective endeavor within an ecosystem.

In your organization and the team(s) you lead,

- Do you treat parties who are not fellow employees as mere vendors and outsiders?
- Are your minds closed to outside suggestions because you think only you know your situation best?
- How often do new ideas come from your extended team?
- How often are new ideas from your extended team embraced, collaborated and implemented?

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- Would yours be the first port of call if an external party has a fresh idea that could benefit you?

It is perhaps high time to step down from the high seat of 'I am the Customer, you are the Vendor' if you haven't truly enjoyed the joy and beauty of embracing non-employees as part of a tight-knit extended team. Try it, Shokunin is beautiful.

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