

The Car & The Potato

You might have watched Jiro's Dreams of Sushi on Netflix, a documentary that depicts Jiro Ono, the 85-year old sushi master's quest for perfection; his goal of making tomorrow better than today. Jiro started working in a restaurant from seven years old and his quest has taken him a lifetime. His 10-seat eatery is a Michelin 3-stars and Jiro brings discipline and dedication to his obsession over the perfect slice. He observes and makes sushi based on his customer's size and he would dream of making sushi and jumps out of bed with ideas. He is excited about making sushi all day after all these years.

Such is what the Japanese call the Shokunin Spirit. While most associate it with the spirit of craftsmanship and artisan, what it represents is an attitude of striving beyond one's best in technical mastery and meeting the greater good of the constituents where one is placed. We often find such obsession and level of concentration in artists, and is why some of my friends would only drive a Lexus because of Lexus' obsession to details and excellence.

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We could argue that Lexus is a luxury brand and it should pay attention to details and excellence. How about the humble potato? Ray Kroc, the guy who institutionalized McDonald's and gave it's international wings was a man who was obsessed with quality and it was his pursuit of consistency that the world enjoys McDonald's French Fries which some argue to be the best among fast food chains.

Not only was Ray's team concerned with where their suppliers grew their potatoes, they were very particular about how the potatoes were harvested, transported and stored, as well as the temperature at which they were fried, among other things. Together with one of their suppliers Jack Simplot, Ray Kroc and his McDonald's team revolutionized how potatoes were processed for the perfect French Fries- a specific method of freezing potatoes.

In Ray's words, '...to most people, a french-fried potato is a pretty uninspiring object....The McDonald brothers lavished attention on it.....The french fry would become almost sacrosanct for me, its preparation a ritual to be followed religiously'.

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Many business people, especially in Asia, view artists as people who work based on inspirations, moods and have little substantive things to show for (meaning, no accountability) but Jiro Ono, Lexus and Ray Kroc demonstrate the artist's frame of mind at work in the context of business, specifically, in quality management.

I am still searching for answers to, 'How will Japanese startups balance the speed to market which is essential for venture building companies with the Shokunin Spirit that could slow things down because of its quest for perfection?' Perhaps the jury is still out.

Shokunin is beautiful but I believe we need a balance; too much of Shokunin and your world might be overly orderly and ritualistic, and you could end up resisting to change. As a leader you also need to know when you should nudge your team into Shokunin and when to pull it back.

Today, Jiro is still making sushi in his 90s, a feat I hope to achieve with coaching into my 80s.

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