

Recitation D

Seven-minute Miracle

The super-speedy teams of cleaners that keep the interiors of Shinkansen bullet trains sparkly clean for the next batch of passengers have become something of an international internet sensation. News outlets even dubbed their work the “seven-minute miracle.” Now, students at Harvard Business School will be required to study that miracle.

The custodial teams must finish cleaning the Shinkansen train from end to end between the train’s arrival and its next departure time. The trains have a 12-minute turnaround, but that includes time for passenger disembarkation and boarding, leaving just the “miracle” seven minutes for the cleaners to do their job.

Up until ten years ago, the cleaning company was assailed by customer complaints, and staff morale was very low. The job itself was considered dirty and difficult, leading to a high turnover rate.

The turnaround began in 2005, when Teruo Yabe took over business planning at the company. Yabe quickly moved to improve the workplace environment, introducing colorful uniforms and calling the trains the “Shinkansen Theater,” where cleaners put their techniques on public display.

In addition, he took suggestions from the workers themselves and encouraged the cleaners to report the best qualities of their coworkers. Yabe created a path for cleaners to reach management positions, which really helped boost their morale. However, he also set up a penalty system, where workers’ bonuses shrank if they repeatedly came to work late. His system of benefits and demerits has vastly helped improve service at the company.

According to Ethan Bernstein, an assistant professor of leadership and organizational behavior, most students entering Harvard Business School think of leadership in terms of simple control, and many believe that problems within an organization can all be solved with financial incentives. He went on to say that Yabe’s methods were more sophisticated, and that by studying them, the students could learn a lot.

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