

Column: “Individuals vs. Organizations”

Individuals vs. Organizations



Mr. Takao Ogiya

Mr. Takao Ogiya
Director General of APIC

The 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil has gained much global attention. It is believed that people in all of the 230 countries/regions worldwide are closely following the event, and its economic effects are estimated to reach approximately 7 trillion yen in Brazil alone.

As of this writing, the group stage is over. Unfortunately, Japan was unable to proceed to the round of 16, but the final tournament is expected to feature even more exciting, heated matches.

Concerning football, we often hear comments about two types of power: individual and organizational. For instance, many support the view that while the Japanese football team excels in organizational power, the power of individual players needs to be enhanced. Some commentators attribute the lack of the latter type of power to the national character of the Japanese people.

In relation to this, I would like to introduce a parable that illustrates the national characters of various peoples. It goes like this: Imagine that a luxury cruise ship is sinking. Many people have boarded a lifeboat, which is now excessively overloaded. To persuade some men to dive into the sea, the most effective words are as follows:

To an American: You want to be a hero, don't you?

To an Englishman: You are a true gentleman, aren't you?

To a German: It's a rule that you should dive in.

And to a Japanese: You are left behind. Everyone else has already dived into the sea.

This story indicates that the most effective way to urge Japanese people to do something is to say, “Everyone else has done, or is doing something.”

To understand this national mentality, we need to review the historical background. During the Edo period (1603–1868), farmers—who, at the time, comprised over 80% of Japan's population—belonged to a *mura*, or local community, which governed both their farming operations and daily lives. The local community decided, among other things, procedures for agricultural operations and the allocation of agricultural water to respective paddy fields. It even decided holidays and dates of village festivals, and also selected village representatives. While the community was run autonomously by the villagers, it also served to restrict their activities and daily lives.

Another influential system that has helped determine the Japanese mentality is that of the *ie*, or the patriarchal family system. No matter which social class people belonged to within the feudalistic four-class system—which was comprised of warriors, farmers, craftsmen and merchants—people in the Edo period led their lives within the framework of their own respective families. This system placed utmost priority on sustaining and developing a family business—and it was considered absolutely wrong for a family member to endanger this business in order to fulfill his or her own personal ambitions.

Over the 265 years of the Edo period, it was ensured that people could lead stable lives as long as they observed the rules of the local community and the family system. It is understandable that Japanese people, who remained under these systems for centuries, did not foster an individualistic mentality. More specifically, Japanese people have developed a tendency to avoid isolation from other members of organizations to which they belong, as well as to worry about other people's criticism, and behave modestly without expressing or developing their own opinions.

Such tendencies have positive elements as well as negative ones, however. First, Japanese people tend to be extremely sensitive toward—and pay meticulous consideration to—the feelings of other people. This attitude derives from the values that prioritize the needs of organizations rather than those of individuals. This also explains the low incidence of violent crimes in Japan, and why only a few riots and other crimes occur even during great disasters and other emergency occasions.

In the context of advanced globalization, however, this mentality often inhibits Japanese people from responding adequately to people who have grown up in more individualistic cultures.

To win football matches at the FIFA World Cup, Japan's team needs to develop the power of individual players in addition to sustaining its excellent organizational power. To nurture players' abilities, the Japan's football community is eager to transfer them to overseas teams. I believe that this approach is valid, even though it did not lead to the results hoped for at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil.

Meanwhile, Japan's women's football team, known as "Nadeshiko Japan", has won the world championship—an achievement that is yet to be attained by the men's team. During the Edo period, men were subject to the aforementioned bondage of the local community and family systems more closely than women, who were comparatively free from both. Remaining outside the organizational systems, women were able to observe conflicts between individuals and organizations more objectively than men, and developed a good sense of balance between the two. Needless to say, Nadeshiko Japan's victory was certainly the result of team members' efforts and grueling physical training. At the same time, I also believe that one element of their power is their excellent sense of balance between the power of individuals and that of the organization.

In conclusion, I believe that we must seek an optimal balance today between the demands of individuals and those of the organizations to which we belong. On one hand, we must forge self-identities as independent individuals. Additionally, we must develop our own opinions and

express them clearly in our own words. And above all, we must work to fulfill our own mission.

At the same time, however, we must also be aware of organizational needs. We must pay meticulous attention to the needs of other people, wherever they may be, while respecting their views—and must also, when necessary, sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the organizations we belong to. This, I believe, is essential for contemporary Japanese people living in this global age.

It may sound quite challenging to achieve this vision. Let us believe in our own capacity, however, and boldly step forward toward this goal.

