

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TBT invites readers to submit letters to the Editor, TBT, Toyo Keizai Inc., 1-2-1 Nihonbashi Hongokucho, Chuo-ku, Tokyo 103, or faxed to (03) 3241-5543. Letters may be edited for reasons of space and clarity.

### Steam-powered Trains

We are grateful for your two-page report about our company (TBT, February). It was a good, compact story done within the limited space. We were also impressed with your professional photographer who produced the vivid pictures. We sent a copy of your magazine to our Swiss sister company, Brienz Rothorn Bahn Railway.

Recently, the staff of Japan Airlines' flight magazine, *Wings*, also visited us to cover our steam-run trains. This story will appear in the magazine in

summer. The reporting by mass media communications is truly encouraging to us as we do our utmost to preserve and operate the steam-powered trains. We hope that you will keep up your good work.

Akira Shirai  
Executive Vice-President  
Oigawa Railways  
Kanaya, Japan

### The Handicapped

Thank you for carrying an article

about Kyoto Omron Taiyo, our joint venture firm with Omron Corp. (TBT, February). We immediately translated it into Japanese so that all of us could share it. Taiyo no Ie (Japan Sun Industries) publishes *Taiyo Tsushin* every month, an in-house communications publication. Enclosed are copies. We hope these you will deepen your understanding of our operations.

Yasushi Abe  
Taiyo no Ie  
(Japan Sun Industries)  
Beppu, Japan

## BOOK REVIEW

*Taking Charge in Japan* is an excellent guidebook for foreign managers and corporate executive officers on the intricacies of managing Japanese staff. Topics range from establishing the proper rules of employment and the methods and problems of recruiting and rewarding employees, to ways of rehabilitating or, as Nevins puts it, "reducing staff as a last resort."

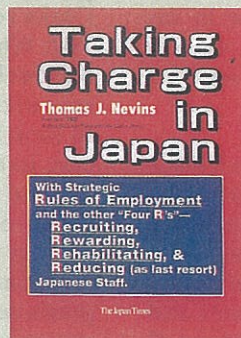
One of the more interesting chapters, "Managers and Monday Morning in Tokyo and New York," takes the reader through a typical day in the life of a Tokyo-based Japanese personnel manager (Suzuki) and a New York-based American (White) in the same position. Mr. Suzuki, the Japanese manager, pops out of bed, looking forward to arriving at work early to read the newspaper and to prepare for the day's busy agenda. His desk is at the head of the cluster of desks of his subordinates, a Japanese practice which encourages punctuality and communications. All section members are thus always aware of the responsibilities of the section, and specific job descriptions, so important for corporate America, are much less important in Japan. The organization of corporate divisions and sections at Japanese firms means that while one may not receive official acknowledgement for innovative, fruitful ideas or work, neither will one get the blame for mistakes made. The accolades or the accountability are given to the entire section or department. Suzuki gets along well with his fellow workers and with his boss, who sits at a separate desk nearby.

Nevins points out that Japanese companies tend to prefer the generalist over the specialist and can thus effect frequent job rotation to make employees more well-rounded and to increase their hands-on expertise in various aspects of the corporate business.

Other interesting points that Nevins makes about Suzuki include the fact that superiors are secure in their jobs, the lack of top-down instructions breeds initiative

### Taking Charge in Japan

by Thomas J. Nevins  
The Japan Times, 1990;  
300 pages; ¥5,150



on the part of younger workers and that workers don't oppose technological change and job restructuring because it rarely hurts them.

As Nevins sees it, Mr. White, in a position in New York similar to that of Mr. Suzuki in Tokyo, is nowhere near as enthusiastic about his work, especially the labor negotiations he must go through and be held accountable for. He is in a career rut, having been performing the same specialized duties for the past thirteen years. He is undergoing job burn-out and has been passed over by younger men and people hired through executive search agencies. When he goes to work, he greets his secretary, enters his office and closes the door. He faces his desk and his "in-box" alone. Communications are limited to phone calls and meetings. While he may actually produce more work and paper than his Tokyo counterpart, he does not enjoy his job, he is frustrated and he does not have good feelings about his company. He feels left behind.

Nevins also maintains that it can be very difficult for foreign firms to hire good people in Japan. Suzuki-san is happy in his job and knows that he will continue to rise within the ranks of the corporate organization. His position is secure. Why would he even consider changing jobs?

The author covers many other important aspects of recruitment and employment practices in Japan, and his advice should be taken seriously, although the book tends to be a bit too anecdotal. Also, since a number of the chapters have been taken from speeches and previous papers, the information sometimes overlaps.

*Taking Charge in Japan* is a long-awaited sequel and update of an earlier work, *Labor Pains and the Gaijin Boss*, and is recommended reading for both the long-term foreign resident and the newcomer to Japan.

Richard Schultz, Staff Editor