

Interview with Mr. Mohan Kumar, MD, M/s Toyota Kirloskar Auto Parts Pvt. Ltd, Bangalore, India (TKAP)



Mr. Tomoyuki Kogure (Kogure): Asked to briefly explain the profile and background of Mr. Mohan Kumar

Mr. Mohan Kumar (Kumar): Basically, a Mechanical Engineer and joined Hindustan Motors (HM), India in Jan 1985. Had worked in Hindustan Motors for 12yrs. First exposure to Japanese culture and language began with Isuzu, Japan (HM's collaboration for Engines and Transmission) in 1986 and spent six months in Japan on an assignment. Later spent some time with Cummins, Indonesia, through a local Indian company. Joined Toyota group in 1998, when Toyota re-established in India. Continue to work with Toyota group till date. Worked with various business arms like Engineering, Manufacturing, Quality, Marketing and Corporate management in a span of over 35 years in the industry.

Kogure: How is your experience in working with Japanese companies?

Kumar: Like the Work discipline, Social discipline, Commitment, Passion and Life time association with the company. In fact, these basic values are the primary inspiration to me to be associated with Japanese.

Kogure: Is it difficult to work with Japanese company (life time association) and balancing your time between work and your personal life?

Kumar: Depends on the person. One can enjoy this association by removing language barrier and better understanding of Japanese culture. Personal communication or interaction gets strengthened after work - 'Nomunication' over a beer. Toyota made conscious effort to globalize by creating regional headquarters. Local leaders are developed and encouraged to take up Leadership roles. Some of the other Japanese companies say they are Globalized, but they work like a hub and spoke operation. Corporate office remains the hub and rest of the units are remotely controlled from Japan.

Kogure: What effort you see in Globalization?

Kumar: Requires Global management and Individual career development on a global scale. In Toyota, all potential leaders around the world can pitch for senior positions globally. In fact in Toyota, many Indians are positioned in USA, Thailand, Japan, Europe, South Africa, Australia and so on.

Kogure: Why Indian people are successful around the globe, what is the secret?

Kumar: India is not a monolith, it is a diversified country. It consists of multi cultured, multilingual and with different climate and food habits. Because of this diversity, it is easy for us to relocate to any environment. India was under British rule for over 200yrs, so we happened to get good command over English language as well. English is a common language in India, for both formal and informal communication.

Kogure: Even though Japanese know English, because of cultural background, difficult to exchange their thoughts. Try to read others mind, but not to speak out. Yes, Indian express their thoughts freely, as they have different culture and exposure. As per your observation, what is the uniqueness of Japanese?

Kumar: The Japanese are highly disciplined people, and do not question the authority. However, in Japan decisions are made by consensus so that everyone follows it. Once consensus is made, people are willing to make sacrifices to reach the goal. It is a huge plus for Japan, as a society it is aligned in one direction. In India, people pull in all directions and hence difficult to get consensus built. Though sometimes it is useful as people express their dissent openly. We can work with opponents to clear their dissent. In case of Japanese, as they don't open up freely, it is difficult to know the true opponents.

Kogure: Is it difficult to understand with Japanese, who is your opponent?

Kumar: With Japanese 'Nomunication' is important to understand individuals, what is in their mind? Best way is to join them after work over a beer / drink. At work Japanese are very formal. Same group of people go out for a drink, open up and share their concerns, thoughts and ideas. This is very productive and unique in Japanese culture. In India, generally we go for a drink with personal friends and family members (not so much with colleagues); we generally avoid people from work in our private lives.

Kogure: Do you drink a lot?

Kumar: Not much, just do social drinking for giving company. I can also take Japanese food. This makes it easy for me to join any party

Kogure: In recent days, more young Japanese members want more freedom after work, so not joining the Drink party. Boss of young Japanese couldn't invite for a drink party. So, a bit gap is increasing, as he is not able to find individual opinions on the ongoing work.



Kumar: Yes, Japanese society is also changing. For example, many young Japanese don't prefer life time employment, rather look for short term assignments. Primarily, I think it is because of Western influence.

Kogure: If you have business with non-Japanese (may be Europe, USA etc.) customer, do you follow any Strategy or Code of conduct?

Kumar: Yes, each country has certain Taboos (which have to be avoided like in Indonesia, they don't drink and they have their own choice of food), behavior, culture, traditions and customs. In Toyota

we have many exchange programs / meetings. That gives us exposure to understand and build that kind of network across the globe; understand the likes and dislikes of various cultures.

Kogure: How do you learn Taboos, Culture and Traditions of other countries?

Kumar: Learn from Books, formal inputs etc. Information gathering from experienced members will give you more insights of the various cultures.

Kogure: Japanese companies becoming International companies. Some of these companies create exactly the same vehicle / product, the way it is developed in Japan by not considering local culture and diversity. This some times causes some tension among Japanese and others.

Kumar: Agree, local factors need to be considered for building a successful global business; we call it "Best In Town".

Kogure: Assigning people is very important either Japanese or Indians. How do you evaluate / measure people for assignments?

Kumar: Yes, it is a difficult task. Truly understanding people is difficult. Respect for elders, traditions, and culture is very important, as is to maximise human potential, which is immense. With right kind of inputs, opportunities and support, people will measure up. While developing / mentoring, give right inputs, evaluate regularly, provide feedback and also collect feedback from colleagues. Planning and identifying key talent at early stages for leadership positions and with right mentoring will work. Toyota is very methodical in people development and believe in 'Good Thinking makes Good Product'. For Good Thinking, we need Good People.

Kogure: Some say Toyota squeeze suppliers and I know Toyota makes suppliers to earn more by improved processes for a win-win situation.

Kumar: In Toyota, we try to create a pocket of excellence inhouse at first. Once the system is established to identify waste and to improve productivity sustainably by PDCA and SDCA, Cost reduction is achieved as a result. Then we guide our supplier partners to implement it. We believe "Sky is the lower limit" for such improvements that is endless, towards increased value added products (and services).

Kogure: What kind of Skills / Occupation is defined for recruiting a professional? In Japan people are developed by rotation. Is it bother Indians?

Kumar: Not really. Job rotation is key. Qualifications matter at the entry level. Once inside the company, the systems and processes are established to train a member suitably to increase his interest and understanding for doing the assigned job successfully. New technologies require different type of skills. So, members are trained in different areas by rotation effectively. Job rotation is challenging and individual career growth will be good, even though it is little uncomfortable in the beginning.

Kogure: This job rotation is common in Japan

Kumar: Yes, Job rotation is unique to Japanese. Now, the rest of the world has also started this concept of Job rotation. It helps to build team work and also people empathize and appreciate each other.

Kogure: Believe Japanese needs to improve to work in diversified culture. Any messages to Japanese readers?

Kumar: Japanese young generation is changing but core strengths like basic values, passion etc. must be retained. Not good to change everything.

Tips:

1. To understand Japanese, 'Nomunication' is a useful tool
2. Indians naturally global, since the country itself is very diversified
3. To relocate in any environment, is key to work globally