

Equality, customer-facing perfectionism, and 'the responsibility problem' in Japan: the limits of just following the manual

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Abstract

This paper explores rule-following behaviour in Japan by examining how workplace manuals are used not only in the service of equality and customer-facing perfectionism, but also to minimise personal and institutional liability. Rule-following behaviour can help create a safe and ordered society but can be problematic when encountering novel or unusual situations, suppressing initiative, and making change slow and difficult. A governmentality-based explanation is explored, and a range of brief case studies including overly complex work manuals, coronavirus vaccine distribution, bank ATM failures, and harassment of service staff by customers. The paper concludes with a discussion of how organisations can move past these limitations, with an illustrative case study comparing treatment of Para swimmers in Japan, the UK, and New Zealand.

Keywords: customer harassment, equality, governmentality, Japanese culture, liability, risk aversion, uncertainty avoidance

Working or living in a foreign culture, there are occasionally situations – failures, surprises – that become ‘aha!’ moments of cultural understanding. Having worked in Japan on and off since 2000, this one came to me rather late. One afternoon in late 2019, I was sitting in a large lecture hall with most of the academic staff of my university, plus a minority of the admin staff, at the tail end of the first of two multi-hour briefing sessions about the administration of the ‘National Center Test for University Admissions’. In late January 2020, nearly 558,000 candidates (mostly final-year high school students) would head to universities all over Japan to sit national tests from history to math over an intensive weekend, with teaching staff roped in to help, generally for one day or the other. The tests – rebranded in 2021 as the ‘Common Test for University Admissions’ – are high-stakes gatekeepers, and ensuring equal opportunity across hundreds of test sites is a serious enough business that even minor disruptions make national news.

Open in front of each attendee that day was a 222 page (9-point font, A4) ‘Invigilation Guidelines’ (*kantoku yōryō*) booklet from the National Center for University Entrance Examinations, marked ‘confidential’; a 21-page A4 booklet with the same title and source, containing 38 printed PowerPoint slides and a couple of last-minute additions; a range of A4-sized stickers and inserts to add to one booklet or the other, giving a fun scrapbooking vibe to proceedings; and a 48-page ‘Implementation Guide’ (*jisshi no tebiki*) from the university,

with site-specific information ... for a total of 300 pages. This was no outlier – 2022 for example exceeded 400 pages by including separate copies of key reference sections and 31 loose pages.

In the final hour, we leafed madly back and forth making notes as the speaker talked us through a series of ‘case study’ flowcharts covering possible problems on the day. Eventually, we reached the end of both booklets, were told that session two shortly before the actual test dates would review the key points, and then it was Q&A time. After a few unremarkable questions – staff parking, toilet chaperone protocol etc. – someone pointed out that while we had master flowcharts to handle, for example, power cuts (pages 182), vomiting candidates (pages 170, 178), and delayed starts due to natural disasters (page 181), it was not clear what would happen time-wise if a candidate starting vomiting during a power cut after a delayed start.

I couldn’t help it – I laughed. If I were to ask this question, it would be a wryly indirect suggestion that no one could internalize more than a few key points from 300 densely-packed pages of text for a one-day job a month away, and that at some level of detail (likely around page 2) the main purpose of the meeting can only really be to remind everyone that we need to take care around a high-stakes test. Indeed, in two years of being a parttime invigilator and then a ‘Head Invigilator’ with University of London Examinations, I never saw more than an occasional and sparse A4 sheet of instructions, and certainly no multi-page manual.

But here’s the critical moment that is the point of this anecdote – no-one else laughed. No-one smiled or shrugged or nodded at me in sympathy. I suspect if anyone noticed my laugh, they assumed it was unrelated to the question. Veteran staff members remained in low-power mode; more recent arrivals waited for the answer with pens poised. My laugh died away and I scrapbooked furiously to cover my faux pas.

An easy response here is to note that Japan is one of the most ‘uncertainty avoiding’ countries on earth (Hofstede 2001), with many actions ritualized, standardized, governed by precedent, and managed in order to reduce risk. Hofstede’s analysis is notable for identifying patterns of similarity and difference between countries, finding for example that Japan and South Korea are highly risk averse while Jamaica and Denmark are not. While this botanizing is explanatorily useful for intercultural business (for example, in predicting problems for a Danish manager at a Japanese company, or vice versa), it appears less useful for understanding *why* careful rule-following is normal in Japan. Hofstede and commentators suggest that Japan’s uncertainty avoidance is connected to being constantly threatened by natural disasters, but other similarly threatened countries (for example, the Philippines and Indonesia) show as only moderately risk averse. At the very least more work is required to identify other relevant factors.

I’ve told this anecdote to a range of people, and the general response from non-Japanese people is ‘that’s insane’. The general response from Japanese people, though, is more like ‘you laugh, but who will take responsibility if something goes wrong?’. And there we have it: the all-important ‘liability risk’, or more literally translated, the ‘problem of responsibility’ (*sekinin mondai*). If a candidate is disadvantaged by invigilator indecision after vomiting during a power cut and after a delayed start due to an earthquake, or two such candidates at different sites are treated differently, an angry parent will register a complaint, the media will get

hold of it, and before we know what's happening, the test site that callously destroyed a bright young future by failing to prepare properly will be all over the news, university governors will be holding low bows in apology on national TV, and committees will be looking for scapegoats. Or so people fear; or, at least, must pretend to fear, in order to show that they are taking their responsibilities seriously.

Now, you might have already been balking at the idea of a 300-page manual for a one-day job. There is, however, a parallel familiar outside Japan – long documents we are nominally required to read but never do: license agreements, terms of service, and privacy policies (see for example Obar & Oeldorf-Hirsch 2020). These pretend to be aimed at giving us information or gaining informed consent, but are obviously unfit for this purpose, and presumably instead serve mostly to reduce institutional risk of litigation. Against that background, it is perhaps not too strange that an enormous work manual which is nominally about allowing invigilators do a job well is obviously unfit for this purpose – it is in fact also serving to reduce institutional risk. Japan is a comparatively unlitigious country, so the feared censure is more reputational rather than legal.

This fear of individual-level and institution-level reputational damage or failures of 'responsibility' requires a couple of things to get started: firstly, a culture of customer-facing perfectionism (*kanpekishugi*), whereby not preparing for even an improbable trifecta (delay, vomiting, power cut) counts as a failure of service; and a strong demand for equality (*byōdou*) such that one test site's handling of such a case must be the same as another site's handling. A proper appreciation of the importance in Japan of these three concepts – equality, customer-facing perfectionism, and the problem of responsibility – helps explain a lot that might otherwise seem strange. The three are of course interrelated – guaranteed equality of treatment necessitates exhaustive rules for handling customers (perfectionism) and makes failures problematic (responsibility), and so on.

They serve Japanese society well in some ways. Customer service is excellent across the country. Staff go above and beyond to answer requests for help. Lost property is returned, correct change is given, and schedules are respected. Operating in accordance with a detailed manual is seen as professional and even cool: Tokyo station attendants, for example, unselfconsciously follow their manual on crowded platforms before train arrivals and departures, performing a complex procedure of standing in a set spot, repeating a mantra-like checklist aloud to themselves, following their white-gloved finger as it points up and down the tracks and the platform edge looking for safety issues, raising signal lanterns, and so on. It is difficult to imagine London TFL or New York MTA station staff members doing the same, or remaining unmocked while doing so.

The theoretical framework of 'governmentality', a critical social policy approach to understanding power, seems particularly well-suited here. Governmentality focuses on the participation of the governed and on a range of non-state levels: family, society, workplace, and so on. On this analysis, defining and classifying populations and their mechanisms of management and administration (for example, manuals and the practices they codify) enables them to self-govern; power on this view is less the inevitably negative state-led repression that some critical social theory calls to our attention, than a positive productive network that facilitates and empowers (McKee 2009: 8). People identify or are identified as being a member of a particular population and

adopt the moral, social, and professional guides to conduct whereby that population self-governs. Social policy research, including work on governmentality, tends to be focused on discourse analysis, and productive of a heterogenous and opaque literature reflecting the varied concerns of post-Foucauldian commentators. As McKee (2009: 19-20) suggests, there is a need for more ethnographic research to balance this tendency to be highly abstract, and the participant observation ethnography of this paper can be viewed as exactly such an effort.

The abstract nature of the governmentality approach notwithstanding, it seems to do real explanatory work here. Japan is in many ways a governmentality success story, in that people generally self-govern consistently and willingly as members of various groups. The governmentality analysis draws our attention to the non-coincidental emphasis in Japan on creating and maintaining group identities: wearing the uniform, attending all-hands morning stand-up meetings (*chōrei*), eating and cleaning together, using different forms of address and language depending on position within the group, and so on. This emphasis promotes attachment to group identities which are defined in part through willing or even proud self- or group-governance in accordance with the tacit or explicit manuals associated with those identities.

Group membership is multiple, overlapping, and messy: for example, a single person may be a station guard, a mother, a wife, and a member of the neighbourhood association, and so on, dealing with rules and expectations that may be in tension or mutually exclusive. Indeed, there may be room to give an account of resistance to manuals and policy within the governmentality analysis through the notion of multiple roles in tension. For example, though my corporate sales manual dictates a certain polite response to a rude customer, and at work this generally takes precedence, I am nonetheless aware of other ways the interaction would go should I respond as the holder of some other identity, perhaps ‘private citizen’ or ‘respected worker’.

The three concepts – equality, customer-facing perfectionism, and the problem of responsibility – can make for interesting cultural differences without being obviously positive or negative. The high value given to equality means no one asks for their dressing on the side or extra foam on their latte – you take what is on the menu. This leads to some tensions with foreign visitors in luxury hotels who expect high prices to license friendly and personalized service, but find that while they may get a bigger room and a different menu, Japanese professionalism generally doesn’t allow for going off-menu. In yet other ways, the three concepts serve Japan poorly. For example, a need to act with perfect equality can be paralyzing. With coronavirus vaccines in short supply across the country in early 2021, hospitals destroyed doses earmarked for people who cancelled their reservations on the grounds that ‘fairness cannot be guaranteed’ if doses were passed to others (Tokyo Shimbun 2021, my translation).

The risk analysis underwriting the decision to destroy vaccines highlights a problematic asymmetry for risk averse cultures: acting outside the rules (for example, giving out surplus doses) generally carries at most a minor upside – perhaps your boss nods in agreement, and a later version of the manual includes this point – but a possibility of large downside (accusations of unfairness, inquiries, and ‘the responsibility problem’ leading to apologies or job loss etc.). Following the manual may sometimes be silly, but is seldom if ever blameworthy;

destroying the vaccine doses was wasteful, but not the responsibility of the poor hospital workers. This skewing of possible upside potential and downside risk suppresses initiative and entrepreneurship at all levels, from an employee speaking out with an idea (a team success if it proves successful, their responsibility if it doesn't) to securing funding for start-up companies (bankers deny funding applications more often than is warranted by the financials if held individually responsible for failed calls, though in reality Japanese banks require guarantees such that start-ups are unlikely to be able to even complete an application).

Problems with such a corporate culture were indicated in a recent report on systemic failures at the megabank Mizuho, which noted a 'corporate culture whereby it is more rational to keep quiet and wait, than to speak up proactively and run the risk of "the problem of responsibility"' (Nippon News Network 2021, my translation). This problem is not limited to megabanks: even if change or action is quite clearly required, this same prudence would often suggest that instead of instigating it, you should at most obliquely sow the idea here and there, and participate diffidently in cultivating a general agreement regarding said change or action, so that when it finally happens or becomes policy, any resulting 'responsibility problems' can be assigned to some internal procedures which can be reviewed, rather than to you.

This process of changing or updating policy without anyone being obviously the instigator or a key supporter is a slow one. It involves casual asides when opportunities present, waiting for awareness and consensus to build, and so on. People and institutions used to this style are poorly equipped to respond in periods of rapid change or disruption. My experience in Japan during the coronavirus pandemic, for example, was that each level of management in large organizations is remarkably reluctant to escalate a problem, even when it is clearly a novel situation the existing manuals and precedents cannot handle (such as running classes, committees, NPOs etc. during a semi-lockdown). Passing a problem up the management chain becomes a major issue following its own manual (meetings are called, agenda written, reports required) with the person escalating it somehow identified as the instigator of all the fuss, so the default response of middle management to problem cases is to quote the relevant but insufficient policy, perhaps with a disclaimer that they personally can't change said policy, and then if pressed admit obliquely off-record that they will not seek to confirm that the policy is being followed. The positive result is presumably that the institution appears to run smoothly, with few policy revisions required; and management need not make any decisions about policy changes (decisions which would pose individual risk). The negative result is that information flow regarding the need for change is largely blocked, occurring only when critical levels of frustration are exceeded (or, following the governmentality analysis suggested above, when cognitive dissonance would be reduced by following the manual or rules associated with some other identity: good citizen rather than salesperson, educator rather than corporate employee, and so on); and that the whole experience is stressful to frontline staff, who find that they have to either suffer while following insufficient rules, or find ways to work around the rules without official sanction or support (a Chinese proverb often quoted in Japan goes something like 'for every policy from above, a countermeasure from below').

This conservatism or inertia can create a tension with the ideal of equality we started this discussion with. That is, the domains over which ‘equality’ is desired to operate change over time (for example to include women, or LGBTQ people, or Zainichi Koreans) but actual practices are remarkably slow to change. Even when policy nominally changes at the top (say, in a political decision), or public opinion shifts, the layers of detailed manuals (or, in the absence of actual physical manuals, de facto sets of precedents and practices codifying institutional cultures) between the newly promulgated law and actual practices act as a delaying buffer. In a culture where taking some initiative feels less risky, awareness of a societal shift can have an immediate effect on decisions about, say, gender pay gaps; but where initiative is risky and following even an obviously sub-optimal manual or established practice is common-sense, not only do those manuals and practices need to be changed in thousands of meetings and committees around the country, but the process of obliquely sowing and cultivating those changes can be hugely time-consuming.

This over-awareness of the risks of operating outside the manual and unwillingness to escalate problems, together with the ideal of customer-facing perfection, is probably also what enables the growing problem of customers harassing service industry staff. People called ‘claimers’ (*kurēmā*) make unreasonable or false complaints about poor service in the expectation of receiving compensation and grovelling apologies, in a kind of service-industry Munchausen’s syndrome. If the manual says that customer complaints must be listened to and an apology made, then staff may feel bound to do exactly that, even when the complaint is shouted for three hours, or repeated day after day, or the apology demanded includes prostrating themselves on the floor.

In 2003, sharing office space with a Japanese partner company in Tokyo, I noticed visibly upset tele-sales staff literally drawing straws on a Friday afternoon, and later ran into the loser leaving work ... with visibly shaking hands and swollen eyes. It turned out that a particular man would call the sales line (perhaps non-coincidentally staffed entirely by women) at roughly the same time every week, spend half an hour or so choosing a product, and when finally asked regarding payment method, would try to pay with an obscure card (something like a village friendly society account card), have this rejected, and then embark on an angry rant for up to half an hour. The staff knew his voice, number, and schedule; it had been happening for months; the supervisor could not help but be aware of the issue ... but, the salesperson told me, they had no choice but to follow the manual anyway as ‘we represent the company’.

Government documents suggest that over 61% of workers from 117 unions have recently suffered from claimers, nearly 90% feel stressed by the issue, and 44% can’t do anything about it except continue to apologize (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2021). The same documents trace the nominally urgent development of legal guidelines, from 2018 discussion in the Diet to securing a fiscal 2021 budget for ‘the formulation and dissemination of a corporate manual against harassment by customers’ (my translation). I imagine tens of thousands of thick and detailed workplace manuals (one for every role in every company) being updated to try and close the loopholes that make claimers such a problem.

Of course, an updated manual is still a manual, and a manual cannot always correctly cover all possible cases: for example, there can always be an additional problem with those vomiting late power-cut exam candidates. Similarly, a customer service manual for identifying claimers that has a false negative rate low enough to reliably protect staff will inevitably have a non-zero false positive rate (that is, some customers whose complaint should be heard will be treated as claimers), while a manual that aims to have no false positives by requiring staff to giving even loud and upset customers the benefit of the doubt will have a non-zero false negative rate, leaving staff vulnerable to harassment. So, while updating manuals can be important, ultimately what is required is some facility to operate outside the manual in cases that the manual does not handle appropriately.

While these cases or how to identify them may generally not be specifiable in advance, people are often capable of identifying when a manual is insufficient. The salesperson facing weekly abuse can identify that following the manual is harming them and probably not helping the company. Hiring managers can identify that following the manual dictates a gender pay gap that doesn't fit well with current culture or stated policy. Doctors destroying vaccines can identify that following the manual is in tension with their wider goals of helping people. An exam invigilator can look over a group of delayed candidates vomiting in a suddenly dark room and decide to pause the exam and call for guidance. The problem, then, is not so much that the manual does not correctly cover all cases (that's practically impossible), as that people who believe they're encountering a problem case feel unable to operate outside it.

There is of course a tension between needing people to usually follow a manual (guaranteeing that invigilators, salespeople, hiring managers and doctors aim for consistent service even when tired, or dealing with people they may personally like or dislike, reducing discrimination, nepotism, and so on) while also making room for them to operate outside it when needed. There is, I think, a useful parallel with traffic laws: these are high stakes, and we very much need people to usually follow them. Nonetheless, we can easily imagine problem cases where we should break the laws – for example, where you should speed to get your busload of children away from a lava flow, or cause minor property damage to stop your runaway truck. I've crossed centre lines (to skirt fallen boulders), driven an unwarranted vehicle (to a warrant station), driven through red lights (broken and never changing), failed to stop after striking an animal (rabbit on a highway) and deliberately parked to block a road (at a complex accident scene). As I write, I can see four heavy vehicles (delivery trucks and a small crane) that are breaking parking or traffic rules – all ignored by the regular police and community patrols, as these jobs must be done and there's no other practical way to do them. Presumably, we are able to make judgements about when traffic laws should be broken because we are aware of (1) the core purpose of the traffic manual (keeping people safe on the roads while allowing traffic to move), and (2) various cases in which the normal rules are rightfully not followed (by emergency services, on the instructions of a police officer, and regularly in fiction as we watch action screen heroes break traffic rules in the service of a greater good).

To generalize these two points to other manuals (for example, to customer service manuals which interpreted too strictly permit ‘claimers’), we should (1) make sure that each group of rules is prefaced by some general goals, perhaps just something like ‘to efficiently and safely maximize customer satisfaction’. Even if the rules nominally never permit staff to hang up on a customer or go off-script to ask if they called previously, awareness of the core goals can license staff to break these rules (the claimer reduces efficiency, harms staff safety, is not a customer ...). Where necessary, we can also (2) explicitly include sample cases in which the normal rules are rightfully not followed: where the caller is abusive, a small child, etc. The idea is not necessarily to include such cases as new rules, but rather to note that in some cases the rules should not be followed. The rules themselves can be changed to include some deliberately vague language like ‘generally’ or ‘in most cases’, or to include explicit clauses mandating a different response (given the overall goals) or escalation to a supervisor. The result should be a manual which is still detailed enough to provide clear guidance and guarantee quality of service, but which also allows staff the space to make occasional judgement calls or escalations without censure. If the culture becomes too permissive in licensing off-manual judgement calls or escalations, it can be pushed back slightly by supervisors showing how those cases should have been handled, or pushed back more strongly by some level of censure (in traffic terms, a campaign of public education, and some publicized prosecutions respectively).

The governmentality analysis offered above may also be helpful here. If going off manual can be understood as minimizing dissonance between action and the conflicting demands of various group identities, then reminding people of relevant identities other than the primary one of the manual may help license people to move past the limits of that manual. This is no silver bullet, since speak of different identities is probably unfamiliar to most people, and different people have different identities; but there may be value in even a reminder that the workplace manual should be checked against the requirements of, say, being a member of the community, or simply not being evil (Alphabet 2020). Ultimately, as with noting general goals before detailed procedures, the goal is not to offer a new rule, but to license people in sometimes not following the rules. If that can be achieved by reminding people that they know the standards of conduct for groups other than their work position, and those standards may sometimes be used to license departure from the workplace manual, then the governmentality analysis has done some useful work.

A swimmer competing in the 2018 Japan Sports Masters was disqualified for not touching the pool wall ‘with both hands’, something which he was unable to do as he is missing one arm below the elbow. The disqualification seems unfair, as the swimmer certainly gains no general advantage from missing a forearm: this is presumably the intuition underwriting the allowances made under Paralympic rules, for example requiring a touch with the one arm you have, with the other arm stretched forward if mobility allows. The athlete protested to the Japan Swimming Federation but was repeatedly told his disqualification could not be overturned because they were following the rules and regulations of the International Swimming Federation (Harumashi 2021), a situation which apparently remains unresolved some years later.

I sent the paragraph above to the British and New Zealand national sports governing bodies, preceded by only a single-sentence self-introduction and followed only by the question ‘How are similar cases handled there?’. British Swimming replied that if Para swimmers have completed a national or international classification their exception code allows the referee to make the necessary allowance and not disqualify them, and that otherwise ‘I would just hope that common sense prevailed!’ (J. Dimery, personal communication, November 7, 2021). Swimming New Zealand runs competitions using both World Para Swimming and International Swimming Federation rules:

There’s no formality to it, it’s simply if the swimmer has a disability that is considered rather than simply following the wording of the rule. However, this is underpinned by an education programme for officials to be confident to make a call on Para swimmers. We often couple the education with an empathetic mindset – because not all disabled swimmers have a classification with exception codes to fully implement the World Para rules. We are in the process of pulling together a book of precedents to resolve situations like the one you mention ... [so] we don’t have to repeat the same uncertainty. (C. Leslie, personal communication, November 3, 2021)

These responses neatly illustrate how other cultures move beyond the manual. They do have manuals (probably the same manual Japan is using), but (1) awareness of the core purpose or goals of the manual (‘common sense’, ‘underpinned by an education programme’) gives officials the confidence to move beyond the manual, and (2) sample cases (‘a book of precedents’) help license and guide off-manual judgment calls.

Holding equality and customer-facing perfectionism as ideals, and having a strong culture of requiring responsibility to be taken for any failure, doubtless underwrites some of what is good about Japan: the public safety, the excellent customer service, the comparatively equal wealth distribution and low CEO pay. However, I have suggested here that there are prices associated with holding to these ideals: notably, suppression of initiative at a range of levels, and the ever-present worry of who will take responsibility if the ideal is not reached. People and institutions making manuals feel bound to make them impractically detailed. Those following the manuals feel bound to do so even when the results seem ridiculous. While changing this wider conservative culture of wanting to act only as licensed by rules and precedent is likely impractical (and perhaps on balance undesirable), it would be comparatively easy to tweak manuals and the culture of their use to license exceptions and to be more welcoming of escalations. A small shift towards allowing that some level of exceptions and escalations is inevitable and even praiseworthy given proper awareness of overalls goals seems likely (revisiting some of the examples explored above) to reduce the unworkable level of detail in invigilation manuals, or allow people to raise concerns about destroying valuable vaccines, instigate necessary change in a megabank, change hiring policy to reflect societal norms, hang up on abusive customers, and give Para swimmers a fair chance.

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