

A Sumbiosis Think Piece

The Japanese Way of Apologizing

We often smile in amusement when seeing Japanese personalities bowing low to excuse themselves. However, as explained in an article published in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung ¹, this ritual makes much more sense as we might think in Western countries.

First and foremost, in Japan, excusing oneself does not (or not always) mean admitting guilt. What is at stake is social rehabilitation. Those who do not excuse themselves in proper form risk being ostracized in their private or professional life. By showing that they reflect upon an incident and try to understand its causes, they demonstrate their earnestness and sense of social responsibility. There is obviously no guarantee that those affected will accept an apology, but by behaving correctly, it is possible to turn around an awkward situation.

In the business world, the first step in order to manage a crisis or a scandal is always the same: excuses and bows in front of the press. This procedure is so common that it even has a name: «shazai kaiken», the excuse press conference. It is at this stage not yet necessary to know exactly what happened. What is needed is only that a few members of the top management team excuse themselves visibly and at length for the concerns and worries which they have created – thus allowing photographers and cameramen to document this act of humility.

Attempting to resolve the problem can start only after this ceremony has happened. What follows are a series of endless press conferences during which the company concerned commits to shed light on the incident, presents or repeats tirelessly the results of internal investigations and answers questions. This process may take weeks or even months, until the media feel comfortable to wipe the slate clean.

The question is often being asked whether individuals or companies take their apologies seriously. But especially in Japan, false apologies do not work.

¹ Richtiges Entschuldigen will gelernt sein – In Japan sind Verbeugungen Teil eines komplexen Rituals, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 25. Juli 2019 (<https://www.nzz.ch/international/in-japan-will-richtiges-entschuldigen-gelernt-sein-ld.1496398>)