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ECONOMIC FORUM / Sugar-coated corporate problems by Kio Hayashida

Company staffers called shuga shain (sugar employees) have become the topic of conversation among those in charge of corporate human resources and labor affairs. But what kind of employees are they?

Sugar is sweet. The Japanese word for sweet is amai and when it is used as an adjective to describe a person, he or she is considered a little problematic for being too optimistic, careless or self-indulgent. Hence the new term to describe childish young employees who are overly optimistic about society. (HR: "shuga" here is probably the katakana version of "sugar")

Yukiko Takita, who runs an office as a certified social insurance labor consultant in Hokkaido, coined the term in her book "Shuga Shain ga Kaisha o Tokasu" (Sugar Employees Dissolve Companies), published by Bookman-sha. In the book she gives many examples of sugar employees.

Takita runs a business specializing in social insurance consultancy. Many corporations seek her counsel over "ways to deal with troubled employees" and to "resolve trouble between a company and employees." Typically, these problems involve "sugar employees," many of them in their 20s and 30s.

She analyzes sugar employees by separating them into five types. The two basic types are:

-- The "one room capacity" type: Employees whose ability to handle work is limited and who back away from hard work.

-- The "overextended private life" type: Employees who prioritize their private life, failing to distinguish between work and private spheres of life during working hours by using company time for private use without hesitation, and conversely, refusing to help out on days off no matter what emergency situation their company is in.

She also refers to three other types:

-- The "respect me" type: Employees who are overconfident in their abilities and do not take their duties seriously. They overrate the results of their work and demand generous remuneration.

-- The "prison break" type: Employees who quit when they find they cannot work as they please, leaving companies at the earliest possible moment like inmates escaping from prison. They repeatedly switch jobs.

-- The "helicopter parent" type: An overly protective parent who interferes in company affairs to cover up the inadequacies of his or her offspring working at that firm.

The five types have a similar background in that they are typically people who have been brought up to be spoiled, self-centered and indifferent to the inconvenience they cause others.

They believe their sense of values to be absolutely correct and adhere to their way of thinking no matter how hard others try to persuade them to change. If they find their workplace is not comfortable, they look to escape immediately. In other words, they have all the external appearance of adults, but are quite willful and spoiled on the inside.

Many readers of this column who are corporate managers or in management positions are likely to concur that they have employees like this. Some younger readers, on the other hand, may resent this analysis, saying, "I am different."

Of course, "young employee" is not synonymous with "sugar employee." It may be that the sugary aspect of young people is more conspicuous because many of them state their views so directly these days.

A rather more serious problem for Japan is the sugary sense of values that is proliferating throughout the country.

"Sugar managers" delegate tasks to their subordinates and refrain from making decisions. Then there are "sugar companies" that feel no shame in behaving to the detriment of society. The rise in both sugar managers and sugar companies seems relentless.

In the 1990s, compensation offered to clients by major securities companies for stock investment losses and the illegal payments made to corporate racketeers to prevent them from disrupting shareholder meetings were notable social problems. This decade, meanwhile, has seen the advent of alleged cases of window dressing by Internet firm Livedoor Co., insider trading implicating the so-called Murakami Fund, and the successive false labeling of foodstuffs. They are all "childish" deeds that place significance only on profits and self-interest.

Has any "sugar" coated you or the company you work for? We all need to keep an eye on ourselves. Of course, that includes me, too. I would like to discipline and take another long hard look at myself.

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