

## Warm Hospitality, Japanese Style Part 8

### **Attracting Worldwide Attention! Cleaners of Shinkansen Trains Provide First-Class Service**



The cleaners of the Shinkansen bullet trains arriving and departing from Tokyo Station refer to their workplaces as the “Shinkansen Theater.” When a train pulls in, they spring into action to tidy up the carriages and make them spic-and-span for the next passengers---and they have just seven minutes to complete the task before the train glides off again. The devotion of these cleaners has attracted a lot of attention, both domestically and internationally.

IHCSA Café visited JR East Techno Heart TESSEI Co., Ltd., which undertakes cleaning inside Shinkansen trains operated by East Japan Railway Co. (JR East), and also inside Tokyo Station, to learn about its highly original approach to cleaning and its emphasis on teamwork.

#### **Pleasant Space for 130,000 Passengers a Day**

Every day JR East Shinkansen trains bound for Tohoku, Joetsu, Nagano, Akita, and Yamagata arrive at four platforms of Tokyo Station at four-minute intervals. They will be departing again after 12 minutes. Since time has to be allowed for the unloading of passengers and the boarding of new passengers, the carriages have to be tidied up for the next ride in just seven



minutes.

In the case of a 17-carriage train, this work, which is watched with fascination through the train windows by many passengers standing on the platform, is carried out by 44 cleaners divided into two teams. One TESSEI worker takes charge of an ordinary 100-seat carriage. (Three workers are assigned to a first-class carriage or “green car.”) Other workers clean the lavatories and washrooms. Since everything is done to perfection, TESSEI receives many expressions of gratitude from passengers.



As passengers alight from the train, the cleaners stand by the doors, thank them, and collect their garbage. Then, after checking that everyone is off the train, they begin the seven-minute “Shinkansen Theater” show. For every one of them in their respective posts, the operative words are “concentration” and “swiftness.” In the case of an ordinary carriage, the work flow is as follows:

- (1) Large garbage is collected, and the carriage’s condition is ascertained.
- (2) Seats are turned to face the front of the train.
- (3) The tables in front of every one of the 100 seats arranged in 20 rows, as well as the windows and window frames, are wiped, and seats are checked for dirt.
- (4) The floor is cleaned.
- (5) The headrest covers are changed.
- (6) Final checks are made for items left behind, etc.

Every time a Shinkansen train arrives at Tokyo Station, the cleaners jump into action, briskly creating a pleasant space for the next passengers. Sometimes, due to a busy schedule, the time has to be shortened even more, but the cleaners are trained to do their job in a minimum of four minutes if necessary without cutting any corners.

Every day the TESSEI workers at Tokyo Station clean 120 Shinkansen trains, which then carry about 130,000 passengers in the Tohoku and Joshinetsu directions. In peak periods, the number of trains may be increased to 168 a day, but still the 450-strong staff works at full capacity and ensures that the same quality of service is provided however tight the schedule is.





## Mutual Support Among Team Members

TESSEI is commissioned by JR East to clean in-service trains in accordance with their operation schedule, so punctuality must be strictly observed however dirty the carriages might be. Unforeseen circumstances are overcome by teamwork. A team consists of 22 members, who cooperate with one another in order to get the work done on time.

IHCSA Café asked Toshihiko Sasaki, a manager at TESSEI's Tokyo Service Center in charge of giving instructions to workers at cleaning sites, about what guidance he gives to team members. "We don't want to keep passengers waiting any longer than necessary," he explains, "so the important points are how to do the cleaning work efficiently and how to provide tidy carriages."

"I make sure that members can communicate with one another all the time," he goes on. "I encourage them to discuss know-how and techniques relating to work and to address problems and make improvements themselves. In fact, we spend more time on these discussions than on the actual work!"

The teams consist of members of various ages and previous occupations, so it is important to ensure that they are all moving in the same direction. Good hospitality would be impossible if they all thought in different ways. The secret of TESSEI's success in providing comfortable space for train passengers and station users lies in the multiplier effect achieved by combining the high-level skills of individual members and their teamwork.



**"We try hard in the 'Shinkansen Theater' to provide cleaning that pleases." (Mr. Sasaki)**

## Bringing Out the Best in One Another

"However trivial it might seem," says Mr. Sasaki, "we get members and leaders to write and submit reports on the good points they have noticed among team members, thoughtful responses to passengers, wonderful deeds, feelings of gratitude on being helped by other team members, things like that." These accounts of illustrious acts and modest efforts, even minor ones, are compiled in a monthly "Angel Report," which is made available for all staff to see and shared throughout the company. At the same time, the company expresses its gratitude to staff for their efforts and raises motivation by presenting team and individual awards every month.



"Gratitude from passengers is of course most important," remarks Mr. Sasaki, "but our employees feel even more motivated because they know the company is watching each one of them and evaluating them. We want our staff to engage in their daily work knowing that their efforts and performance are constantly being watched by someone and will be properly recognized."



**The cleaning crew politely stands in line and bows to surprised passengers at Tokyo Station.**



**Cleaners engage in lively communication to check procedures and job content.**

## **Beyond Passengers' Expectations**

TESSEI also cleans station facilities, such as the platforms, passageways, and station lavatories. When they see someone who looks lost or an elderly person with a lot of luggage, cleaners, regardless of their job, take the initiative and offer help, thus ensuring that users of Tokyo Station have a pleasant experience and trouble-free journey.

Kiyomasa Nakata, assistant director at TESSEI's Tokyo Service Center, manages the team leaders and other instructors. He comments, "When passengers say thank you, or applaud and say marvelous when we stand in line and bow, our motivation rises. I think the important thing is to continue this kind of atmosphere. When passengers respond, we feel that the job is worth doing."

"We're not just cleaning folk," Mr. Nakata goes on. "Our aim is to be a company that provides hospitality. For paying passengers, speedy cleaning and pleasant carriages are taken for granted. What we want all our staff to understand is that we are doing things that go beyond the expectations of passengers. In the summer we also wear aloha shirts for our work, and we attach cherry blossoms or hibiscus to our caps. These are ideas that have come from our cleaners."

Once a day, without fail, each team has a meeting at which matters, however small, are discussed thoroughly and the members themselves think of solutions to everyday issues. The company respects the autonomy of the teams, expanding their discretionary powers, positively accepting their proposals whatever they may be, and offering support so that the measures decided by teams are put into practice.

## **Stability Demands Reforms**

The reason why TESSEI staff work so animatedly these days is that Teruo Yabe, who became director and business planning manager eight years ago (he is now head of the Hospitality Creation Department), has instituted various reforms since his appointment. IHCSA Café



**"Since the trains that we clean are in service, every second is precious." (Mr. Nakata)**

asked Mr. Yabe about the situation then and the changes he has introduced.

“Before,” he answers, “work came automatically from JR East, and our income was extremely stable, so we were really just resting on our laurels. Then, in order to increase profits, we started promoting the recruitment of part-time cleaners. But that led to many injuries, many accidents, many complaints, and train delays. Our reputation plummeted. It was miserable for people working in such an environment. When we moved to reduce costs, the turnover of workers rose, and we clearly lost the trust and esteem of customers. So we had to ask ourselves which do we want, and of course the answer was trust. It is precisely when a company is stable that revitalization and new ideas are necessary.”

Many companies adopt measures with the aim of improving profits, but TESSEI shifted in a completely different direction.



**“You can have second-class or third-class strategies, but let’s have first-class performance!”  
(Mr. Yabe)**

## **Fresh, Safe, Warm**

Six years ago TESSEI undertook a companywide redefinition of its raison d’être and adopted a policy of devoting its efforts to increasing user satisfaction not as a cleaning business but as a service business. This alone was not enough, though. The company realized that it was also important to increase the sense of fulfillment of employees. Rather than following the one-way approach of other companies, in which workers provide a service that pleases users, TESSEI recognized that the joy of users and the motivation of workers are constantly interacting in the same space. Therefore, it positioned the workplace at the center of things and thought about what should be done from there.



**After a suggestion from the cleaners, the sign was changed from the standard “Cleaning in progress” to the friendlier “Preparing for boarding.”**



**The cleaners assigned to first-class carriages wear special uniforms.**

Mr. Yabe explains, “What is TESSEI’s product? Previously I would have said cleaning. But customers do not come to purchase cleaning services, do they? So in the ‘Shinkansen Theater,’ a stage that we share with customers, we decided that we want customers to take ‘memories’ back home with them based on the absolute principles of fresh, safe, and warm.”



## Employee Training Begins with Thoughtfulness

While enhancing its capacity as a company to respect the autonomy of employees and realize their proposals, TESSEI has adhered consistently to its principal and absolutely unchangeable mission of cleaning train carriages briskly, correctly, and perfectly. More than simply “service with a smile,” TESSEI believes that the best hospitality lies in enabling customers to fully enjoy fresh spaces and use them safely. As well as being warmhearted, therefore, it is essential for employees also to display strictness in their cleaning work. So while incorporating a bottom-up approach, which recognizes that the front-line staff know best about problems and improvements in the workplace, TESSEI also has a distinct top-down discipline that permeates into every nook and cranny of the company.



**The well-arranged cleaning equipment is testimony to the meticulous care that cleaners put into their work.**



**The cleaners' devotion to their work is evident in the spotless equipment as well.**

“The important thing in employee training,” says Mr. Yabe, “is to develop people who continue to have joy, pleasure, and pride in their work and to fill TESSEI with such people. We have been able to build the company up into what it is today because the company has kept a close watch on employees as they assiduously work for us.

“You can only provide hospitality if you have sincerity and thoughtfulness. It is necessary to show these traits not only toward customers but toward other team members as well. In addition, we tell employees to look after themselves, because you have to have consideration for yourself too. Cleaning in particular is arduous work. Even with self-sacrifice, people don't last long.”

Beautiful streamlined shapes and outstanding performance are not the only attractions of Shinkansen trains. They are also highly praised for their extremely punctual and safe operation, which is achieved because a lot of people do their jobs so meticulously well. The cleaners work with the constant wish that passengers will have a pleasant journey. The Japanese spirit of fine-tuned service is clearly evident in their devotion to the task.

Photos: Fumio Kimiwada