

The Carpenter Who Stretched the Castle Beam

Over a hundred carpenters were hired during the construction of Matsumoto Castle's Great Keep (1593–1594). One of these carpenters seemed determined to avoid work; to the annoyance of his fellow workers, he loafed around, occasionally whittling the pegs that were used to join one piece of wood to another.

Finally, it came time to begin assembling the Great Keep, beginning with a vital step: setting in place the beam that would support the central ridgepole. But to the carpenters' dismay, the beam was about 15 centimeters too short.

The men were shocked and speechless. What could be done? At this moment, the do-nothing carpenter spoke up. "Let me try stretching the beam," he said, and directed the 100 other carpenters to split into two groups. He had one group stand to the east and the other to the west. Then, the do-nothing carpenter had the two groups tie ropes to either end of the beam. When everything was in place, he gave the order to pull. While all the other carpenters heaved on their ropes, he stood balanced at the very center of the beam, holding a huge wooden mallet. When he sensed the moment was right, he braced himself and struck the beam.

Once!

Twice!

Three times!

Then, jumping down, he dropped the mallet and pronounced, "There, that should be about 15 centimeters."

Sure enough, when the other carpenters checked, they found the beam was exactly 15 centimeters longer. Everyone was astonished by this miraculous feat, and thereafter the carpenter was revered as a master.