



“Leadership with Purpose: What Western Executives can learn from Japanese Leadership Principles.”

December 2025

[Henning Ohlsson](#)

In many Western companies, sustainability is still treated as a strategy, a framework, or a reporting requirement. In Japan, it is something deeper: **a mindset**.

Over the years, I have shared reflections on LinkedIn that illuminate how Japanese leadership principles offer a fundamentally different approach to leading businesses responsibly, sustainably, and successfully.

What makes these principles so relevant today is not their cultural origin, but their timeless relevance in a world facing climate risk, talent shortages, and growing expectations of corporate responsibility.

Hitozukuri – Developing People Before Scaling Performance

One of the most powerful concepts I have highlighted is **Hitozukuri**. Literally, “*making people*.”

“While Monozukuri has earned Japan a global reputation for quality, Hitozukuri focuses on nurturing skills, character, and mindset.”

In Western leadership, transformation often starts with technology, structures, or KPIs. Hitozukuri starts with people.

Why this matters today: Sustainability, digital transformation, and AI adoption fail when people are not ready — emotionally, culturally, or intellectually. Long-term success depends less on tools and more on the mindset of those who use them.

Leadership takeaway: Invest in people first. Skills can be trained, but values, trust, and purpose must be cultivated deliberately.

Monozukuri – Excellence with Responsibility

Monozukuri is often translated as “manufacturing excellence,” but that misses the point. It is about craftsmanship, pride, and respect for materials, processes, and outcomes.

I describe Monozukuri as the union of technical mastery and ethical responsibility.

Why this matters today: In a sustainability context, quality is no longer just about performance or price. It includes durability, resource efficiency, circularity, and environmental impact.

Leadership takeaway: Redefine quality. True excellence considers not only *what* is produced, but *how* and *with what long-term consequences*.

Nemawashi – Preparing the Ground for Sustainable Change

In Japanese culture, major decisions are rarely imposed abruptly. Instead, leaders practice **Nemawashi** — “preparing the roots before transplanting a tree.”

I describe it as “*careful groundwork before decision-making and implementation.*”

Why this matters today: Many sustainability initiatives fail not because the strategy is wrong, but because people were not involved early enough.

Leadership takeaway: Engage stakeholders before decisions are finalized. Sustainability requires alignment, trust, and shared ownership — not surprise announcements.

Shinrin-Yoku – Why Leaders Need Nature

In one of his most reflective posts, I wrote about **Shinrin-Yoku**, or *forest bathing*, the practice of immersing oneself in nature to regain clarity and balance.

In hyper-accelerated business environments, this may sound unconventional. It is anything but.

Why this matters today: Sustainable leadership requires long-term thinking, systems awareness, and emotional resilience. All of which are strengthened by time in nature.

Leadership takeaway: Reflection is not a luxury. Leaders who reconnect with nature tend to reconnect with purpose, perspective, and responsibility.

Sanpo Yoshi – Creating Value for All Stakeholders

Sanpo Yoshi — “*good for the seller, good for the buyer, good for society*” — is a centuries-old Japanese business principle.

Long before ESG and stakeholder capitalism became mainstream, Sanpo Yoshi defined what responsible business looks like.

Why this matters today: Companies are increasingly judged not only by financial performance, but by their contribution to society and the environment.

Leadership takeaway: Design business models that create shared value. Profit and purpose are not opposites. They reinforce each other.

Mottainai – Respecting What Exists

Finally, **Mottainai** expresses regret over waste and a deep respect for resources. Material, human, and natural.

“Mottainai encourages individuals to use resources wisely and appreciate their intrinsic value.”

Why this matters today: In a resource-constrained world, efficiency alone is not enough. What is required is respect for energy, materials, time, and people.

Leadership takeaway: Circularity and resource stewardship should be cultural principles, not just operational targets.

From Efficiency to Meaning

What unites Hitozukuri, Monozukuri, Nemawashi, Shinrin-Yoku, Sanpo Yoshi, and Mottainai is their depth. They connect economic performance with ethics, leadership with humility, and business success with responsibility.

I like to summarize it clearly:

“Sustainability is not a project — it is a daily mindset.”

For Western executives, the message is powerful: The future of leadership will not be defined by speed and scale alone, but by **meaning, mindset, and long-term value creation**.

And perhaps, Japan’s leadership philosophy offers not a different path, but a deeper one.