

# sustainable japan

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## Lixil change-maker cultures people for a cleaner world

### Roundtable

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Sanitation is something we take for granted, yet 3 billion people around the world lack access to good hygiene. Jin Montesano of Lixil Corp. wants to change that. A global corporation based in Japan, Lixil's purpose is to help all people live more comfortably. Since joining in 2014, change-maker Montesano has combined her passion for listening and learning with a personal philosophy for keeping people at the center of everything while helping to steer the corporation in bold new directions.

### Finding 'joy in the process'

Montesano has never been afraid to jump into new situations. Emigrating with her family from South Korea to Hawaii at the age of 2, she happily ran around with the local children before knowing even a word of English.

New York beckoned for the teenage Montesano, and she moved to the mainland to attend Columbia University. "This was a place where people walked fast, talked fast, thought fast — things were happening! I've always searched for adventure and I was always quite fearless. I think that still defines who I am today," she said.

It was during her years at Columbia that

she discovered a love of learning for its own sake, which developed into the realization that "the joy is in the process, not in the outcome."

She points out that focusing on the process can also be applied to management, even though it may seem counterintuitive at first. Instead of just saying "do it this way," encouraging employees to think about solutions will pay off in the long run. "If you find a way to empower people to think about the work for themselves, using their own logic, they're much more likely to remember how they got there and apply those lessons for the next problem."

### Articulating the purpose

A commitment to listening to others has been a cornerstone of Montesano's management style since arriving at Lixil. The corporation was formed in 2011 when five firms in various areas of the housing and building industry merged. Within two years they had added companies from the United States, Italy and Germany to the mix, and Montesano came on board in 2014 to help bring everyone together under a common mission.

"Communicators like to put pen to paper and work through a good-sounding narrative and story, but I didn't do that. I decided to go on a 'listening journey' to find out exactly what this company is about," she said.



Jin Montesano, chief public affairs and people officer, director and senior managing director at Lixil YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

Montesano spent the next few months gathering people throughout the corporation in focus groups to "articulate the purpose" and define Lixil's reason for existing. "So it was about listening to where the beating heart of this corporation is, just by getting people to speak up, and then going in to help articulate that," she said.

### The story of Sato

It became clear to Montesano that a passion for water technology and sanitation "existed in the DNA" of the firms that had joined together to form Lixil. Her efforts to make this a more visible part of the corporate culture helped create one of their biggest success stories, the Sato.

Short for "safe toilet," Sato is the world's

leading low-cost toilet solution, featuring an innovative design that utilizes a trap door and self-sealing pan to keep out odors and insects. Run as a social business, Sato is an affordable solution for the 2 billion people who don't have access to a safe toilet and the 3 billion who lack proper hygiene.

It was the brainchild of Daigo Ishiyama, who came up with the original model after getting a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Initial sales of the Sato were approved in 2013.

"When I joined in 2014, the team explained it to me. There was a little bit of the view that we shouldn't be messing around with this 'vanity project' — excuse the pun!" Montesano said with a laugh. "But eventually we convinced the corporation to

give this product a chance." The Sato project surged forward in 2016 after the current CEO, Kinya Seto, joined Lixil and challenged Montesano and her team to turn it into a sustainable business.

Energized by the company's belief in their vision, they set to work forming partnerships with UNICEF and governments. To date, around 4.2 million units have been shipped to 38 countries, helping about 21 million people. The business has now broken even in Bangladesh, which she says has been a big turning point for her team.

Montesano is grateful that the executives at Lixil understood and facilitated her vision for Sato, which has also led to other positive outcomes. One example is the success of a tie-up with their Inax bathroom

technology brand in Japan, whereby every product sold funds a free Sato for someone in need. This became a talking point with customers, who had not realized the scale of the issue of the lack of sanitation. "It changed the conversation, creating a different dimension of Lixil with our business partners," she said.

**LIXIL**

### People first

Montesano recently assumed the role of chief people officer at Lixil. The easily understood job title is a reflection of Lixil's commitment to changing from a top-down corporate culture to an inclusive, bottom-up style. This includes simplifying and streamlining job titles to create a flatter, more egalitarian culture where everyone has a voice.

Having done away with core office hours and pivoted successfully to remote working, Lixil is urging employees to own their career paths and rethink their approach to work. "We are trying to encourage employees to integrate work into their lives and making it more enjoyable: when I do it, how I do it and, of course, why I do it," Montesano said.

Going forward, there are still many challenges to tackle, and she is excited to see how Lixil will deal with issues like water scarcity and creating a sanitation economy. "We are sending people to the moon on a private package, and yet we have people who don't have a basic toilet!"

"I think the grease in the wheel of execution is culture, and culture lives through people," she said. "The heart of creating value at Lixil is really about unlocking the power of our people."

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



Roundtable host Ross Rowbury and Jin Montesano warming up before the roundtable YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

## With Seino service, sell your excess stuff when you move

### ESG / SDGs

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People who are moving tend to wonder what to do with all the items they find they don't need. Sometimes there are just too many and it is too troublesome to give them away or sell them even if they are still usable.

Seino Transportation, one of Japan's top commercial logistics companies, based in Gifu Prefecture, launched a new service in February 2020 that combines moving with the purchase of unwanted goods.

Moving is one of the company's existing services, and its staff members had been aware of their customers' need for getting rid of junk when they move. "We are always trying to provide solutions for problems that arise at the sites of moving and to add new value to our services," said Aya Makimura, product planning section supervisor of the sales management department, in a recent online interview with the Japan Times ESG Consortium. "Moving is a rare opportunity for someone to pick up every single thing in his house," she said, explaining that Seino decided to make the most of this opportunity by providing a one-stop service for both moving and for removing unwanted items.

### Helping achieve U.N. goals

The service can reduce their customers' troubles and the waste generated by moving at the same time, which is in line with Seino's constant efforts to help achieve the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals. "We have been making various efforts to curb emissions, such as making a modal shift from vehicle to rail and coastal transport, using articulated and hybrid trucks, and cooperating with other logistics companies to share transportation," Makimura said.



Brand-name bags and wallets packed in cardboard boxes waiting to be collected SEINO TRANSPORTATION



Seino has developed services that integrate moving and selling unneeded items as part of its efforts to help achieve the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals. SEINO TRANSPORTATION

This new service, which focuses on reusing what can still be used and reducing waste, is Seino's new challenge to itself to go beyond the environmental contributions achieved by its transport service.

It will also free users of the service from the stress of having to think about what to do with unwanted but still usable items and the guilt of throwing them away. They can also get some additional money in their pocket from selling things that could have ended up in the garbage.

### Service buys used stuff

The reuse part of the service is named Eco Loop, which you can subscribe to by itself, without using the moving service. "All they have to do is to register at our website from their PCs or smartphones, pack the things that they wish to sell in the cardboard boxes delivered to their homes and have the boxes collected. They will receive the evaluation result by email," Makimura said, stressing the convenience of being able to complete the whole procedure at home. Things that can be accepted include books, CDs, game software, digital devices, cameras, jewelry, musical instruments, sports equipment and brand-name items.

Seino is collaborating with a provider of recycling and reuse services to offer the Eco Loop program. A certain amount per contract is donated to an organization selected by the customer. Donations are used for social activities such as supporting developing countries, the health and independence of women and people with disabilities, and preserving forests. Customers can also donate part of the proposed sales proceeds if

they wish.

Makimura said the new service got orders even amid the coronavirus pandemic, ascribing this to an increase in people spending time de-cluttering the house while staying home to avoid exposure to the virus.

This year, a new collaboration will start with a company that runs a network of second-hand shops, upgrading the service to make it possible to purchase bigger items such as furniture. This will add extra value to the service because it will give people the ability to sell large items that they otherwise would have thrown away and paid a waste disposal fee for.

Seino is promoting the service in various ways to enhance consumer recognition so more people will choose it. There are several ways to dispose of large pieces of furniture and home appliances, such as using local government services for removing oversized trash or arranging for the store where an item was bought to come pick it up. Neither is simple and both cost money. Seino says it provides the hassle-free advantages of home service, and even pays the customer to boot.

"Sustainable Japan," features issues related to the environment and a sustainable society. It highlights the ESG (environmental, social and governance) activities of companies and other organizations and also introduces municipalities and local companies promoting the beauty and excellence of the real Japan. For more information, see <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/esg>



## Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

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In the Oda district of the city of Tsukuba, citizens are starting to engage in projects aimed at revitalizing the community with support from older generations.

"There were many small groups of young people who helped organize a local festival or worked on other small projects in the neighborhood, so I thought it would be a good idea to put all those groups together," Masato Suzuki, the chairman of the Society for the Promotion of the Community Development of Oda District, said in a recent online interview with the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium.

"Satoyama" refers to a type of settlement that lies between urban and remote mountain areas and is maintained by the sustainable use of resources, just like Oda, one of the eight districts that surround the central area of Tsukuba in Ibaraki Prefecture.

In addition to various ongoing revitalization projects in those districts, the city organized the Tsukuba R8 Regional Revitalization Plan Competition over the last two years. The final screening session of this year's competition, which selected five projects out of 27, was conducted online, which allowed more residents to join the audience than in the previous year.

Last year, Suzuki's organization became one of the winners and received city funding to carry out its project: local residents planting moss phlox, a ground cover plant with vivid pink flowers, in a large vacant lot in Oda.



A road bike stand made out of bamboo CITY OF TSUKUBA



Moss phlox flowers in full bloom CITY OF TSUKUBA

People who had seen flyers distributed at schools or read municipal newsletters joined in planting at the site in October 2019. "The first flowers bloomed in April this year, but it will take a few years for the plants to cover the entire area," said Suzuki, explaining that local residents continue to gather regularly to participate in weeding and maintenance, which has resulted in deepening ties across generations.

The organization intends to gradually expand the area to turn it into a future tourist spot. "But moss phlox is not just beautiful. Its roots spread to every corner of the area, supporting the ground and preventing erosion," he said.

Another opportunity that the city provided to encourage regional revitalization was to hold a series of community development workshops for residents in each area. According to a city official, participants were able to identify the characteristics, resources and potential of their district, which led to the creation and execution of new ideas to promote the districts such as making a town map and restaurant information newsletter, planning events that utilize regional resources, and developing key locations for communities.

Based on what was discussed in the workshops, local residents came up with the idea of using a former elementary school building as a community plaza. It is in a perfect location for both trekkers and bike riders in addition to local residents — exactly between Mount Hokyo, which is part of the Tsukuba mountain range, and Tsukuba Kasumigaura Ring Road, a cycling path with panoramic views.

"Now we are researching the needs of bike riders by actually riding on the road ourselves," Suzuki said. He also explained



Local residents plant moss phlox, a ground cover plant with vivid pink flowers CITY OF TSUKUBA

that the organization's members and supporters had made bicycle stands from bamboo. "We have more than 30 supporters who help us with various activities," he said.

The city has also been supporting this project by renovating part of the school building and letting the organization use it.

The community plaza also serves as a place for children's after-school activities. "As this school has been closed, children in this area go to a distant school by bus. They needed a place to play with their friends after they come home," Suzuki said.

To make money beyond usage fees for cultural and sports activities, Suzuki and his organization's members are planning to restart the production of souvenir items, such as delicacies made with local rice or onions, that have been suspended due to the spread of the coronavirus.

"The plaza plays the role of connecting people inside and outside the community. I hope more people will visit Oda and experience its charms through interacting with the local residents," Suzuki said.



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