

sustainable japan

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BAT area director drives sustainability into every aspect of business

James Yamanaka: One purpose, many changes

Name: James Yamanaka
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Hometown: Torrance, CA
Years in Japan: 3

Leaders & Readers

TIMOTHY SCHULTZ
 CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Every November for the last 22 years, Standard & Poor's has released its Dow Jones Sustainability Indices. The DJSI is the honor roll of ESG, recognizing the most sustainable companies in the world. Companies spend years overhauling their practices just to apply. The competition is fierce, the rewards high: Inclusion attracts billions in investment and helps recruit top-tier talent.

When the DJSI started, no tobacco companies were listed. But one was different. In 2002, British American Tobacco was listed in the DJSI for the first time, and throughout the decade, the accolade was a point of pride for a company that had, well, some perception issues. It was proof that Big Tobacco could also have a big purpose.

James Yamanaka is BAT's area director for North Asia and President of BAT Japan headquartered in Tokyo. He is a Japanese American who joined BAT just after its inclusion in the DJSI. He comes across as an approachable leader, more Californian than American, but don't let his quiet manner fool you. He has spent his entire career

broadening the sustainability mission that was first highlighted by the DJSI, moving from environmental impact to every aspect of BAT's business. Yamanaka has been changing BAT for 16 years, and he is not quite done.

Yamanaka's early career at BAT included a posting in Sri Lanka. "For us, the practices were there before the DJSI was there. We've had a massive footprint in the developing world for decades, so a focus on sustainability, environmentalism and labor practices were just part of our business," he said. His eyes lit up when he talked about the farmers, the fields, that time in his career. "I saw the effects of improved soil, improved growing policies on the farmers. That was the kind of sustainability that I remember most."

Later in his career he found himself in Northern Europe. There, the BAT leadership applied sustainability to a new challenge: devices. "We had an acquisition of a device maker. We took a look at this plastic thing and realized: 'My God! What if we're actually successful? In a short period of time, we might be producing literally tons of these things. We've got to make this plastic recyclable.'"

The glo devices were an aspect of BAT's long, sustained effort at reducing the health impact of their products. "Today, it may seem like glo is an overnight success," he said, "but we were trying to build that for decades. We just couldn't make something that people would actually use. And those early device prototypes ... oh, man, some were just terrible!"

It is the company's effort to reduce the health impact of the products that has most transformed BAT during Yamanaka's

time at the company. "We now have something like 3 million new adult consumers using our glo products. That's 3 million people who aren't smoking, or smoking a lot less," he said. "With ESGs, you're trying to do something to help the world through sustainability. For us, internally, we also add an 'H' to ESG, because we think that reducing the health impact of our business is one of the bigger contributions and solutions for the world."

While Yamanaka is extremely proud of the products of BAT, he is more modest about his efforts in changing its culture. To understand why he is probably the only executive who could do what he is doing, we need to go back farther, before Sri Lanka, before BAT. Back to California, where he was "a classic fourth-generation kid, an American kid ... who never felt like a foreigner." But once he joined corporate America, one thing marked him as distinctly different: his Japanese background.

Now Yamanaka is using that perspective to help change BAT's own leadership culture. "I have a regional training program, which helps mentor Asian leaders through our pipeline. There's a sort of inbred humility for most of us. We're told by our family that if you keep your head down and work hard you'll get ahead. It doesn't work like that. We all tend to have the same common things that hold us back — conflict aversion, you don't speak on things you're not an expert ..."

It was here during our interview that something interesting happened.

Yamanaka and I were sitting across from each other in one of BAT's impressive conference rooms. Yamanaka was accompa-



HIROMICHI MATONO

nied by his head of PR, along with other unnamed executives. They had sat quietly for 55 minutes, listening to our interview. Suddenly the PR head broke in.

"I was in one of the workshops that he taught," she said. "It was so comforting to hear him saying, 'You don't have to force yourself to do it one way, you can find your

Beach volleyball, Mexican cooking

James Yamanaka is the director for North Asia for British American Tobacco and President of BAT Japan headquartered in Tokyo for the past three years. He grew up in Torrance, California, a fourth-generation Japanese American with a love of beach volleyball, basketball and a distinct stubbornness to not learn Japanese. ("I went to eight years of Japanese school but managed to not learn Japanese!"). After high school he attended UC San Diego, earning his BA in political science and economics. It was the first of three degrees; the second was from Georgetown, where he earned an MSFS (Master of Science in financial services); this was followed by an MBA from the London School of Economics. He joined BAT shortly after graduating and has spent 16 years working in Sri Lanka, Northern Europe, the U.K. and now Japan. Happily married with four happy children, in his free time he enjoys traveling and cooking the Mexican food he grew up eating in California.

own way of working," Yamanaka nodded, and politely elaborated on her point. I couldn't help but wonder if he felt a little pride. We were talking about helping Japanese and Asian employees feel comfortable speaking up, and she had done just that.

When Standard & Poor's began measuring corporate sustainability, it told investors that destructive extraction was silly and sustainable practices were smart. And slowly, over the past two decades, the world has come to agree. Why? Because losing isn't fun. And those who practiced sustainability just kept winning — at business, at leadership and at life.

Yamanaka was one of the leaders who taught the world this lesson. Throughout his career, he has followed a simple rule: If something is valuable, it should be nurtured, strengthened and grown. From the fields in Sri Lanka to the talent pool in Tokyo, the harvests have never been richer.

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Times Capsule

Vol. 8: Visual artists

Visual artists flourished overseas in turmoil of '60s, '70s

Postwar Japan saw a flourishing of visual artists, starting with the ideological and political upheavals of the '60s and '70s. Not unlike Japan's film masters, many of Japan's most well-known artists found fame by first attracting the interest of overseas connoisseurs.



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Brand history & Archives
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Yayoi Kusama Sunday, May 22, 1994: THE JAPAN TIMES

CIRCLING IN FOR A LANDING
Kusama celebrates wheel of birth, death

By NANCY HIGASHI

Yayoi Kusama, 70, is celebrating her 70th birthday with a "wheel of birth, death and rebirth" exhibition at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. The artist, known for her polka-dot patterns and immersive installations, is showcasing her latest work, "Infinity Mirrored Room - The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away." The exhibition runs from May 22 to June 10, 2022.

Boy Sculptor's Work Praised

Isamu Noguchi Saturday, Aug. 9, 1921: THE JAPAN TIMES

By [Name]

Isamu Noguchi, a Japanese-American architect, designer, and sculptor, is celebrated for his work in bridging Japanese and Western art. His iconic design, the UN Secretariat Building in New York City, stands as a testament to his architectural vision. The exhibition highlights his diverse portfolio, from traditional Japanese sculpture to modernist architecture.

Yoshitomo Nara Friday, July 20, 2012: THE JAPAN TIMES

By [Name]

Yoshitomo Nara, a contemporary Japanese painter, is known for his melancholic and often disturbing depictions of children. His work explores themes of childhood, memory, and the human condition. The exhibition features his signature style of simple, expressive lines and a limited color palette.

Mekumi

Master sushi chef sets rigorous standards all his own



ROBBIE SWINNERTON
 CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Thanks to its proximity to the Sea of Japan coast, Kanazawa is famous for its fresh seafood. But for chef Takayoshi Yamaguchi, it is still not up to his quality standards. That is why he sets off each morning to drive hundreds of kilometers to source ingredients he will use that day at his acclaimed seven-seat sushiya, Mekumi.

Yamaguchi opened Mekumi in 2002 in a residential area of Nonoichi on the outskirts of Kanazawa. Initially he followed the Tokyo style of sushi known as edomae, which he learned while training in the capital. But over the years he has developed an approach all his own, reflecting his rigorous devotion to quality.

He drives to ports on the Noto Peninsula north of Kanazawa to inspect fish as they are landed, selecting only those he feels are fresh enough. To keep them in optimal condition, he uses a preservation technique known as shinkai-jime, and has developed methods of packing them upright rather than on their side to protect them on the long drive back.

Yamaguchi is no less particular about the rice he uses for his sushi. He prefers the lesser-known Sasashigure variety, which



he sources from farmers who still follow the traditional way of drying the grain outside in the sun.

The results speak for themselves. For his work and devotion to improving quality standards, Yamaguchi has been recognized

TAKA AKI AWA
 MAYOR OF NONOICHI



Nonoichi, located in the center of Ishikawa Prefecture on the Todor River alluvial fan, which is blessed with fertile soil and good groundwater, has long been involved in food production, especially rice farming.

Nonoichi has a rich culinary culture with old favorites such as pickles and famous confections as well as new specialties like kiwi wine.

It is a great honor for our city to have our sushi restaurant Mekumi be selected for the "Japanese restaurant list for people from around the world, chosen by Japanese people."



Address
 Mekumi
 4-48 Shimobayashi, Nonoichi, Ishikawa Pref. 921-8831, Japan

with awards from the Japanese government and two stars in the local Michelin Guide. Not surprisingly, Mekumi draws customers from near and far, especially during the eagerly anticipated crab season in winter.

About Destination Restaurants

Destination Restaurants was conceived based on the idea of creating a recommended restaurant selection by Japanese experts, for people around the world.

The country has a wide variety of climates, and a rich diversity of flora and fauna. The forefront of the restaurant scene has entered an era in which people can enjoy the creativity of chefs that can only be experienced in Japan's dense natural environment.

Each year, Destination Restaurants will select 10 restaurants to visit.



Destination Restaurants 2021 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

