

sustainable japan

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Entrepreneur Kaori Sasaki makes diversity a science

Roundtable

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

While today's companies fight for the innovative edge out in the marketplace, they also increasingly tout their commitment to diversity back in the workplace, often in the form of a noble gesture, yet sometimes leave the impression that the two aspirations are somehow mutually exclusive. For Kaori Sasaki, founder and CEO of Ewoman Inc., Unicul International Inc. and the International Conference for Women in Business (Japan), the two aspirations are actually very much mutually accordant, with both elements essential for fostering innovation and improving governance.

After many years as CEO of Ewoman and utilizing its unique Diversity Index, Sasaki sees the value in increasing diversity now more than ever. Despite Japan ranking 120th out of 136 countries surveyed on gender equality, Sasaki is very confident about the future. "In Japan, hiring more women and giving more women opportunities in the workplace is the key to innovation," she said. "Diversity of people means diversity of ideas."

Sasaki took time out of her busy schedule to sit down with Ross Rowbury for the 20th iteration of Roundtable by The Japan Times to explain why diversity is important, how to effectively implement diversity, how Ewoman's Diversity Index

works, why she began the International Conference for Women in Business, and why she is hopeful about the future, among much else. Rowbury began by asking Sasaki about her early experiences in business and her motivations for creating the Women's Business Network, a first in Japan, in 1989.

The accidental pioneer

It was a very serendipitous journey for Sasaki. From finding a job handing out flyers for concert venues in high school, when she knew she had to help out by making her own money, to working freelance as an interpreter after graduating from university, to incorporating her first company, Unicul International — mainly at the behest of her paying clients — Sasaki pretty much fell into her corporate role. As Unicul International began to grow in the late 1980s, Sasaki was often approached by the media for interviews, and she soon realized that Japan lacked a network for advice and support for female entrepreneurs such as herself.

Sasaki then began researching women's business networks in the United States and established what is now called the International Conference for Women in Business, and in the process became a pioneer in her field. "I just did what I felt was needed, and did what I thought I could contribute," she explained. "When I see something in business or society that I think is needed, I think, 'Well if I need it, I guess then everyone else must need it...'



Kaori Sasaki is a well-known diversity expert, entrepreneur and role model who has paved the way for women in Japan. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

And that's the good thing about being an entrepreneur."

Giving, ownership, action

Sasaki had certain stipulations for those who wished to join the network. For one, they must contribute in some way. But to Japanese people, the concept of contributing or giving had philosophical or religious connotations, so they often asked what giving in a business context would mean for them.

For Sasaki, this kind of giving is to bring any experience you have, to turn up and ask questions every time, to have a sense of

ownership over what you do. Making those connections is what brings about action, because without action nothing changes. In Sasaki's world view, in order to help a company, organization or even family to change, "you have to give, and you have to be the change-maker — any speciality is OK, but you have to be aware that you are giving something." It is the agency over your own actions that animates change.

The Diversity Index

For every organization, the variety of thought that diversity brings is important,

but just as critical is ensuring that the diversity is actually used. To ensure this outcome, Ewoman uses the Diversity Index, which facilitates four stages of diversity utilization.

The first stage is to recognize people within the organization. Next is the "equity stage," which ensures that every member is significantly active and fairly evaluated. The third stage is inclusion, ensuring that everyone is listened to and evaluated fairly. The final stage is governance and innovation, where ideas are implemented. This process is termed "diversity management," a horizontal strategy to unite a diverse team with a common goal, as opposed to the traditional vertical management strategy of top-down goal implementation. It is also important that diversity is represented across every section of the company. Companies can boast, for example, of having 40% female employees, but if those employees are not in decision-making roles or lack voting rights on the board, then nothing changes. The Diversity Index is the only system that performs such a comprehensive check. Sasaki said it is "like an annual health checkup."

Rowbury asked about the diversity of life experiences that new recruits can bring to a company. Sasaki joked that she would like to be brought back for another episode to discuss this point, but also discussed the positive benefits of some recent changes to Japan's corporate governance code, including a new stipulation that compels companies to take an internal audit of the talent skills of every employee. This creates a talent matrix to assess an employee's skills rather than just the typical matrix of age, university and time served at the company. Sasaki agreed that many companies are now operating completely differently from the way they operated just 10 years ago, and that with employees' talents increasingly now being recognized, there is every rea-



Internet pioneer Sasaki opened the first portal for women in Japan in 1996 and founded Ewoman Inc. YUICO TAIYA

son to believe that companies will make more use of their employee's diverse talents in the future.

What's next?

Sasaki says she now wants to gather more data and expand the use of the Diversity Index internationally to help companies and employees around the world. She also plans on shifting the International Conference for Women in Business online so there are no boundaries and women and men from all backgrounds can have the experience of tuning in and experiencing diversity together.

After working for so many decades, taking a step back and enjoying life is also a priority, as well as hopefully being an inspiration to other women who are starting out in their careers, as a businesswoman who enjoys life and can still be passionate about what she does.

As for the future of the International Conference for Women in Business, "In 10 years it should be over — we shouldn't have the need for the word 'women' in the title."

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

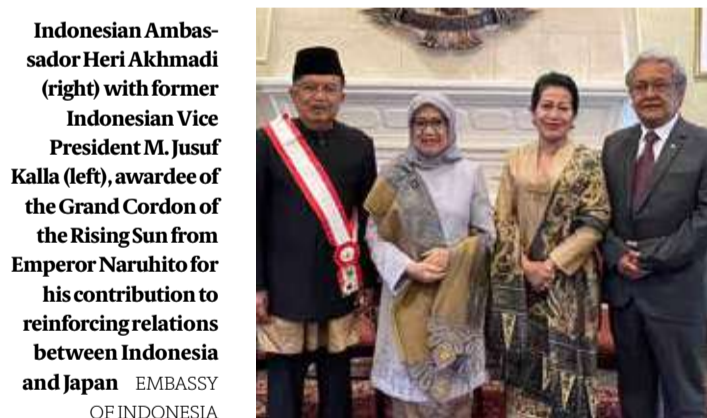


Sasaki, inventor of the Diversity Index, produces and chairs the largest diversity conference in Asia, ICWB, with over 1,000 participants each year. YUICO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

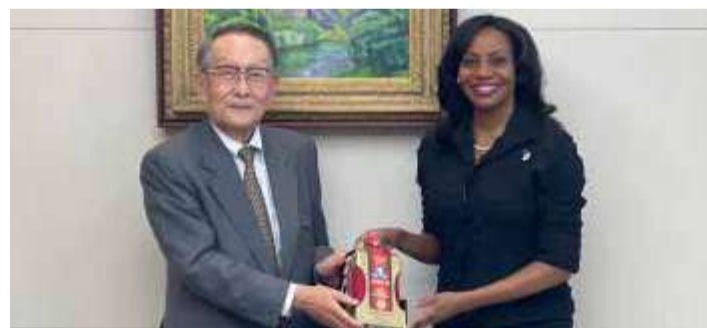
Times Gallery



"Let's Walkathon!" — the opening ceremony of the 31st annual Chubu Walkathon International Charity Festival — was held on May 22 at Meijo Park in Nagoya by the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan's Chubu Chapter and Nagoya International School. ANDY BOONE



Indonesian Ambassador Heri Akhmadi (right) with former Indonesian Vice President M. Jusuf Kalla (left), awardee of the Grand Cordon of the Rising Sun from Emperor Naruhito for his contribution to reinforcing relations between Indonesia and Japan. EMBASSY OF INDONESIA



Jamaican Ambassador Shorna-Kay Richards meets with Mikio Sasaki, chairman of the Japan Association of Latin America and the Caribbean and chairman emeritus of Mitsubishi Corp. They discussed the important and evolving relationship between Japan and the region. EMBASSY OF JAMAICA



An event organized by the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Japan called "Italia, amore mio!" was held on May 21 and 22 in Tokyo, featuring art exhibitions and presentations on Italian culture and gastronomy, with a selection of 20 dishes from all regions. © HOTTER THAN JULY INC



Yasushi Shibatayama, representing the Japan Sumo Association, leads a toast at the Herend Exhibition of the Liszt Hungarian Cultural Institute in Tokyo. The Hungarian Friendship Cup, made by Herend, is presented to sumo tournament champions. EMBASSY OF HUNGARY



On the occasion of the bicentennial of the Battle of Pichincha, a key victory over Spanish royalist forces, Ecuadorian Ambassador Cesar Montano gives a speech in the presence of Diet member Yasutoshi Nishimura. EMBASSY OF ECUADOR



At a jewelry exhibition hosted by Manal Alsharif, wife of the ambassador of Kuwait, at the Kuwaiti Embassy. From left: Alsharif, Kuwaiti Ambassador Hasan Mohammad Zaman, former ILBS President Carole Yoshida and former ILBS Vice President Mariko Nakasone. EMBASSY OF KUWAIT



Ambassador Aleksandra Kovac of Serbia gives a lecture on the history of bilateral relations between Serbia and Japan across their 140 years of friendship at Aoyama Gakuin University, where she also met with President Hiroshi Sakamoto, on June 3. EMBASSY OF SERBIA

Empathy the essential key to sustainability: Sega Sammy chief

Unraveling Japanese companies

TOMOKO KAICHI
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This past May, the Sega Sammy group worked out a "sustainability vision" for 2030 and announced important issues and action plans that it aims to work on toward improving corporate value in a sustainable manner. The keyword for the vision is "compassion."

A company whose corporate philosophy or business practices fail to convince or win support of the public will have difficulty surviving. Haruki Satomi, representative director, president and group CEO of Sega Sammy Holdings Inc., says it is essential for a company to inspire empathy within and outside the company and share the experience of "captivating experiences" with stakeholders, including customers, if it is to achieve lasting growth.

Sega Sammy Holdings is a comprehensive entertainment company operating in the areas of entertainment content, "pachislot" and pachinko machines, and resorts. While entertainment businesses help make people's lives richer, critics have pointed to their socially negative aspects, including a tendency to make people obsessive or even addicted. Satomi does not try to hide this.

He works with industry groups and universities to address and prevent it. His message to employees is clear: "We can deliver positivity that more than offsets [negative aspects], and experiences that can move people with joy and stimulus.

Therein lies the group's reason for existence." "Human resources," "products and services," "the environment," "addiction" and "governance" are the keywords cited in the sustainability vision.

In terms of human resources, the company is working to promote diversity in hiring and promotion and increase spending to develop human resources, including measures to expand and enhance its in-house university. The company is also working to introduce a system for the group to maximize opportunities to take advantage of its human resources. Going forward, it aims to actively support re-skilling, Satomi said.

In the area of the environment, the company aims to make the group headquarters carbon neutral and have each group company work with its suppliers on measures to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

NAONORI KIMURA
INDUSTRIAL GROWTH PLATFORM INC.
(IGPI) PARTNER

Empathy is the source of sustainability. A company that does not inspire empathy cannot survive. That is the powerful message CEO Satomi communicates with strong determination.

While many companies tout that they put customers first or are considerate toward customers, such thinking has penetrated throughout the management of Sega Sammy.

The management style of capturing human emotions and squarely facing negative aspects speaks directly to



Haruki Satomi, representative director, president and group CEO of Sega Sammy Holdings Inc. THE JAPAN TIMES

The company also has begun the work to reduce waste by rethinking product packaging designs and materials.

Reforms can cause friction within a company as well as external entities and have negative impacts on its business. Satomi said that what is right for him is the primary criterion for him to decide whether

to proceed with a reform project. Another key factor is "whether it can inspire empathy in society at large," he said.

In the first general meeting of shareholders after he was appointed president five years ago, Satomi pledged to make Sega Sammy Holdings "a company that employees can be proud of and talk about with pride."

While his focus has shifted to environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors and the U.N.'s sustainable development goals, he said "the top priority is employees."



the essence of human existence. That is why it can inspire real empathy, in my view. Satomi is also strongly aware of the importance of inspiring employees' empathy. At the root of his management style is a belief that a company cannot create great products or services unless it has great employees.

A vision of a sustainable future for the company is clearly reflected in the eyes of CEO Satomi, who is powerfully leading empathy-driven management at whose center is the goal of maintaining a company that employees can be proud of.

This section highlights the environment and a sustainable society. For more information please visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com>

