ENABLING THE NEXT GENERATION TO LEAD IN A VUCA WORLD

With the world in the midst of radical transition, Japan is boosting efforts to nurture future leaders to take to the world stage and supporting startup businesses for the new era. Professor TAKEUCHI Hirotaka of Harvard Business School has been actively endeavoring in Japan and the U.S. to develop globally minded human resources. He explains the qualities needed for the coming times, and details Japan’s possibilities.

“We are living in an era of VUCA,” says TAKEUCHI Hirotaka, management scholar and professor at Harvard Business School (HBS). VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) is the perfect way to describe the world of recent years, with Russia invading Ukraine and COVID-19 developing into a global pandemic. These are times that require human resources capable of dealing with social issues across national borders and opening doors to new development. Digital technology enables us to maintain close ties with the rest of the world regardless of time or location, but “a multi-cultural minder” is still indispensable even if we no longer need to physically travel abroad, Takeuchi explains. “The important thing is to understand this ‘dynamic duality’ between analog and digital and be capable of adapting to both.” Investment in human capital is at the heart of the Kishida administration’s growth strategy, and Japan is actively cultivating people who can act on the global stage in the post-COVID era. From early on, as a private-sector actor Takeuchi has been engaged in efforts toward those ends, creating a platform that will produce large numbers of global leaders from Japan. “Agility is important in a VUCA world,” Takeuchi maintains. Agility was part of the strength of renowned Japanese companies such as Sony and Honda—both established soon after World War II—as they became major players in the world. “Young people are taking on leadership roles because they feel truly compelled to do something about the situation in which many have lost everything owing to the disaster.”

In 2012, Takeuchi launched a two-year field study program called the Japan Immersive Field Course (known until 2015 as the Japan Immersive Experience Program). During the first six years of the program, students carried out hands-on projects, such as clearing debris in Tohoku, while helping to find solutions for local business problems. In their first-year strategy course, HBS students are rigorously trained to adopt an “outside-in” approach that begins with an objective analysis of the industry and competition. In Tohoku, on the other hand, they encountered social entrepreneurs who followed a diametrically opposed “inside-out” approach to strategy that put one’s mission and beliefs at the core. “What our students learned was an integration of the two approaches to strategy,” says Takeuchi. Takeuchi regards the goal of the program to be more than just “Knowing”—that is, going beyond the acquisition of knowledge. Also to be considered and learned are “Doing”—namely, practicing that knowledge through action—and “Being”—which is learning the values and convictions needed to become a business leader. Leadership in today’s world requires that both organizations and individuals be socially responsible, and that demands a progression from “Knowing” and “Doing” to “Being.” The ultimate goal in educating leaders who make a difference in the world is to enable them to reach the state of “Being.” And “Being” is attained through the act of “Doing,” he concludes.

The Japanese government aims to increase the number of startups tenfold over the next five years. If that is achieved, the number of entrepreneurs who can grapple with social issues on the global stage may also multiply significantly. “Many talented young Japanese students who study abroad on scholarships are choosing to start their own businesses instead of finding employment with blue-chip companies. Amazing things are already happening,” Takeuchi observes. “Enabling Japan to compete again—that’s what we aspire to. I hope to see these students break the mold in these VUCA times.”

Left: HONDA Soichiro (center) established Honda Motor Co., Ltd. shortly after World War II ended. Takeuchi, along with management scholar Hitotsubashi University in Japan in 1987. He became an assistant professor at Harvard Business School (HBS) and subsequently a professor at Hitotsubashi University in Japan in 1987. He has authored numerous books and articles that provide detailed analysis of Japanese businesses.

Right: TAKEUCHI Hirotaka points to MLB player OHTANI Shohei as a role model who possesses “dynamic duality.” He admires the way that Ohtani has not only achieved superb results at both pitcher and batter, but has also succeeded in smoothly assimilating the mindset and values of American culture while maintaining the traditional courtesy and morals of Japanese society. Multi-cultural minder