

7 Lean Leadership Lessons from Japan

Insights from Mark Graban's Japan Study Tours

1. Think in Centuries, Not Quarters

Japanese companies like Ina Food practice “tree-ring management,” guided by a **100-year calendar**. Profit is treated as the natural byproduct of doing everything well — not the goal itself. Leaders focus on sustainable growth and resilience, not quarterly numbers.

2. Develop People as the Core Mission

Toyota calls itself a “people development company.” Improvement isn’t only for SQDC outcomes; it’s the vehicle for building problem-solving skills and confidence. Hospitals like Nerima General use Kaizen activities as training grounds where doctors and staff learn by doing.

3. Lead with Questions, Not Commands

Lean leaders engage through **respectful inquiry**, not top-down directives. Consensus-building and curiosity replace “thou shalt.” This makes improvement safer and more inclusive — especially in cultures where speaking up “doesn’t come naturally”.

4. Make Improvement a Daily Discipline

As one Japanese leader said: *“Improvement must be like brushing your teeth.”* Kaizen is not a program; it’s a way of working. Small daily changes build the habits that lead to innovation. Dr. Shuhei Iida put it bluntly: *“If you keep doing Kaizen, you will get innovation.”*

5. Show Respect in Action at the Gemba

Respect isn’t a slogan; it’s visible in leaders’ behavior. Hospital CEOs conduct their own 5S audits. Manufacturing presidents scrub floors alongside employees. These aren’t symbolic gestures — they show that improvement is owned, not delegated.

6. Create Systems That Enable, Not Punish

Lean leaders build structures that make it **safe to speak up**. The andon cord provides a non-confrontational way to signal problems. Hospitals track the number of incident **reports** (not just incidents) as a measure of psychological safety. More reports mean people feel safer raising concerns.

7. Adapt, Don't Copy

Toyota isn't Japan's default. Honda, for example, operates with a radically different culture. Likewise, hospitals in Japan are learning from American counterparts like Virginia Mason. The lesson: **don't copy Toyota, adapt mindsets to your own context.**

Closing Thought

Lean methods flow from **mindsets**: long-term thinking, respect for people, and systems that enable learning. Speaking up is not automatic — in Japan or anywhere. Leaders must model humility, build safety, and make improvement part of daily work. That's how small Kaizens accumulate into innovation.

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