

Dorin-Felician Marchiș

Japanese Cultural Principles in Leadership



Presa Universitară Clujeană

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LISTA OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial intelligence
AJAI	All Japan Association of Indians
BCG	Boston Consulting Group
CEO	Chief executive officer
CQ	Cultural intelligence
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
ESG	Environmental, social, and governance
EU	European Union
GCP	GLOBIS Capital Partners
GM	General Motors
GRIC	Growth Industry Conference
HR	Human resources
IBM	International Business Machines
IDV	Individualism versus collectivism
IT	Information technology
IVR	Indulgence versus restraint
JCE	Japan Creative Enterprise
LMS	Learning management system
LTO	Long-term versus short-term orientation
MAS	Masculinity versus femininity
MBA	Master of Business Administration
NUMMI	New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc.
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OJT	On-the-job training
PDI	Power distance index
RPA	Robotic process automation
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
TPS	Toyota Production System
TQM	Total quality management
UAI	Uncertainty avoidance index

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PREFACE

Writing the doctoral thesis *The Influence of Cultural Principles on Leadership in Japan* was a long and challenging journey, enriched by diverse and fascinating experiences in Japan, as an Aikido practitioner and instructor, as a traveler, and as an entrepreneur. The study set out to examine how Japanese cultural principles shape decision-making processes and leadership styles in Japanese companies, and whether these principles can be successfully applied in non-Japanese companies, particularly Romanian ones.

This thesis offers an original perspective on leadership within a rapidly shifting, multipolar world. Its distinct value lies in a comparative analysis of leadership practices between Japan and Romania.

From a theoretical perspective, the research advances knowledge in the field by integrating established conceptual frameworks, such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions, with authentic Japanese concepts such as Ikigai, Kokorozashi, and Generative Leadership. An innovative contribution is the integration and application of Aikido principles in the analysis of how leadership styles, decision-making processes, and organizational outcomes take shape.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, based on survey data and participant observation, allowing an in-depth exploration of leadership practices. Empirically, the research provides new evidence of the positive impact of Japanese cultural principles on organizational growth, scalability, sustainability, and innovation, as well as of their applicability in the Romanian business environment.

By proposing a new leadership model inspired by Japanese practices, the study offers useful insights for practitioners and contributes to the development of more resilient and effective leadership strategies in diverse intercultural contexts.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to The Bucharest University of Economic Studies for the remarkable opportunity to pursue doctoral studies and to explore, through scientific research, a subject I am deeply passionate about — the influence of cultural principles on leadership in Japan. This opportunity has held a special significance for my academic and personal path. I also extend my sincere and heartfelt thanks to my academic supervisor, Professor Constantin Marius Profiroiu, for his patience, trust, careful guidance, and constant support, without which this endeavor would not have been possible.

This effort would likewise not have been possible without the constant and genuine support of the many Romanian and Japanese friends and colleagues, from a wide range of fields, who encouraged me, stood by me, and walked alongside me throughout this journey. I am also deeply grateful to the professors with rich experience in both academia and business, whose advice, generosity with their time, and perspectives helped me see things more clearly and move forward with confidence.

This book has its origins in the doctoral thesis *The Influence of Cultural Principles on Leadership in Japan*. The study of the Japanese phenomenon is an ongoing process, and understanding its cultural principles is a revelation that never ends. True understanding comes from applying these principles in everyday life and allowing them to become part of one's own way of being. Through this practice, they open new horizons of perception: a deeper view of human relationships and a clearer awareness of the bond between humanity and nature.

The writing of these pages began with an encouragement from Professor Călin Hîntea of Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, who urged me to share my own perspective on the "Japanese phenomenon." From that encouragement, and from the desire to pass on the Japanese experience, the idea of this book took shape.

And so *Japanese Cultural Principles in Leadership* came into being.

CHAPTER 1.

BEGINNINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

1.1. The Motivation for Choosing This Topic

My contact with Japan and Japanese culture began in Romania, roughly forty years ago, with my first studies in the martial arts. In 2004, I visited Japan for the first time and encountered the "Japanese phenomenon" firsthand. Since then, my experiences have intensified and diversified significantly, both through my Aikido practice and through the entrepreneurial activity I carry out in Japan, and the deepening study of Japanese culture has become a natural part of my everyday life. All these experiences—meetings and conversations with Japanese business-people, business consultants in Japan, and faculty members at Japanese universities—have helped me understand the Japanese way of thinking more deeply, in daily life as much as in friendships and business relationships.

My first conversations about the Japanese business environment were with Cristian Vlad, a Romanian who has lived in Japan for more than thirty years—among other roles, a professor at GLOBIS University in Japan, holding a PhD in Management from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, and a business consultant at Japan Creative Enterprise. From the very beginning, he told me: "Dorin-san, if you want collaborations and partnerships with Japanese companies, they have to be conceived and managed for the long term! Most of the Japanese companies I have worked with pay very close attention to strategic thinking and long-range planning. Business alliances and partnerships, therefore, are also conceived and managed with the long term in mind.

That is how it was more than thirty years ago, and that is exactly how it is today!" At one point, I asked him: "Cristi, if you had to define Japan, what would you call it?" His answer was quick and short: "The land of surprises! Because many things are not quite what they seem."

The same logic of contrasts is reflected in the Japanese business environment. Professional relationships are marked by a delicate balance between formality and flexibility, between patience and efficiency. Negotiation processes, collaboration with outside partners, the way decisions are made within companies, and leadership styles all reveal significant differences from Western models. Japan is thus not only a country of visible contrasts but also of subtle ones, which reveal themselves gradually and contribute to its profound uniqueness.

Even after all this time, Japan continues to surprise me and, at times, to shock me. Most often, though, it is a pleasant shock, one that makes me look at things from a different perspective. For me, Japan is, above all, "the land of contrasts", contrasts I discover daily, sometimes in small details, sometimes in essential things. I find them in the culture and the language, in the way centuries-old traditions coexist naturally with cutting-edge technology, in an architecture that joins quiet temples with crowded skyscrapers, or in dress that shifts effortlessly from kimono to perfectly tailored suits. These contrasts are reflected in people's behavior as well, in customs, in ways of communicating, and even in food, where apparent simplicity conceals an incredible attention to detail.

The more I discover Japan, the more I realize that nothing is left to chance, that every detail matters enormously, and that details make the difference! The same feeling and the same logic of contrasts run through the Japanese business environment. Professional collaborations are governed by unwritten rules, by patience and respect, but also by a rigor that is hard to grasp at first. Business relationships are marked by a delicate balance between formality and flexibility, between patience and efficiency. Negotiations, decision-making, and leadership styles were unlike anything I had encountered before, and these differences forced me to learn, to adapt, and, at times, to reassess my own convictions.

I clearly remember one of my first conversations with Professor Watahiki Nobumichi, sensei at the Nagaoka University of Technology. At one point, he looked at me closely and asked: "Dorin-san, in your opinion, what is the most important thing for a Japanese company?" Although it was not the answer I truly believed in, convinced that it was what he expected to hear, I replied without hesitation: "Profit, of course." The expression on his face told me immediately that I was wrong. I then tried to correct myself: "To be honest, I think profit should come second." He looked at me again, just as calmly, and said simply: "Wrong again." Then came the explanation that would profoundly change my perspective: "In a Japanese company, employees and their security must come first. Above all, the company must be able to pay their salaries and provide the conditions it needs to operate properly. The people are the company." He paused briefly, then continued: "Second comes social responsibility—giving back to the community. The company must offer something to the community in which it has grown: build parks and playgrounds, employ people with social needs or with disabilities. Only in third place comes profit." At the end, he added: "Dorin-san, never forget this."

From that moment on, my perspective changed significantly. I began to look with new eyes and to perceive more deeply not only how Japanese companies are structured and how they operate, but also many other dimensions of life in Japan. This shift in vision led me to pay closer attention to the cultural values underlying Japanese society—to the importance of discipline, respect, and collective spirit—and to the way these principles are reflected in human relationships, in the business environment, and in the balance between tradition and modernity.

I began to feel an ever stronger desire to understand in depth, and to reach further into, what might be called the "Japanese phenomenon." This curiosity led me to explore the subject from multiple perspectives: I read specialized books, searched for relevant information online, and studied the experiences and testimonies of others, trying to piece together as broad and nuanced a picture as possible of Japanese culture, mentality, and distinctiveness.

As I continued my research, I discovered a world far larger, more complex, and more fascinating than I had imagined. New experiences sometimes made me pause and attend to the present moment. Each day brought surprises and dozens of questions, revealing possibilities I had never considered. The more I discovered, the more I wanted to understand.

It is widely recognized that Japan stands out globally as the country with the largest number of long-established companies, some of which have been operating without interruption for centuries. In contrast with this remarkable longevity, studies show that the average lifespan of a company listed in the Standard & Poor's 500 index has shrunk considerably, currently standing at around 20 years, clear evidence of the volatility and accelerated dynamics of the modern business environment. Further support for this reality comes from a report published in 2008 by the Bank of Korea. The analysis covered 41 countries and identified more than 5,500 companies at least 200 years old. The results were as surprising as they were telling: more than half of these companies—56%—originate in Japan, confirming an organizational culture oriented toward continuity, stability, and the handing down of the business from one generation to the next.

Likewise, the ranking of the world's ten oldest continuously operating companies is frequently published and cited by numerous reference sources. It appears both in analyses by institutions specializing in research and statistical data, such as Statista and World Atlas, and in articles and reports from prestigious international business publications such as Forbes and Bloomberg.

Throughout history, few companies have managed to cross the centuries without losing their identity, yet Japan offers remarkable examples of continuity and respect for tradition. According to this ranking, the oldest company in the world is Kongō Gumi, founded in AD 578, at a time when Buddhism was just taking root in Japan. The company's story begins in Osaka, where a master builder of Korean origin was summoned by Prince Shōtoku to erect the Buddhist temple

Shitennō-ji, one of the country's first Buddhist places of worship. From that initial mission grew a tradition that would endure for more than fourteen centuries. Whole generations of artisans passed down the secrets of temple construction, and Kongō Gumi became a name synonymous with craftsmanship, perseverance, and reverence for the past.

Not long after, in AD 705, in a quiet mountain region of Yamanashi Prefecture, another story of exceptional longevity was born: Nishiyama Onsen Keiunkan. Founded as a traditional Japanese *ryokan*, this inn was built around natural hot springs prized since antiquity for their therapeutic properties. For more than thirteen centuries, guests of every era—samurai, nobles, travelers, and modern leaders—have stopped here for rest and quiet reflection. Run without interruption by the same family, Nishiyama Onsen Keiunkan has preserved the spirit of authentic Japanese hospitality while adapting to the times. Today, it is officially recognized by Guinness World Records as the oldest operating hotel in the world, a living symbol of the bond between past and present.

These two Japanese companies are not merely historical records; they are true stories of continuity, identity, and the capacity to withstand change, illustrating how tradition can become the foundation of longevity. Indeed, of the world's ten oldest operating companies, six are Japanese!

If we regard a company's longevity as a mark of success, a question naturally arises: why have so many Japanese companies managed to endure for hundreds of years, while others disappeared far sooner? What has helped them remain active in a world marked by continuous economic, social, and technological change? What is more, this suggests that the success factors that guided these companies over such a long span of time have been able to adapt to the dynamic and volatile shifts in the economy and in society.

It is equally well known that, in the early 1980s, Toyota was looking to expand and consolidate its position in the American market, an extremely competitive one, but essential to its global growth strategy. At the same time, General Motors was facing major financial difficulties,

serious productivity problems, poor vehicle quality, and tense relations with the unions. In this context, the interests of the two companies began to converge: Toyota needed direct access to the US market and a better understanding of American organizational culture, while GM urgently needed know-how in operational efficiency, quality management, and modern production systems.

Toyota and General Motors therefore entered into a collaboration in which Toyota took over the operations of the automobile plant in Fremont, California. The facility was widely regarded as one of General Motors' weakest and most troubled sites, marked by frequent conflicts between management and workers, low productivity, and poor finished-product quality. To bring this collaboration to life, the two companies established a joint venture called NUMMI—New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc.—which operated from 1984 to 2010.

NUMMI was a unique industrial and managerial experiment: the first large-scale application of the Toyota Production System (TPS) on United States soil. In early 1982, Toyota sent a group of its American employees, workers and managers alike, to Japan to be trained directly in Toyota's factories. The aim of the program was to familiarize them with the management philosophy known as the "Toyota Way," which emphasizes respect for people, continuous improvement, the elimination of waste, teamwork, and individual responsibility for quality.

Two years later, in 1984, following this historic joint venture, the Fremont plant was reopened and almost completely reorganized. The results were spectacular: in a very short time, the plant was transformed into one of the best-performing production units in all of General Motors. This is all the more remarkable given that the factory ran with nearly the same workforce, the very same employees who had previously been considered a major problem! The only difference was the change in organizational culture, in the style of management, and in the way employees were engaged and given responsibility in the production process.

The "Toyota Way" is a comprehensive management philosophy and a set of principles that define the organizational culture of Toyota Motor Corporation, resting on two fundamental pillars: Continuous Improvement (Kaizen 改善) and Respect for People. In his book *The Toyota Way*, Jeffrey Liker describes this set of cultural principles as "a system designed to provide the tools for people to continually improve their work."

With all these examples as a starting point, the conclusion that takes shape is clear: adopting Japanese success factors within Western companies can contribute significantly to strengthening organizational robustness, ensuring corporate longevity, and improving economic performance. This model is not limited to management tools or production techniques; it reflects a profound philosophy of work, centered on discipline, perseverance, respect, continuous improvement (Kaizen), and harmony between the individual, the team, and the organization.

What is more, if we look closely at the Japanese character (kanji) 道, translated as "way" or "path," we find that its meaning runs far deeper than a mere route or method. *Dō* symbolizes a process of continuous evolution, a practice sustained over an entire lifetime, in which technical refinement is inseparable from moral and spiritual development.

It is no accident that this character appears in the names of all the Traditional Japanese Arts, where the emphasis falls not exclusively on the final result but, first and foremost, on the practitioner's entire path of formation:

- Budō (武道) — the way of the martial arts, centered on self-control, respect, and discipline;
- Sadō / Chadō (茶道) — the way of tea, which cultivates simplicity and harmony;
- Kadō (華道) — the way of flower arrangement, with its emphasis on balance and aesthetics;
- Shodō (書道) — the way of calligraphy, an expression of inner character and concentration;
- Aikidō — the art that unites physical technique with spiritual formation, also known as the Art of Peace.

By analogy, modern organizations can be seen as walking their own "*dō*," in which success is defined not exclusively by short-term profit but by the capacity to build durable, adaptive structures oriented toward continuous development. Integrating this Japanese perspective into the Western corporate world can transform a company from a mere economic entity into a living organization, capable of constant evolution and of creating sustainable long-term value.

All over the world, we find countless schools and training centers devoted to the traditional Japanese arts—whether martial arts, calligraphy, the tea ceremony, *ikebana*, or other disciplines that combine technique, discipline, and a philosophy of life. These arts are taught by Japanese and non-Japanese teachers alike, people who have gone through years of rigorous study and continuous training. Learning proceeds step by step, with attention to every detail, on the basis of clearly defined rules handed down from generation to generation. More than mere techniques, these rules are understood, accepted, and deeply integrated into the daily lives of those who study them. At the end of these educational journeys, what emerges is not just technical competence: new specialists and practitioners are formed who, in turn, become educators and mentors for others. And so these traditional arts continue to live, to evolve, and to spread across different cultural contexts without losing their essence.

Starting from this reality, a question naturally arises: why couldn't principles such as the "Toyota Way," the "Matsushita Way," or other fundamental concepts of Japanese organizational culture be taught and internalized in a similar fashion?

These are not simple management methods but coherent systems of thought, built on values such as respect for people, harmony, continuous improvement (*Kaizen*), collective responsibility, discipline, and long-term decision-making. Why not seek a way, a structured method, by which certain Japanese principles could be adapted to the reality of Western companies without altering their essence?

Just as the traditional Japanese arts have been understood and practiced outside Japan while keeping their authentic spirit, these cultural principles, too, can be translated into an accessible organizational language, compatible with our own way of thinking and acting.

In this light, integrating Japanese principles is not a renunciation of Western identity, but an opportunity to enrich it and help it evolve.

1.2. Purpose and Objectives

Today we face a complex dynamic of leadership against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving, multipolar global environment, one that makes it necessary to reassess traditional leadership paradigms. This study focuses on the challenges leaders face in effectively managing culturally diverse teams operating within extensive international networks. Seeking to underscore the vital importance of leadership styles characterized by inclusivity, adaptability, and a horizontal approach, particularly when navigating diverse cultural landscapes, this study aims:

- 1) To investigate the corporate cultural principles from Japanese management history that have driven growth, scalability, and sustainability and promoted innovation and creativity.
- 2) To identify Japanese cultural principles that have had adverse effects, while maintaining a positive outlook.
- 3) To determine which successful Japanese cultural principles can be applied to Romanian companies to enhance profitability and resilience.
- 4) To compare and analyze Japanese and Romanian leadership styles, identifying similarities and differences based on their cultural principles.

1.3. Japanese Leadership and Cultural Principles

In the 21st century, the business landscape has evolved, prompting a recognition of the interconnectedness between human activities and global ecosystems. This realization emphasizes the role of individuals as stewards of the environment. It requires organizations to prioritize the

wellbeing of future generations by dedicating their resources to serving the greater good. Consequently, many organizations now emphasize environmental stewardship, actively engaging in initiatives to minimize their negative environmental impact.

The impact of cultural principles on leadership in Japan is deeply intertwined with the country's historical, religious, and philosophical foundations (Blefari, 2025). Japanese leadership styles have been significantly influenced by a set of cultural principles inherited from the samurai era—loyalty, hierarchical order, and mutual respect—which are still evident today in practices such as formal seating arrangements, structured mentorship systems, and a strong emphasis on consensus-based decision-making (Jain, 2025). Principles like *Ikigai*—the pursuit of a meaningful life, or one's "reason for being"—inspire leaders to align their passions, skills, and societal contributions, thereby cultivating purpose-driven organizations and motivating teams toward meaningful achievements (World Economic Forum, 2022). *Kokorozashi* builds on this by highlighting the importance of a leader's personal mission and dedication to the greater good (GLOBIS, 2024). The concept of *Nemawashi*, the informal groundwork and consensus-building that precede the formalizing of decisions, facilitates smooth implementation and collective agreement, while *Wa* (harmony) emphasizes group unity and the avoidance of conflict, both of which are central to effective leadership in Japan. *Kaizen*, meaning continuous improvement, fosters a culture of incremental progress and adaptability, supporting resilience and sustainable growth over time (World Economic Forum, 2022). Hierarchical dynamics such as *Senpai-Kohai* (mentor–protégé) and *Oyabun-Kobun* (master–apprentice) underpin mentorship and the transfer of knowledge, benefiting individuals and organizations alike.

These Japanese cultural principles not only define leadership within Japan but also offer valuable insights for other countries, including Romania, where leadership models are adapting to globalization and economic change. Incorporating these Japanese concepts has been shown to boost employee engagement, drive innovation, and support

organizational sustainability, underscoring the importance of this research for anyone interested in effective leadership and cross-cultural management (GLOBIS, 2024). Research shows that Japanese leadership, grounded in cultural principles such as Wa (harmony), Nemawashi (consensus-building), and Kaizen (continuous improvement), significantly enhances organizational effectiveness and employee engagement. Studies by Kobayashi (2020) and Tanaka et al. (2024) highlight the positive impact of the servant and transformational leadership styles shaped by these values. Mentorship systems such as Senpai-Kohai and concepts like Ikigai further influence leadership motivation and culture. Business practice reflects these principles, underscoring their importance for effective leadership and cross-cultural management and making this topic highly relevant for scholars and practitioners alike.

This shift has led to innovative business models centered on environmental sustainability. The influence of cultural principles on leadership in Japan is a topic of significant interest and importance, as Japan has a unique cultural context that shapes its leadership practices and styles. Cultural principles are crucial in shaping the decision-making processes and leadership behaviors of Japanese organizations.

Understanding the influence of cultural principles on leadership in Japan is essential for several reasons. First, Japan has a distinct cultural heritage and a long history of traditional values that shape its society and organizations. These cultural principles mold the expectations and behaviors of leaders, affecting their decision-making processes, communication styles, and relationships with followers. Second, Japan is known for its strong emphasis on teamwork and consensus. The cultural principle of collectivism promotes group harmony and cooperation, which influences leadership practice by fostering collaboration, seeking consensus, and valuing the input and opinions of all team members. Furthermore, the cultural principle of hierarchy is deeply ingrained in Japanese society, emphasizing respect for authority and seniority. This hierarchical structure shapes leadership dynamics and decision-making, as leaders are expected to maintain harmony within the organization and to seek input and approval from their superiors.

Japan's cultural principles also influence the development and effectiveness of Japanese leaders. The values of diligence, discipline, and perseverance are highly regarded, and leaders are expected to embody these qualities. The cultural emphasis on long-term orientation and patience likewise shapes leadership approaches, as leaders are encouraged to take a patient, strategic view of organizational challenges and opportunities.

It is essential to recognize, however, that Japan is a complex and diverse country, and leadership practices and styles may vary across industries, generations, and regions. Researching the influence of cultural principles on leadership in Japan can therefore provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics and contribute to the development of effective leadership strategies in this unique cultural context. Overall, studying the influence of cultural principles on leadership in Japan can yield valuable insights into the cultural dynamics that shape leadership practices, inform leadership development programs, enhance organizational effectiveness, promote intercultural collaboration, and facilitate cross-cultural learning and adaptation.

In the current era, marked by ongoing societal and organizational change, the significance of leadership, particularly in the aftermath of the global pandemic, cannot be overstated. Inclusive leadership, which fosters adaptability, empowerment, collaboration, and a sense of community and belonging, is crucial for creating environments conducive to growth.

“Studying the Japanese phenomenon is a journey without end, while understanding its cultural principles becomes a continuous process of discovery and revelation. Yet their true depth can only be experienced by putting them into practice in everyday life and allowing them to become part of one’s own way of being. In doing so, new horizons of understanding emerge—of ourselves, of our relationships with others, and of the profound connection between human beings and nature.”



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