

# Transforming the Showa Mindset to *Festina Lente* to Survive an Aging Society

By Asako Takada



Author Asako Takada

## Introduction

Japan is a country with unprecedented longevity. By 2060, the average life expectancy for men is estimated to be 84.19 years, and 90.93 years for women (Cabinet Office, *Annual Report on the Aging Society: 2016*). Since the Second Baby Boom which was seen from 1971 to 1974, birth rates have continued to drop whilst the aging of society has progressed.

The future of Japan looks to be a society which consists of many active elderly people and a small number of children. Increases in medical and welfare expenditures are inevitable, and drops in the labor force also unavoidable. Those elderly people who are able to retire at age 60 or 65 and also lead comfortable and leisurely lives will be limited to a very few. Working actively for the rest of your life, literally, will become the *de facto* standard.

To find one's own happiness, whether it be in business or in society, I believe it is imperative to adapt by transforming the rules behind our actions, namely, the basic component of our mindset. This article will describe in particular the structure of the new mindset that is required in the field of business.

## Components of the Showa Mindset

First, let us confirm the components of the Showa mindset in Japan that we possess. The three key terms are homogeneity, pseudo family, and long-term employment.

### Homogeneity and pseudo family

The Japanese corporate world is a male-dominated society. The depletion and shortage of the labor force with a declining birthrate and aging population has finally shed light on the female workforce, and created grand slogans like "Promoting Women's Active Participation" which can be seen everywhere. But Japan still remains a male-dominated society, although it is certainly beginning to change.

Most management positions in Japanese businesses are held by Japanese men who have similar educational backgrounds and who share the same value sets, and therefore these men make up a homogenous group. They work in groups from morning to night, just as they are mocked for being the "worker bees". The familistic management style which is typical of Japan accurately points to men with high homogeneity working for the same company, spending

long hours working towards common goals, and eventually living a pseudo-family existence with each other.

In such working environments, such qualities as "attunement" and "understanding the needs of a partner just by looking at his eyes" have been valued. By spending many hours with the same people, their feelings and patterns of behavior become ingrained. Knowledge is shared tacitly and this serves as the basis for rules of conduct and thinking. In a Japanese business institution, the basic mindset of a Japanese business person is that it is more important to sense what the other person wants and to go one step ahead to fulfill that, rather than to be self-assertive.

But changes in the business environment, such as more women in management and the globalization of businesses, have made it more complex, though not impossible, to leverage homogeneity within a workplace. Undoubtedly, the mindset which had so far been based on homogeneity is being forced to change. Attunement among people with different characteristics cannot be achieved that easily. What is required is to verbalize and exchange one's opinions and thoughts, and to make an effort to understand one another.

When people of various views and values, such as women, foreigners, and those from the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community become new members of such a Japanese male-oriented institution, managing that institution based on pseudo-family interactions becomes extremely difficult.

### Long-term employment and the company being life itself

Although life-time employment is becoming a fading phenomenon in Japan, it is nevertheless still the norm and approved by society. Hence we often see people who maintain that mindset even though they've left their employment at companies where this was the norm.

I have been teaching at a business school for many years, but in recent years there have been a steady number of students around their 60s who have enrolled to obtain MBAs after their retirement. Many of them come with the aim of rearranging the wisdom and knowledge that they have acquired through their jobs at companies, and starting their own business consultancies after graduation. There are sometimes instances where former employees of a parent company and a subsidiary company come together in the same class. Oddly enough, although they are equals in that they are both students, the former employee of the subsidiary is mindful and respectful of the former employee of the parent company. In class discussions, comments are made based on the thoughts and

decision-making processes from the perspective of the company for which they had worked for many years. It is as though the policies of the companies they used to work for are programmed into their mindset.

Many business persons have been programmed to think about the intentions of their affiliated organizations and institutions first, not “what he or she wants to do”. But once that corporate title disappears, this mindset becomes obsolete, and one becomes at a complete loss as to how to make decisions and move forward.

### What Is Needed in the 21st Century Mindset: *Festina Lente*

Then how can one change this mindset? In simple terms, it is as the ancient saying goes: *festina lente* — more haste, less speed. This may sound odd. This is because with advancements in science and technology, promptness has been one of the most important requirements in our world today. But think about it. Japan is seeing a decreasing population and extended life expectancies. Businesses have become global and many heterogeneous human resources are coming into Japan. With working hours within a lifetime becoming extensively longer, it will be necessary for people to think about their whole life from a long-term perspective, how they work, and how they can enjoy their life overall. With the development of artificial intelligence, we live in an age where many jobs will eventually be taken over by robots and such like, and therefore to hold both a short-term vision and a long-term vision in parallel is increasingly important. One needs to act swiftly, by thinking slowly and deeply about what makes one’s life richer and more fulfilling. Let us look at two key ways of approaching this.

#### Thinking about careers in chapters

The first is to think about life as a series of chapters. This is the *lente* process. Take roughly 10 years as one chapter, and create a new mindset by thinking about what one wants to do and implement during that chapter. As life becomes longer, working for more than 50 years is becoming the *de facto* standard and it is critical to think about how to add one’s added-value to oneself in order to survive. The importance of knowledge and technology that can be acquired in a short period of time is not to be denied, but the wisdom that an individual formulates over a longer period of time is undoubtedly more precious.

The following are reasons for considering a decade as one chapter. First, there is the issue of an individual’s level of satisfaction. When pursuing one’s career by accumulating added-value on one’s own, it will take a few years, depending on the individual, for that to become real and for your own evaluation and external evaluation by others to coincide, and for it to also build your own confidence and fulfillment. For this skill set and knowledge to mature and accumulate as wisdom, it will take around 10 years. Of course, this can be shortened depending on one’s preferences.

On the other hand, stopping the turnover in human resources and revitalizing human resources are key challenges for businesses. Getting married later in life has become more common in Japan, and the average age for a woman to give birth to her first child is now 30.4 years old (*Declining Birth Rate White Paper: 2013*). In the past, the life journey had generally been to get married, give birth, raise children, care for elderly parents, then age together with one’s spouse. The mindset of the Showa era had been built up based on this life journey. But looking to the future, we will be seeing situations where economic activities outside of the households need to slow down, because people will need to raise children and also care for the elderly parents simultaneously. This is the same for both men and women.

There will be an acute increase in people raising small children whilst also caring for their parents. Many mid-career employees in their “prime” will face raising children and caring for elderly parents, which will both hold numerous elements that they will not be able to control themselves.

The Japanese people tend to feel guilty about slowing down their work in an organization. I have interviewed many management staff as a researcher of organizational behavior, and there is a term that I commonly hear in my interviews regardless of their workplace, age, or gender. It is the phrase “I don’t want to be a burden to the company.” This is most frequently heard when one is stepping away from the company for an extended period of time for child care or family care. Then I also hear “I am taking this much time off for leave, so I have given up on front line promotion.” It points to the reality that if there is some sort of flaw, one has to drop out of the promotion race. For women especially, there seem to be many cases still where they quit their jobs “because they do not want to be a burden to the company” as their work slows down during their maternity leave (Asako Takada, *Training Course for Female Managers (Jyosei Manager Ikusei Koza)*, Seisansei Shuppan, 2016).

If a career path can be viewed over a 10-year span, the work load may be reduced for three years to care for elderly parents, and the remaining seven years after coming back full-time can be used to maintain the motivation and effort to produce an output that can offset the slow period, and also allow that person to design his or her life.

If businesses can make performance evaluations based on the total output for a span of 10 years, then it would be possible for them to secure talented human resources. Japanese companies have formulated a variety of human resources development and nurturing systems based on long-term employment. But in the promotion process, evaluation and selection have primarily been limited to a few years in determining promotions (Yo Takeuchi, *Meritocracy in Japan: Structure and Mind (Nihon no Meritocracy: Kozo to Shinsho)*, Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1995, and Kazuo Koike, *Economics of Work: Second Edition (Shigoto no Keizaigaku)*, Toyo Keizai Shinposha, 1999). Of course, this is not meant to deny the traditional short-term promotion at Japanese companies. But there is a need to add a 10-year span perspective to the evaluation standard.

### Accepting heterogeneity promptly

The second is not to seek homogeneity and accept heterogeneity promptly (*festina*).

Human beings are animals of forecast. Humans continue living by always thinking about what will happen next, what this person wants to do, and how. For a group of people of high homogeneity, it is easy to forecast their next actions. But with people of heterogeneity, forecasting becomes hard and there will always be impatience. Estimating how others will act based on one's own prejudices, such as "It should be this", will lead to disappointment and impatience because the actual action will differ from one's estimates.

The important point is to set aside homogeneity and promptly accept heterogeneity, dispose of the old mindset, and start building the new one. This process will involve difficulties and will not come into effect without getting the mind to accept. But at the same time, it will also give pleasure that one is learning new things.

### Things That Must Be Done to Create a New Mindset

Finally, I'd like to discuss what actions we need to take in order to build a new mindset that can fulfill these two elements.

### Polish the ability to verbalize

In order to come together with people of heterogeneity, explaining with words at length becomes necessary and crucial. To deliver and convey one's thoughts to another person, one must choose the right words and express them so that the other person can understand, and this has become more important than ever before. One must assume that attunement does not hold, and must accurately express things verbally in any given situation.

### Observe very closely

In order to verbalize so that another person can understand you, you need to have information about that person. There is a need to have an interest in the person and observe him or her. In addition, by hypothetically thinking about why this person did this or why this person is making this comment, scenery which had not crossed your mind before begins to appear. One can then observe the other person and estimate how they understand things. Once this process has been carried out, one can build a story that the other person can understand easily and convey the message. This task will take time and effort. But it is a necessary task to make sure that your own circumstances and your evaluation of the other person adequately fit the current situation.

### Have the courage to transform

What is most important is to have the courage to renew one's mindset. When forming a new mindset, one of the decision-making actions that many people undertake is "postponement". When decision making involves difficulties, complexities, inconveniences, and anxieties, there is a tendency to have a low evaluation of the current situation, to have wishful thinking by claiming "I can't do this now, but I can do it in the future", and to selfishly underestimate the future. In order to break through this tendency, a strong desire and will to change is vital.

In an era where an aging society brings on huge changes to the working environment, the Showa mindset cannot enable us to live and maintain our happiness. In order to possess a new mindset, we must have the strong personal will to change — otherwise it cannot be achieved. Now is the time to replace our mindset in the spirit of *festina lente*. **JS**

*Asako Takada, Ph.D., is professor of Hosei Business School of Innovation Management.*