

THE KOKOROZASHI CUDGEL

Kokorozashi is real. The corporate exercise built on it is not.

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The story of *kokorozashi* starts with Confucius.

He did not invent 志 (pronounced *zhi*; Japanese *kokorozashi*) nor did he define it as support for the emperor of the day or the status quo. He used 志 for the directed aim of a person who already held, or was preparing to hold, a public station. The aim was supposed to be fixed on learning and on the Way (the proper order of roles, rites, and duties). When the actual ruler or state departed from that order, the gentleman's 志 could, and in Confucius's own career did, lead to refusal of office or withdrawal. He spent years traveling because the rulers of his time would not use him on terms he considered right. The Analects record him declining positions and leaving states when the conditions were wrong.

The term itself carries no guarantee of personal freedom in the modern sense. It belongs to someone inside a hierarchical order. But it is also not a blank endorsement of whoever currently holds power. The test is whether the aim stays fixed on the Way when the existing authority pulls the other way. Later writers, including Mencius and then Japanese figures such as Yoshida Shōin, made that possibility of refusal sharper. Shōin's 志 opposed the Tokugawa government of his day.

The classical idea supports neither unrestricted personal freedom nor automatic loyalty to the current ruler. It supports a directed aim, proper to a public station, that can be tested by what the person refuses when the incentive points elsewhere.

And this is where the seeds were planted for the widespread misuse of *kokorozashi* two millennia later in twenty-first-century Japanese business. But before the flaws, outcomes, and remedies, the definitions of 志 are needed.

Direction is not virtue. Declaring resolve does not make resolve true.

In Classical Chinese (roughly the eighth to third century BCE), 志 means the directed aim or will of a person. It is where the heart is pointed. The character 志 is composed of 士 (*shi*, the public station) above 心 (*xīn*, the heart/mind). The written form places the public role over the heart. The aim is not a free-floating inner feeling. It is the heart of a person who already stands in that station, pointed toward the proper object of the station.

Confucius used it for a mind intent on learning. Mencius treated it as the aim that ought to command the feelings (*qì*), though he notes that the reverse often occurs. It belongs to a person who already has a public station (士) and is good only if fixed on the Way, learning, or a defensible public end. A strong will pointed at status, faction, or conquest still counts as 志. Direction is not virtue. Mencius calls some aims lofty and others pretentious. The tradition never solved the reverse case in which *qì* moves the will. Declaring resolve does not make resolve true.

It smuggles a role into an inner state. 士 is a social station: the person who has a public part to play. Classical 志 is the aim proper to that station, under rite and hierarchy. It is a poor ancestor for “my personal mission” of corporate Japan today. The gentleman's will was supposed to converge on one Way. It is directed resolve, tested by what you do when *qì*, salary, or the state pull the other way. It is not evidence that you benefit society, and it is not something an employer can verify by asking you to narrate it.

Modern Japanese 志 uses the same character, but it is now commonly thought of as a personal mission or sense of purpose. In leadership and corporate training it is usually defined as a mission that unifies passion and skill to create positive change in society. The older sense of directed resolve tested by refusal remains in the word, but the current training is oblivious to that aspect and treats it as a statement that can be collected and matched to a company's purpose. The modern corporate sense is a much later development, mainly from the late twentieth century. Table 1 sets the classical aim beside three later standards. Only the corporate column grades fit with an institution's wording.

Japan's adoption of 志: *zhi* becomes *kokorozashi*

Japan began using 志 with the introduction of Chinese learning, mainly from the sixth and seventh centuries onward. Buddhist and Confucian texts entered Japan in that period. By the Nara and Heian eras the character was in regular

use among the literate class. Samurai teachers in the medieval and early modern periods treated it as the resolve expected of a man with a public duty, not a private dream.

Enter Yoshida Shōin who, in the 1850s, made that concrete. Shōin was a samurai teacher from Chōshū, today’s Yamaguchi Prefecture. He lived from 1830 to 1859 and was executed at 29. He was born Sugi Toranosuke in Hagi and was adopted into the Yoshida family, a house tied to the military and Confucian teaching of Yamaga Sokō. He studied strategy, Confucianism, and Western learning through Dutch sources. When Matthew Perry’s ships arrived, he tried to stow away to study the West. The attempt failed, and he was jailed.

After his release he ran a tiny school, Shōka Sonjuku. He taught that Japan had to learn from the foreign threat and that a real 志 meant acting for the realm, not just holding office under the shogun. Late in life he turned sharply against the Tokugawa government. He was arrested in the Ansei Purge and beheaded in Edo for his part in a plot against a senior shogunate official.

His importance is mostly through his students. Takasugi Shinsaku, Kido Takayoshi, Itō Hirobumi, Yamagata Aritomo, and Inoue Kaoru went on to overthrow the shogunate and build the Meiji state. Itō became Japan’s first prime minister. In the kokorozashi tradition, Shōin is the Japanese example of resolve pointed at the country, held even when it cost him his life. He taught young samurai that a real aim meant acting for Japan under foreign pressure, even at the cost of one’s life. In that Japanese line, kokorozashi is political will: learn what the threat requires, then move.

Companies further domesticated it. By the time Japan entered the post-war era, a company could stand in for the realm. Loyalty to the company, long hours, and endurance were praised as 志. The word kept the moral weight of the older use while meaning, in practice, devotion to the employer.

The current version of corporate training is a third turn. Business schools redefined it as a personal mission that mixes passion, skill, and social benefit. Corporate leader programs sit on that version. The Japanese word is still used, so it sounds older and stricter than “purpose.” The content is newer: a statement the company can collect and match to its own purpose.

The Japanese flaw is in that handoff. Shōin’s 志 could oppose the government of the day. Company 志 almost never can. It asks for the feeling of public resolve, then points it at the firm. Global leaders are asked to perform a Japanese moral word whose sharp version—duty to a country, a craft, or a judgment that may clash with headquarters—is exactly what the exercise cannot use.

Solutions from entrepreneurs’ kokorozashi in Meiji and Taishō times

There is no record that NEC’s co-founder Kunihiro Iwadare discussed Yoshida Shōin or used 志 the way a leadership program does. He was born in 1857, two years before Shōin was executed, into a Kokura domain samurai family. He would have known the name. Nothing he left behind shows that he took Shōin as a model.

What he did is plainer. His father was killed when he was a boy. Later biographies say he went to Tokyo meaning to take revenge, then dropped it for the Meiji work of building the country. He trained as a telegraph engineer at the Imperial College of Engineering, worked in Edison’s shop in the United States, and on his return chose alternating current for Japan even though Edison was pushing direct current. In 1899 he founded NEC with Western Electric, which took 54 percent of the stock, after joint-venture talks with Oki Taizo failed. Oki wanted domestic control of the technology. Iwadare took the foreign capital and the foreign equipment. The line associated with him is “better products, better service,” and the wish to make a Japanese electrical company that would last. A 1912 trade-magazine sketch calls him steady, diligent, and quietly gentlemanly. He ran the firm for about twenty-seven years, became chairman in 1926, and died in 1941. He did not leave a manifesto.

Better, not best. Best is a claim you can finish. Better still binds you after the founding drama is over. His public service was a telephone system that stayed up, built with whatever capital could deliver it. He would have had little patience for a session that asks leaders to declare a social mission.

As a founder, Iwadare’s 志 was the company, not a personal creed. Learn the foreign technique, judge it on performance, and use foreign capital if that is what gets Japan a working telephone and electrical industry. He would not have called a joint venture a betrayal. He had already refused the patriotic option that kept the technology at home and the firm unbuilt. He also would not have sounded like Shōin, whose resolve opposed the government and ended on the executioner’s block. Iwadare’s resolve needed the Meiji state, a treaty revision, and a Western partner. The test was whether the product worked.

In later years the same aim would have narrowed. By the time he was chairman, the bet had become an institution: keep the standard from slipping, keep the foreign technical tie useful, and do not confuse the firm with a slogan. “Better,” not “best,” fits that. Best is a claim you can finish. Better is a standard that still binds you after the founding

drama is over. He would have had little patience for a training exercise that asks leaders to declare a social mission. His version of public service was a telephone system that stayed up, built with whatever capital and engineering could actually deliver it.

Taizo Oki had built Oki Electric Works into Japan’s main domestic maker of telegraph equipment. Western Electric wanted a Japanese factory partner for telephone gear, not only a sales agent. In March 1898 it approached Oki. Iwaware was already Western Electric’s man in Japan, through his import shop, and Oki asked him to broker the talks. A provisional agreement was reached.

It broke on terms. Western Electric’s investment conditions were hard. Walter Tenney Carleton was Western Electric’s representative in Japan during the 1898–99 negotiations. He handled the talks with Oki, set or conveyed the valuation and profit-share terms, and decided which Japanese partner Western Electric would accept. Later, he ran operations in Japan. When the discussions between Carleton and Oki broke, Oki walked away. Western Electric still needed a Japanese vehicle. Iwaware, who had been the go-between, offered himself. Carleton continued with Iwaware. The joint venture that became Nippon Electric Company was formed with the partner Carleton trusted. In August 1898, Iwaware bought the failing Miyoshi Electric factory and set up Nippon Electric as a partnership, with himself at the head. The unequal treaties were revised the next year so foreign direct investment became legal in Japan, and on 17 July 1899 the partnership became Nippon Electric Company. Western Electric took 54 percent. Iwaware at 34% was managing director. The old NEC logo came from Western Electric’s.

Oki did not sit still. In May 1899 he formed a partnership with Yoshida Masahide, a former Communications Ministry official, to keep a line to the ministry and to try the China market. A telephone-office job in Guangdong was finished. The export business did not follow, and Oki dissolved that partnership in 1900. Oki Electric remained the domestic rival. NEC became the foreign-capital manufacturer.

The split is the cleanest evidence of the two aims. Oki treated foreign control as the thing to refuse. Iwaware treated a working telephone industry as the thing to get, and took the capital and the equipment that made it possible. NEC exists because the broker took the deal the factory owner rejected.¹

Today’s corporate training exercises

Global leader training asks participants to produce a 志: a directed resolve, in the Confucian sense, that the company can then use. The classical object does not survive that transfer. 志 was the aim of a person with a public station, fixed on the Way or the realm, and tested by whether qi and advantage could drag it off course. A training deliverable reverses the test. The institution sets the occasion, the template, and the audience. What comes back is a text the program can collect, compare, and align with the company’s purpose—safety, security, fairness, efficiency, a sustainable society. That is an obedience exercise wearing an older word.

The Confucian flaw carries over directly. 志 is not good because it is sincere. It is good only if the aim is defensible. Training cannot grade that. It can grade clarity, passion, and overlap with the firm’s language. So the deliverable selects for people who can narrate a private aim in the company’s register. A leader whose real resolve is a network that holds, a bid refused, or a program killed will look unfinished next to someone who has written a social-benefit sentence. Global cohorts make this worse. The term is untranslatable, the moral cosmology is not shared, and the exercise still treats convergence on one corporate Way as maturity.

A deliverable that respects the word would be short, revisable, and tied to a refusal, for example:

¹ The letters of the principals in the story complicate the later patriotic reading. Oki had spent fifteen years building Japan’s main domestic telegraph and telephone works. In 1896 the government started its first long-term telephone plan. He put the firm’s money and engineering into a large new factory so that foreign sets and switchboards would not take the network he called the nation’s nervous system. Western Electric’s offer arrived in the middle of that push. Oki’s later company account says he refused because a company in that trade owed its allegiance to the country, because he trusted his own plant, and because he was ill and feared that if he died a foreign majority owner would control the firm and his workers. The same account says the government was pressing makers to localize, and that Western Electric’s terms on valuation and profit share were severe. Talks that were close to a deal stopped abruptly in early June 1898.

The letters of Walter Tenney Carleton cuts against the idea that Oki began from a domestic-only principle. He had already agreed to a tie-up, and he was actively importing Western Electric equipment. On that reading the break came from Western Electric’s side: valuation, profit share, and the choice of partner. Iwaware, the broker, was the man Western Electric trusted, and the joint venture went to a company he created. “Domestic technology” became Oki’s position after the deal was gone, not the fixed reason he opened with.

So he did not refuse foreign machines. He had been selling them. What he would not sign, or what Western Electric would not concede, was foreign control of the factory he had built for the government network. The nationalism explains the stance he kept afterward. It does not, by itself, explain the June break.

My resolve in this role is that the systems we put into governments, operators, and critical industries hold on the day they fail. I will own the uptime, security, and delivery of what I touch, and I will stop work that cannot be defended technically or commercially.

The company’s purpose is relevant only where it coincides with that. The aim can be revised if the facts change. It is not a life sentence, and it is not a pledge to the slogan.

What’s gone wrong with kokorozashi in twenty-first-century business

The question confuses three different things and then grades employees on the confusion.

First, it treats a life-direction as something an employer is entitled to audit. A company can reasonably ask what you will do with its capital, people, and customers over the next few years. It cannot reasonably ask for the thing your heart points at, then score the answer for fit. People with a genuine 志 are often inconvenient: they will refuse a bad bid, protect a technical standard against a quarterly target, or leave when the firm drifts. The company rewards the opposite skill—producing an origin story that flatters the institution.

Second, the “benefits society” clause is doing ideological work. It rules out, or at least embarrasses, several honest answers: “I want this P&L to be the most reliable network infrastructure in Asia,” “I want to build systems the Japanese state and its allies can actually depend on,” or “I want to make this division profitable enough that it stops being a cost center dressed up as purpose.” Those are legitimate leadership missions. They are not incomplete because they lack a sentence about humanity flourishing. If a company’s real value is submarine cables, public-safety systems, enterprise IT, identity, defense-adjacent computing—which is concrete and sometimes politically sharp—then wrapping it in “social value creation” makes the hard part harder to say.

Third, it selects for fluency, not resolve. Classical 志 is tested by what you sacrifice when the incentive points the other way. Corporate training tests whether you can sound as if you have already made that sacrifice. The leader candidates who win executive promotions are often the ones who have practiced the party line, not the ones who have held a line. *Ikigai* (a reason to get through the day) gets blended into the same prompt, so the answer is pushed toward wellness-purpose language that no operator can be managed against.

Fourth, it borrows moral prestige from Meiji and samurai usage while cashing it out as culture-change compliance. Japan’s lumbering giant companies that shrank hard after the early 2000s tried to move from making things to making “social value,” and then discovered the culture had not moved with the strategy. That is a management problem. It is not solved by asking employees to declare a personal mission. Declaring one can even hide the problem because everyone sounds aligned while the incentives stay the same.

The version now used in Japanese leadership programs narrows it. There, kokorozashi is “a personal mission that unifies passion and skills to create positive change in society.” That adds two filters the old word did not have: the mission must be narratable as passion, and it must be framed as social benefit. A company’s own purpose language sits in the same register—safety, security, fairness, efficiency, a sustainable society in which people can fully express their humanity. Asking a leader for their kokorozashi is, in practice, asking them to recite a private myth that rhymes with that purpose.

So the premise fails in a specific way. It asks for something private and directional, then grades it as public relations for the corporate purpose. The correct, sharper questions are: what will you refuse, what will you build, and what result in three years would show you were right?

What to do when your company asks you for a kokorozashi statement

Meiji and Taishō era founders make the solution concrete.

Namihei Odaira is the rise Iwadare was not. Born in 1874 in rural Tochigi, the second son of a local family, he reached Tokyo Imperial University on ability and graduated in electrical engineering in 1900. No house. No trading firm. In 1906 he was engineering section chief at the Kuhara copper mine in Hitachi, hired to keep the power on and the imported machines running. The job was repair. He and his colleagues built a five-horsepower motor instead.

Hitachi began in 1910 as that shop. Fusanosuke Kuhara owned it. The firm became independent only in 1920. Odaira ran it as managing director, then as president. The creation was the motor, and the habit of making the next machine rather than waiting for it from abroad.

Hitachi is the clean pair. Odaira’s good kokorozashi was narrow. Build the machine Japan was importing. Train the technicians who can build the one after that, even if they later leave for a rival. He said the goal was to train technicians and industrialists. That aim can fail in public. The motor works or it does not. The apprentice can repair it or he

cannot. It names a refusal. He would not leave the mine dependent on a foreign spare part if his own shop could make one.

The bad kokorozashi at the same company is the one a program would collect now. A pledge to contribute to society through social innovation. No machine named. No import he will stop waiting for. No order he will disobey. Odaira's shop began by disobeying the repair ticket. A purpose statement cannot disobey anything. It can only resemble the purpose already printed on the wall.

Oki's "no" sits between Iwaware and Odaira. He would not hand his factory to a foreign majority, and he was ill enough to mean it. That can be resolve. It can also be a closed search: foreign control refused, and the new use left to the broker who would take the capital. Iwaware's aim was cruder. A working company, foreign machines, foreign money, judged on whether the line stayed up.

Shōin would have recognized the cost in Oki. He would not have recognized the worksheet. Iwaware would not have called the joint venture a betrayal. He had already refused the patriotic option that kept the technology at home and the firm unbuilt.

If the deliverable has to be written, write it as Odaira would have understood it. Name the machine. Name the refusal. Name the result in three years that would show you were right. Say the aim can be revised if the facts change.

A kokorozashi that cannot be revised is not resolve. It is a script to camouflage the CEO's personal agenda.

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KOKOROZASHI AND OTHER STANDARDS

	CLASSICAL CHINESE	STOIC	BHUDDIST	CORPORATE JAPAN
Object	志 is the aim of a person who already has a public station (士), fixed on something defensible—learning, the Way, or the country.	The standard is the rational will’s correct judgment of what is in accordance with nature and virtue. External things (office, reputation, the state) are preferred or dispreferred, not the good.	The aim is the cessation of craving and the release from a fixed self. It is not fixed on a public station, a firm purpose, or an external good.	The firm sets the occasion, the template, and the audience. The deliverable is a personal mission that mixes passion, skill, and social benefit, then matches the company’s purpose language.
Moral status	It is not good because it is sincere. Direction is not virtue; a strong will pointed at status or conquest still counts as 志.	Virtue is the correct use of the will. External success is not required. The passions are judgments that can be corrected by withholding assent.	Virtue is the reduction of attachment. Sincerity or social benefit is not the measure. A strong will directed at status or conquest remains craving.	Clarity, warmth, and overlap with the firm’s wording are graded. A leader whose real resolve is a network that holds, a bid refused, or a program killed looks unfinished next to a social-benefit sentence.
Test	The test is what the person does when appetite, fear, salary, or the state pull the other way. Shōin’s version could oppose the government of the day and cost him his life.	The test is whether the agent maintains correct judgment under any external condition (exile, loss of office, death). Refusal of an unjust order is possible, but the primary measure is the integrity of the will.	The test is whether practice continues under pleasant or painful conditions. The measure is the lessening of attachment, not an external result or a narrated mission.	The test is reversed: the institution grades fit. Company 志 almost never can oppose the institution that asked for it.
Revision and convergence	It is supposed to converge on a shared standard, not express a unique inner story. It can be revised as the facts change; Confucius’s own account is a staged life, not one sentence at twenty.	The will is revised by correcting false judgments. Convergence is on virtue, not on an institution’s language. The action remains virtuous regardless of external result.	The teaching is a raft to be abandoned once it has done its work. No permanent script is required. Convergence is on release, not on an institution’s language.	It borrows the moral weight of the older word while requiring convergence on the firm’s Way. A version that cannot name a refusal or be revised when the facts change is a script, not resolve.
Result	Directed resolve tested by refusal.	A rational will tested by the correctness of its judgments under any circumstance.	Release from craving tested by continued practice under any condition. It cannot be collected as a personal mission that matches company wording.	An obedience exercise. What comes back can be collected, compared, and aligned.

Table 1. Kokorozashi and Other Standards. Classical, Stoic, and Buddhist standards allow refusal or release under pressure. Only the corporate column assesses merit of the person with compliance with the company’s wording.