THE KOKOROZASHI CUDGEL

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

Mark Lee Ford

The story of *kokorozashi* starts with Confucius and Mencius.

Although he did not invent 志 (pronounced *zhì*; Japanese kokorozashi), Confucius used 志[1] for the "directed aim" or "will" of a person who already held, or was preparing to hold, a public station. "Aim" meant the person's own goal or final destination that he resolved to reach or uphold. It was expected to be fixed on learning, the "Way" (meaning "the proper order of roles, rites, and duties" for a civil servant) or the good of the country. The "directed" part is the path or heading he would take to get there. Unlike the aim, the path was changeable according to circumstances and new developments. At the time of Confucius, the Zhou royal authority had weakened and the various states were ruled by their own lords and ministers, so there was no centralized civil service that prescribed a man's aim and then tested him against it. The directed aim, it seems, was left to the individual.

The classical test of one in public station in those times was what he did when appetite, fear, salary, or the ruler of the day threatened to divert him from his aim. When the actual ruler or state departed from one's aim, one could refuse an order or quit, as what Confucius did. He spent years traveling because the rulers of his time would not use him on terms he considered right. The Analects record him refusing positions and leaving states when the conditions were wrong. At the same time, refusal was unusual for one following a Confucian life, which emphasized hierarchical duty. Nevertheless, it was recognized as an allowable and valid test of whether the aim still governed the person.

Centuries later in a different country during its medieval period, samurai teachers focused the aim of 志 on the resolve expected of a man with a public ambition. And centuries after that in 1850s, Shōin Yoshida pushed the aim toward political will for Japan under external pressure from foreigners, opening the door to new uses of 志—political and institutional—that were not part of the spirit and philosophy of classical 志.

志 became kokorozashi, which has been evolving to this day. The story of this evolution, as you will read, illuminates why 志 is far off course in modern corporate Japan, and provides insights to restoring 志 to its proper, classical use.

Japan changes 志: the politicization of "will"

Japan began using 志 with the arrival of Chinese learning and of Buddhist and Confucian texts in the sixth and seventh centuries. By the Nara and Heian eras the literate class used it regularly. Samurai teachers in the medieval and early modern periods read 志 as the resolve expected of a man with a public (rather than private) ambition.

Enter Shōin Yoshida.

Yoshida was a samurai teacher from the Chōshū domain (now Yamaguchi Prefecture). Born in 1830 as Toranosuke Sugi in the castle town of Hagi, he was adopted by Yoshida family, a house linked to the military and Confucian teachings of Sokō Yamaga. He studied strategy and Confucianism, and even undertook some studies from Dutch and Chinese translations about Western coastal defense and artillery, maps, and elements of Western political organization and naval powers.

When Matthew Perry's ships arrived in 1854, Yoshida saw the American expedition as both a danger and a teacher. He wrote that Japan must "know the enemy" and adopt what was useful from them. He tried to stow away to study the West, was caught, jailed, and stripped of his samurai status. After his release he ran a tiny school. He taught that Japan had to learn from the foreign threat and that a real 志 meant acting for the realm, not merely holding office under the Shōgun.

As the unequal treaties proceeded, Yoshida grew more radical. In 1858 he learned that the Shōgun was accepting the treaties without the emperor's consent. He plotted to assassinate Akikatsu Manabe, the senior official sent to enforce the treaties, the bakufu's succession decision, and the suppression of dissent. The plot was uncovered. Yoshida was arrested in the Ansei Purge and beheaded in Edo in 1859 at the age of 29.

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[1] In Classical Chinese (roughly the eighth to third century BCE), 志 means "where the heart-mind is pointed." Xu Shen, in the *Shuowen* dictionary (c. 100 CE), analyzed the character as 从心, 之聲: the heart-mind plus the phonetic 之 ("to go"). Early forms show 之 above 心; 士 above 心 came later.

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His students later helped overthrow the Shōgun and build the Meiji state; one became Japan's first prime minister. Yoshida stands as the Japanese example of resolve pointed at the country and held even when it cost his life. He taught young samurai that a real 志 means acting for Japan in the face of foreign pressure, even at the cost of life. Yoshida was a staunch Confucian, specifically in the Mencian emphasis on resolute aim. By this time, however, he had changed (perhaps without fully realizing it) the original definition of aim in 志 by Confucius and Mencius to a new one: political will.

Endurance of classic 志

Namihei Odaira (1874–1951) was born the second son of a local family in rural Tochigi. He graduated as an electrical engineer in 1900. By 1906 he became engineering section chief at the Kuhara copper mine in Hitachi. His job was to keep the imported motors for the mine running. Rather than importing more parts and motors to do so, he and a few colleagues built a five-horsepower induction motor in the mine shop. It worked, and soon the foreign motors were replaced with domestic ones. The decision to make that motor, and to keep making the next motors rather than order them from abroad, is the origin of Hitachi Ltd. (1910).

Odaira rose to managing director, then president, keeping the same aim all the way: train technicians and industrialists to make the motor that Japan is importing—even if they later leave for a rival. He stated the aim plainly. The test was public and immediate. The motor ran or it did not. The technician repaired it or he could not. Odaira's refusal was concrete: do not leave the mine dependent on a foreign spare part if his shop could make one instead.

This is classical 志 at work in Meiji and Taishō era industry. The aim is anchored on a defensible public end (working machines and the men who can build them). It can be revised as the facts change. It is tested by what is refused (an order from the boss to continue dependence on the imported part). No social-benefit sentence is required. No company purpose statement is required. The company is the vehicle. The machine and the trained workmen are the aim. The final part of the equation is the price that one would be willing to sacrifice for that refusal. In Confucian times, as with Odaira, one would sacrifice one's post—one's entire wages—to be free to choose according to their 志. Contrast that with the typical salaryman of today.

Granted, this is merely one anecdotal example. Yet, Odaira's story is one of many like it from that time. Those like-minded stories suggest that Yoshida's 志 was not a clean break from classical 志, even for Yoshida. Perhaps his was more of a one-time extreme event. And with the ascent of industrialization in Japan and demise of the samurai, the medieval 志 had anyway become anachronistic in the Meiji and Taishō eras. Indeed, a persuasive argument might be made that classic 志 fits with the entrepreneur's temperament.

Turning points in 志: Shōwa era until today

During the early Shōwa era, the use of 志 in Japan changed again as the country militarized. The seed that Yoshida planted—the change of the classic definition of "aim" to one of political will—took a turn for the worse. The aim was re-directed to the realm: the emperor and his divinity. In the 1930s–1940s, military and educational rhetoric redefined 志 as total, unquestioning commitment to the emperor and the state's war aims. The *kamikaze* units of suicide pilots were presented as the purest expression of that redirected resolve: the individual's life offered as the path to the aim. All of this was assigned by authority, and not chosen by the individual, contrary to classic 志. The option of refusal or quitting was no longer part of the test the integrity of one's 志; compliance unto death was.

After WWII, the military was no longer in power. The political and religious ideologies had been ameliorated substantially. In the absence of a central religious figure on which one could pin one's aim of 志, companies began to stand in for the realm. Loyalty to the company, long hours, and endurance were praised as 志. The word kept the appearance and prestige of classical moral weight, but in practice it meant devotion to the employer and obeying rules that are alien to classical 志.

志 evolved further by the 2000s to be a personal mission or sense of purpose. In that sense, the meaning reverted somewhat to the classical one. Directed aim tested by refusal remained in the word. Unfortunately, companies usurped 志 to ask employees to make "personal" 志 declarations, nudging them to pen something that supports the corporate mission or vision statement. As is done today, verbiage in such employee declarations ranged from vague references to the mission statement to explicit quotations.

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Most recently, 志 has been redefined[2] again, this time by business schools, to include words of passion, society's values, contribution to society, and so on. Companies use these poorly written definitions, or ones of their own crafting, as a guiding star for participants in their corporate leadership programs. They still use the classic character 志, which gives the definition a kind of gravitas and legitimacy based on (false) historical continuity; arguments from authority are persuasive. But their definitions of 志 are far from those that came before: classic 志, Japanese medieval 志, Yoshida's 志, and Odaira's 志, and even the 志 of the War and postwar period. The most obvious deficit that one finds consistently in the new definitions has to do with the test of one's 志. Whereas Yoshida's 志 could still oppose the government of the day, and Odaira's 志 refused an order from his boss, an employee's 志 in a modern company rarely can refuse an order, nor will the employee go against the grain of management's direction. 志 has become an obedience exercise, a pledge of allegiance either to the company or society. With both, 志 is not a reliable test of actual refusal. First, one rarely quits his company. Second, society is a faceless, nameless abstraction to which one has nobody to submit oneself to be accountable.

Table 1 sets today's definition of 志 against three standards. The differences with the definition and use in modern corporate Japan are easily seen.

Diagnosis: the error of 志 in modern corporate Japan

The current definition of 志 adds two filters the classical 志 did not have: the mission must be narratable as passion, and it must be framed as social benefit. Several problems arise from this.

They treat an employee's 志 as a deliverable they are entitled to audit and critique. A company can reasonably ask what an employee will do with its capital, people, and customers over the next few years. It has no moral authority, and no legitimate business reason, to ask where the employees' heart points and then score the answer for fit with the company's agenda.

The company's requirement for the employee to include clauses about benefiting society in his 志 does ideological work. It rules out, or at least embarrasses, employees with honest answers that are legitimate of a leader, such as "I want this P&L to be the most reliable network infrastructure in Asia." Aims are not incomplete because they lack a sentence about society's values. If a company's real value is politically controversial (and which company is immune from that today?!) then wrapping it in "social value creation" makes the hard part harder to say. It ends up smacking of hypocrisy. The employee becomes cynical. The public do not know let alone care. And it backfires on management.

Corporate 志 exercises select for fluency in the party line, not for individual resolve. Classical 志 is tested by what one will sacrifice when one must refuse or quit. Corporate training tests whether the employee can sound as the sacrifice has already been made. The candidates who win promotions are the ones at ease with the party line, not those who have held the line.

The premise of 志 in leadership training fails in a specific way. It asks for something private and directional, then grades it as public relations for the corporate purpose. The incisive questions are: what will one refuse, what will one build, and what result in three years would show one was correct?

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

The meaning and use of 志 by modern corporate Japan is obscure and uneven compared to the precision, clarity, logic, and practical utility of classic 志. One can commend the bravery of the authors of modern 志 for trying to create something new of value to the individual and his fellow man. At the same time, one can also forgive them for not having the brains of Confucius and Mencius required for such an undertaking. Besides, all one need do is a little homework about classical 志 to find a useful, tested, time-honored idea of great practical use in modern business, without having to create anything new. As with composers who try to write music like Bach or Mozart, they should not try— just play Bach or Mozart. But such is the way of the management class of the modern corporate world, not limited to Japan. Few have worked in the factory, designed a product, or pounded the street to sell one. They dwell in the theoretical world of business cases and slide decks.

So, what should one do when the company asks for a 志 "declaration."

Odaira's 志 was in keeping with classical 志. It was narrow. Testable. Build the motor that Japan was importing. Train the technicians who can build the motor after that, even if they later left 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

[2] My description draws on common practice in leadership programs rather than a comprehensive survey.

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or he cannot. A refusal is specified. He would not leave the mine dependent on a foreign spare part if his own shop could make one.

If the deliverable must 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. Make it testable, falsifiable, measurable, and revisable. Bind it to a refusal. Keep it short. Above all, ensure it is consistent with the classical definition of 志. If it was good enough for Odaira, Confucius, and Mencius, then classic 志 should be good enough for you.

An example:

> *My aim in my job is that the systems we put into governments and industries hold on the day they fail. I will be responsible and accountable for the uptime, security, and delivery of what I work on. I will stop work that cannot be defended technically or commercially.*

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

Above all, the aim can be revised if the facts change. A 志 that cannot be revised is not resolve to a directed aim. It is merely a script to camouflage the CEO’s personal agenda.

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KOKOROZASHI AND OTHER STANDARDS

	CLASSICAL CHINESE	STOIC	BUDDHIST	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. None of them treats narrative fit with an employer's current purpose statement as the measure of the aim. Only the Corporate Japan column reverses the test. The company sets the aim then grades the conformity of the employee's 志 declaration with its own language—its own agenda.

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