



People

HIDEO SUZUKI, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF KHS JAPAN

Half Japanese, half German

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From Osaka through Weihenstephan to Tokyo: Hideo Suzuki's plans were turned upside down when he took over from his father and spent almost 25 years making KHS Japan what it is today. His openness towards other cultures and mentalities and his genuine interest in other people have stood him in good stead throughout.

PHOTOGRAPHY / ILLUSTRATION

Frank Reinhold

Born and bred in Osaka, early in life Hideo Suzuki found out what it means when your own father has an extremely challenging job. Ted Suzuki was an entrepreneur who first imported American products and later KHS machines to

Japan and then sold them on to beverage producers. When not away on one of his many business trips, Suzuki Senior was often on the phone until late into the night. He told his children that this was because he had so many friends around the world. He also had them believe that his job was full of great adventure. “Business people from across the globe were always coming and going at our house. That’s why I developed an interest in other countries and cultures as a little boy,” says Hideo Suzuki. It’s thus no surprise to learn that he first wanted to be a pilot when he grew up.

Biochemistry, beer and Bavaria

As a businessman, his father was convinced that a technical career held great value. He of course wanted Hideo to go his own way but believed that a technical education was essential in doing so. After first studying biochemistry at the Tokyo University of Science, Hideo was then drawn to Munich. Here, he first worked in the traditional Spaten Brewery for twelve months before completing his master brewer’s diploma at the Technical University of Munich in Weihenstephan.

Four years in Bavaria meant early mornings, cold winter days of -15°C and, first and foremost, plenty of new experiences. Even though some things seemed so different to him so far from his native Japan, the newcomer kept an open and inquisitive mind. Instead of becoming caught up in the bubble of Japanese students, he sought contact with Germans. For him, this was the quickest and easiest way to learn German – or rather, Bavarian. Suzuki laughs. “As long as you’re having a beer together, communication isn’t a problem!”

One aspect of work in Germany that sometimes surprised him was that individual employees would suddenly disappear off on vacation, leaving their colleagues more or less at a loss as how to proceed. “In the Japanese work culture, harmony always takes priority. Nobody should have a problem with someone taking a day off. However, you always leave your

team with clear instructions as to what needs doing and inform your customers clearly and in good time of your absence.”

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Back to Japan

Suzuki's entry into the family firm wasn't planned: back in Japan, Hideo had been working for Kirin for eight years when his younger brother asked him for help. Their father, who had always seemed so strong, was fading at a time of fundamental change: KHS was increasingly converting the previously independent local import and sales companies into full subsidiaries on a global scale. In 2000, the future of Suzuki International suddenly seemed quite insecure. Hideo thus decided to give something back to the family who had made everything possible for him – and in the space of just three months he took over as managing director. Two years later, he set up the sales company KHS Japan – initially parallel to the previous firm that was responsible for service. All functions were then gradually transferred over to the new enterprise.

Machines like jewels

“If you want to sell plant equipment in Japan, you have to be prepared to meet the highest demands,” says Suzuki, emphasizing the particular characteristics of his home market. Before industry greats such as Suntory or Asahi decide on an investment, they meticulously scrutinize every single technical feature: drawings, process sequences, design philosophies and much more are all examined and analyzed down to the last detail. “Sometimes you get the feeling that customers would prefer to build their plant engineering themselves,” jokes Suzuki. “And when the machine is finally delivered, it mustn't have even the tiniest scratch on it.” In Germany, people understand that this has no impact on its ability to function. Yet in Japan a machine is seen as a precious jewel – and treated as such.

Whenever German colleagues visit production lines in Japan that have been up and running for many years, they often can't believe their eyes. “The machines look newer than the ones they've just installed,” claims Suzuki. He tends to see

things the German way: above all else, an industrial system has to work and perform its functions properly. “When it comes down to it, I’m half Japanese, half German,” he smiles.



“The special requests of our Japanese clients often later become global standards.”

Japan an initiator

One good thing about his native country is its perfectionism, he believes, for this is what drives innovation. “My clients’ special requests often later become global standards.

Automatic height adjustment on filling machines, for example – now long taken for granted – was actually initiated in Japan.”

Relations a source of energy

Now 63, Suzuki is active in plenty of professional associations – such as the [International Beer Convention](#), a network that’s linked prominent figures from business, science and brewing across national boundaries since 1968. This is hardly surprising, as his father made him aware of how important interpersonal relations are at an early age. He also taught him humility and showed him how to see situations from several different perspectives instead of becoming fixated on a single idea.

What Hideo Suzuki chiefly appreciates about KHS are the people. “We have colleagues all over the world, so you never feel left on your own. Sitting down with customers and colleagues at the end of a successful project as you would with good friends, enjoying a beer together and chatting about the next ideas: these are special moments for me that continue to motivate me time and again.”