

Norio Sasaki

*Give Them Credit for Tackling Challenges,
Don't Scold Them for Mistakes*

Norio Sasaki is a former head coach of the Japan Women's National Football Team (a.k.a., Nadeshiko Japan), renowned for leading the team to win the World Cup Championship in 2011. He resigned in March 2016, despite the public's hope for continuation. His organizational management theory, however, continues to inspire not only leaders in the world of sports but also top executives, as its applicability to business strategies is extremely effective.

Identify Strengths and Weaknesses to Draw Out Potential for Growth

The year 2008 marked the 30th anniversary of the founding of Japan's National Women's Football Team. In that milestone year, the team, which had never won a competition, seized the East Asian Football Federation (EAFF) Women's Championship (present-day EAFF Women's East Asian Cup) after winning all three games. This glorious headline was made only two months after Sasaki became the team's head coach.

Recalling those initial years, Sasaki comments, "In those days, women's football relied on power and speed, but the members of Nadeshiko Japan had superior skills of observation and attentiveness. I was confident that they could become World Champion if these advantages could be leveraged." The tactic Sasaki chose for the team was the "zone defense," whereby the defenders channel the opponents into the center from the outside. This strategy was diametrically opposite to what was standard at that time, but in fact best suited the capabilities of the team and its members.

"If the ball is lofted from the outer side, the players have to perform 'air fights' in front of the goal, which was not an advantageous situation for Japanese players who were generally shorter than their opponents. We pushed the defense line up to make the defense more compact, forcing our opponents into the packed inside area in order to gain possession of the ball, so that we could instigate a counter-attack. I assigned Homare Sawa to play 'volante' (defensive midfielder)

specifically for this strategy. She was excellent at gaining possession of the ball, and performed her best when going forward, facing the goal. But initially, when the new tactic was introduced, she was worried that she would lose her chance to play, being an offensive player."

The team's journey after Sasaki became head coach is impressive: In three consecutive competitions, the team was a finalist in three major international football tournaments. Their winning the World Cup in 2011 surprised the world, and as a result Sasaki became the first Asian recipient of the FIFA World Coach of the Year for Women's Football award.

Upgrading Collective Intelligence to Become a Winning Organization

Sasaki thinks coaching football is akin to operating a business: "A head coach's job is to prepare for the game, and although I choose which strategy to take, at the end of the day, it is individual players who make the decisions during a game." To be specific, for an organization to yield good results, leaders must draw out the strengths of the players and motivate them to tackle challenges, as well as coordinate individuals' efforts.

"For my first 18 months as head coach, I hammered into them basic theories and principles in order to establish a foundation for executing strategies. It was a 'triangular' approach, involving preparation, practice, and review, using an audio-visual aid. I would say that, at this stage, the team's staff took the initiative 80% of the time and the members, the remaining 20%."

During this time, Sasaki was careful not to scold the players all the time for their mistakes, so that they would not cringe. He also made sure not to discourage those who were motivated to boldly take on challenges, by lauding their pro-active attempts even if they failed.

The next step was to encourage the members to think individually but to discuss things as a team. "So, I let the members lead meetings and figure out for themselves what their challenges were and how to resolve them. We provided clues and support, but by this time, the members were taking the initiative 60% of the time and the staff, the remaining 40%." This transition motivated the members to start communicating with each other voluntarily,

which led to the inception of collective intelligence within the team. "We are all engaged in both defense and offense. Collective intelligence allowed them to connect with each other and perform 'social football.'"

All these years, Sasaki never lost his cool, thoroughly performed analyses, and provided extensive and logical explanations to his team. He also patiently waited for the members to grow. He respected his staff and listened to them. He also took time to study medicine, so as to understand the physical and psychological differences between men and women. These may be on every leader's to-do list, but it is never easy to put into practice. Sasaki talks about his experience somewhat nonchalantly, but "Nori-san," —as everybody calls him— is a gentle and patient man, equipped with exceptional coaching skills and the tenacity to make painstaking efforts. Otherwise, this winning organization with such prowess — which people describe as "Nadeshiko power" — would never have been born.

Where Sasaki will next demonstrate his coaching capability is not yet known. However, he is certainly a brilliant leader from whom we can expect great achievements that are well worth noting.



Norio Sasaki

Born in 1958, in Obanazawa City, Yamagata Prefecture, Japan. He played as a midfielder for several teams. After retiring as a player, he became head coach of Omiya Ardija in 1998, and then served for nine years as head coach of Japan Women's National Football Team, beginning in 2007, after becoming one of the team's coaches in 2006. His career is studded with great achievements: Nadeshiko Japan finished as one of the top four teams at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, were the victors at the EAFF Women's Championship (present-day EAFF Women's East Asian Cup) in 2008 and 2010, were champions of the FIFA Women's World Cup Germany 2011, Silver Medalists in the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, and runner-up in the FIFA Women's World Cup Canada 2015. In 2011, Sasaki became the first Asian recipient of the FIFA World Coach of the Year for Women's Football award.

