

# Takako Suwa: a 21<sup>st</sup> Century *Machi-Koba* Leader

Meet the charismatic Daiya Seiki president who rescued her father's company thanks to her innovative leadership skills.

Suwa until he suddenly passed away in 2004. That was when his energetic and extremely passionate daughter, Takako Suwa took up the reins. Although she had worked for her father's business in the past, at just 32 years of age and a full-time housewife at the time, she was suddenly thrust into a leadership position, answering the collective call of her father's employees. It was a huge challenge that she met head-on. Courageous and decisive, she made reforms that helped save the company. Just two years after taking over, its operating profits increased. Since then, things have continued to march along nicely, and the firm is now flourishing.

At a time when the population is shrinking, Suwa has remarkably managed to increase the workforce at her factory while also decreasing the average age of the employees from 53 to 38. Young workers receive constant training from older members of the team, who become their mentors. Senior operators are not forced to retire at 60 because she believes their experience and know-how are vital to a company that prides itself on the accuracy and reliability of its products.

Suwa likes to take a caring approach to management. New employees, for example, exchange correspondence on a daily basis, a "diary" with the president during their first month at the company. As well as helping her get to know them as individuals, it also gives fresh-faced recruits a better idea of how they are developing.

As a pioneer of diversity, she has modernized and rejuvenated the company while at the

same maintaining its traditions and culture. For that, she deserves a lot of credit. A gutsy, determined, and very passionate woman, she is widely admired for her innovative managerial approach and the way she manages to balance her job and family.

The charismatic Daiya Seiki president is constantly communicating with fellow machi-koba managers and leaders in Ota Ward. There is a real close bond between the numerous small factories in the area. Suwa plays an important role in what is a very warm and unified community.

Having now written and published a book which has been since made into a television miniseries, she has become a rather well-known figure in some circles. Because of this she is seen as an emblematic figure of the modern workingwoman and the new generation of brave female leaders in Japan. As a powerful role model and inspiring Tokyoite, Suwa is more than happy to pass on her wisdom to future generations. Her main piece of advice is simple: "We only have one life, so we had better do our best to make the most of it!"



Shoulder to shoulder with her employees, Suwa at work on the factory floor.

Takako Suwa, president of Daiya Seiki Co., Ltd.

An industrial powerhouse boasting the world's third-largest economy, Japan is a country known for its sophisticated market structure, efficient work-practices, and meticulous attention to detail when it comes to manufacturing. Famed for their high-quality and reliable products, Japanese brands are often studied and emulated by various companies around the globe. Such a reputation would not have been possible without the hard graft and unique skills displayed by workers at *machi-koba*.

A crucial component of the country's industrial success, machi-koba is the name given to small, factories in Japan usually operated by families or a handful of craftspeople. Though rarely in the limelight, the importance of these factories cannot be underestimated. There are thousands of them all over Tokyo. They can be found in the city's back streets, next to high-rise buildings, and sometimes in between or even inside houses. That is one of the beauties of Tokyo, it is a unique and diverse capital city where industrial zones, commercial districts, and residen-

tial areas all exist, however these zones are sometimes less distinct than they may appear in other cities.

One area of Tokyo with a wide range of machi-koba, often nestled in between houses, is Ota Ward, the gateway to Japan and home to Tokyo International Airport at Haneda. Here you will find Daiya Seiki Co., Ltd. a dynamic industrial parts manufacturing firm founded by Yasuo Suwa in 1964 that is currently garnering a lot of attention. It has a small, committed team that works together to produce precision gauges for transportation vehicles. The micro detailing required for these products can only be achieved by human hands. It is a perfect example of *monozukuri*, an almost ineffable and untranslatable Japanese term that literally means to make things, but in reality, goes well beyond that. It is like a philosophy with an emphasis on first-rate quality, intense scrupulousness, and *kaizen* (continuous improvement).

For over 40 years the company was run in a traditional Japanese manner by the highly-respected president Yasuo