

Obituary: Ikujiro Nonaka (1935–2025)

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Younger researchers and managers, we hope, will come after us, crossing the bridge we've created, continuously searching for knowledge – and wisdom.

Ikujiro Nonaka, *The Wise Company*

Professor Ikujiro Nonaka passed away on January 25, 2025. He was one of Japan's most distinguished management scholars whose groundbreaking work in knowledge management transformed how scholars and practitioners understand knowledge within organizations. Best known for developing the Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization (SECI) model of knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1990; Nonaka *et al.*, 1996), Nonaka laid the theoretical foundation for dynamic knowledge creation in firms (Nonaka *et al.*, 2000), deeply influencing academic research and business practices worldwide. During his golden years, with the updated SECI Spiral – which integrates Aristotle's phronesis and the thoughts of Husserl, Heidegger and Polanyi – Nonaka completed the upgrade from knowledge to wisdom. This, while elevating knowledge management to the level of management philosophy, made him a truly great thinker. However, his studies from wisdom to "goodness" are unfinished yet.

Born in Tokyo in 1935, Prof. Nonaka completed his undergraduate studies at Waseda University before earning his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. Over a distinguished career, he held academic positions at prestigious institutions, including Hitotsubashi University, where he served as Professor Emeritus, and the Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology. He also held visiting appointments at Harvard Business School, UC Berkeley, and leading universities across Europe and Asia.

Prof. Nonaka's work bridged Eastern and Western management thought, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge. His seminal book, *The Knowledge-Creating Company*, coauthored with Hirotaka Takeuchi (1995), provided a framework for understanding how knowledge evolves within organizations,



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shaping strategic decision-making and innovation processes (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 2019). At the core of his theory was the SECI model, which elucidates how organizations (and, thus, individuals) continuously transform and leverage knowledge. His research also introduced the concept of *ba*, a shared space for knowledge creation, and *phronesis* (i.e. practical wisdom) (Kase *et al.*, 2016; Nonaka and Toyama, 2007), underscoring the crucial role of leadership in knowledge-based management.

Prof. Nonaka's theories and related ideas not only influenced management theory but also found practical applications in corporate strategy, government policy and public administration, profoundly impacting them. Companies such as Toyota, Honda and Eisai integrated Nonaka's knowledge-creation framework into their innovation and organizational learning strategies. His work extended beyond business, influencing government institutions. His insights also shaped agile methodologies in software development, particularly the *Scrum* framework (an approach to project management), inspired by his article *The New Product Development Game* (Takeuchi and Nonaka, 1986). Moreover, his "middle-up-down management" concept (Nonaka, 1988) redefined leadership structures by emphasizing collaborative knowledge creation at all organizational levels. In December 2005, Prof. Nonaka founded – together with other colleagues – the Nonaka Institute of Knowledge (NIK) to provide customized and open executive education programs as well as human resource development programs for global business affairs.

Prof. Nonaka further strengthened the cultural dimension of knowledge management. He infused management with Japanese culture through, for example, the *bushido* spirit and the concept of *ba*. He also put emphasis on the belief attribute of knowledge. This can be seen in his latest works, such as *Empathy-driven Management* (Nonaka and Katsumi, 2020) and *Management by Eidetic Intuition* (Nonaka and Yamaguchi, 2022). His recent management theories, humanizing strategy and concept of dynamic duality have been applied globally.

Throughout his career, Prof. Nonaka received numerous accolades for his outstanding contributions to Academia, including the Purple Ribbon Medal from the Japanese government (in 2002), the Zuihoshō (i.e. the Order of the Sacred Treasure – in 2010) and the Eminent Scholar Award from the Academy of International Business (in 2012). Furthermore, he was the first Asian scholar elected to the Fellows Group of the Academy of Management and ranked number 20 in the Wall Street Journal's "Most Influential Business Thinkers" (in 2008). His contributions were recognized with Lifetime Achievement Awards from Thinkers50 (in 2013) and the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley (in 2017).

Prof. Nonaka leaves an extraordinary intellectual legacy that continues to shape scholarship and practice in knowledge management worldwide. He will be remembered not only for his pioneering theories but also for his interdisciplinary approach and ability to identify the connection between abstract concepts and real-world challenges. His influence will endure through the countless students, scholars and practitioners who continue to build upon his foundational work in organizational knowledge creation.

Further information on Prof. Nonaka's publications and Academic Honors can be found at <https://nonaka-ik.org/en/nonaka>

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