

Sumitomo Aphorisms Still Valid Today

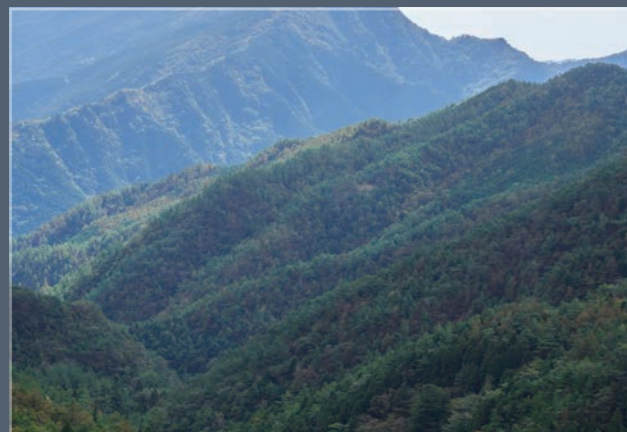
Many words of great wisdom have been passed down at Sumitomo during its four centuries in existence. Among the aphorisms embraced by our predecessors for conducting business with sincerity, many have retained their validity and worthiness down through the ages. Today these maxims form the core of the spirit that underlies all Sumitomo business operations.

“Repay with gratitude what was reaped from the land.”

Teigo Iba, the second Director General of Sumitomo, was deeply shaken on viewing the devastation Sumitomo’s mining operations caused to the mountains of Besshi from smoke pollution. “To leave Besshi’s mountains, to which we owe such a profound debt, so degraded would violate the natural order,” he reflected. “We have to atone for our reckless overcutting and return the mountains to their original verdant state, restoring the natural order.”

Based on his commitment to repay with gratitude what had been reaped from the land, Iba determined to restore, as possible, the mountains at Besshi. In 1894 he launched a massive reforestation project. His aspiration was carried on by his successor, Masaya Suzuki, the third Director General, and at peak times more than two million trees were planted each year. In this way, Sumitomo regenerated the forests at Besshi over a period spanning nearly a century.

In his later years, Iba, seeing the restored verdant mountains, is said to have commented that the reforestation of Besshi had been his “true calling.” What he accomplished was a forerunner of what we today refer to as corporate environmental measures.



The mountains at Besshi, at one time totally degraded, are today again lush following a 100-year restoration project.

“Bring benefit to others as you would to yourself.”

Sumitomo ardently seeks harmony with the public interest, firmly believing that its business operations must bring benefit not only to Sumitomo but also to the nation and all society. Saihei Hirose, the first Director General who carried out the modernization of the Besshi Copper Mine and achieved Besshi’s “industrial revolution,” declared at the time, “We must devote ourselves wholeheartedly to making our business flourish, and share the benefits with tens of millions of people.” Reaping the spoils of success is not enough; Sumitomo has a commitment, he proclaimed, to share all benefits with the citizens of Japan. In keeping with this thinking, Hirose established a smelter at a site in Sobiraki, in Niihama alongside the Seto Inland Sea, laying the foundation for the area’s development as a vital industrial center.

Hirose’s successor, Masaya Suzuki, was of similar mind. “We must put virtue first and profits second,” he said. “It is through virtue that we will reap our profits.” In this way, “bringing benefit to others as you would to yourself” corresponds to today’s CSR activities that strive, through business activities, to fulfill corporate responsibility and contribute to society. Hirose’s and Suzuki’s words thus symbolize Sumitomo’s philosophy even today.



Niihama smelter in 1890 (photo courtesy of Sumitomo Historical Archives)

“Always plan with a farsighted perspective”

Sumitomo embraces the philosophy that, in all business endeavors, planning should be undertaken meticulously – and always with an eye set long into the future. Our philosophy is that, even if positive results elude in the immediate term, we should always strive to bring a business endeavor to fruition over the course of two or even three generations.

The first Sumitomo Director General, Saihei Hirose, modernizer of the Besshi Copper Mine, is on record as having stated, “My task is to sow the seeds of business for the sake of many people. They in turn shall see their flowers bloom and later dine on the fruit they bear.” His successor, Teigo Iba, implemented Besshi’s grand reforestation plan spanning 100 years. The third Director General, Masaya Suzuki, embraced the same philosophy. Upon taking up his post, he said, “I intend to tread the just and proper path, working together with everyone for the good of the country 100 years into the future.”



Planning with a farsighted perspective is Sumitomo’s business philosophy passed down from the early days of the Besshi Copper Mine. (photo courtesy of Niihama City)

“True loyalty is disobeying the master’s order to bring him benefit.”

The words cited above were a maxim embraced by Saihei Hirose, the first Director General. True loyalty, they proclaim, calls for disobeying one’s ruler or superior at times when, if the order were carried out, the outcome would run counter to his interests. Hirose resolutely held to the position that instead of obsequiously following all orders, true loyalty lies in disobedience when deemed necessary and ultimately beneficial.

Sumitomo has a long tradition of encouraging a vigorous exchange of views and listening to others’ suggestions regardless of their positions in the hierarchy. The heads of the House of Sumitomo also respected this tradition. In 1828, Tomohiro, the ninth head, made this clear to those who served him. “At Sumitomo,” he told them, “regardless of age or rank, anyone with suggestions that they think would be beneficial to Sumitomo, no matter how modest, should speak up. Even if the suggestion is not adopted, I will be deeply grateful for the loyalty shown in making it. Never hesitate to offer up your opinions.”



Calligraphy by Hirose of his favorite maxim, set down in 1913, one year before his death (photo courtesy of Hirose History Museum, Niihama)