



Okage Sama De: I am What I am Because of You

By Corey M. Matsuoka, P.E., Chair CASE Executive Committee

Imagine being named the President of the Washington Bullets in 1991, a time when the franchise had fallen on lean times. Everyone is looking at you to turn things around. Then imagine you are a 29-year-old female trying to survive in a business (not unlike our own) that has traditionally been dominated by men. That is Susan O'Malley, the first female president of a professional sports franchise. Not only did she survive, but she also thrived. Susan oversaw the largest ticket revenue increase in the history of NBA franchises, and implemented innovative marketing and customer service initiatives that led to the highest renewal rate of season tickets ever by the franchise. When she stepped down as president of the Wizards (name changed) in 2007, owner Abe Pollin described her as his "right hand through the past 20 years."

At this year's ACEC Fall Conference, Susan was a keynote speaker and she shared her seven seminal 'rules' for leadership and life that guided her through her journey. At the end of her speech, she challenged the audience to think about what their 'rules' were.

For me, I do not think I have rules, as much as beliefs and values. As a fourth generation Japanese American growing up in Hawaii, my beliefs and values have been influenced by my Asian heritage and the assimilation of the local Hawaiian culture. From Japan...



better have this submittal complete, or there should be dead bodies on the ground."

From Hawaii...

1) **Aloha.** *A value of unconditional love.* With Hawaii being a mixing pot of races from east and west, I never thought of diversity as being a big challenge. However, I now realize that diversity goes beyond race and includes age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, etc. Aloha is the acceptance and inclusion of all of these differences.

2) **Ohana.** *Those who are family, and those you choose to call family.* My parent's friends, whom I have known since childhood, are still Auntie and Uncle. If you are familiar with Disney's Lilo & Stitch, you know that Ohana means family, and family means no one is left behind. They are still taking care of me today.

3) **Kuleana.** *One's personal sense of responsibility.* As a young principal, I shadowed my boss on a claim negotiation. We had made a few mistakes, and we were going to pay a lot of money. I remember my boss saying this was one of the hardest things he had to do. I assumed it was because of the money, but that was not it. It was because we made a mistake. The money was the easy part. We were wrong, and we needed to fix it. That was never a question. It was our responsibility, our kuleana.

4) **Malama.** *The value of stewardship, to take care.* Living on an island, we take care of our home, as it is the only one we have. As a family, we are often doing service projects such as cleaning up our parks and beaches, removing invasive species from the land and ocean, and educating the public about sustainability.

5) **Pono.** *The value of integrity, of rightness and balance.* At a recent camp, my son's Scout Master was telling us a story of his son who was a good athlete but had not played baseball since intermediate school. As a senior, the baseball coach was looking for more talent and really wanted his son on the team. The son declined and, when the Scout Master asked him why, he said it would not be fair for him to take the place of a classmate who worked all year to be on that team. It was the pono thing to do.

These values and beliefs that I hold dear are because of those that came before me. They showed me what was important and how to be a productive and valued member of society. I hope that I'm doing the same for my children and my staff. Thank you to my parents, my bosses, and my mentors.

Okage Sama De. ■



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1) **Okage Sama De.** *I am what I am because of you.* Show respect for those who came before you and helped you to get where you are. On my desk, I have a copy of the handwritten notes containing the basic concepts and organizational bases on which our company was founded. It is dated 1959, the year SSFM was incorporated and written by one of the company's co-founders. Our company is what it is today because of our founders.

2) **Gaman.** *Enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity.* Initially, I worked as a structural engineer and I wanted to quit after only three months. With a tough boss, long hours, and stress about my design skills (or lack thereof), I was worried that something I designed could collapse and hurt someone. I confided in my father (who was also an engineer) that I was thinking of quitting, hoping for an intellectual discussion about my options. He gave me no sympathy and told me to toughen up or "gaman." Fortunately, I listened to him, and I am still here today.

3) **Ganbaru.** *To do one's best.* This Japanese term is closely related to gaman, relating to persistence and tenacity. Where it differs is that ganbaru also encapsulates the ideals of doggedness and hard work. In practice, it can even mean doing more than one's best. Early in my career, we would stay at work until the job was complete. Sometimes that meant staying overnight to meet a deadline. The bosses would joke, "Tomorrow morning we