“Top 50” Japanese Business Terms

Aimai - 曖昧
Ambiguity or vagueness; often intentional in Japanese communication to maintain harmony.

Amakudari - 天下り
Literally 'descent from heaven'; the practice of retired bureaucrats joining private sector firms.

Chorei - 朝礼
Morning assembly or briefing to align teams and communicate daily objectives.

Dantotsu - 断トツ
Being far and away the best; used to describe superior performance.

Gemba - 現場
The actual place where value is created—factory floor, retail site, or front line.

Genchi Genbutsu - 現地現物
Go and see for yourself; principle of going to the source to understand problems.

Giri / on - 義理 / 恩
Two related core concepts in Japanese business and social culture, shaping relationships of obligation, gratitude, and reciprocity. 義理 (Giri) refers to a sense of social obligation or duty, where one is expected to repay favors or kindness in a formal or customary way — even if personal feelings are neutral. In business, giri often underlies gift-giving, attendance at events, or reciprocal gestures meant to maintain harmony and respect. 恩 (On) signifies a deeper, often emotional sense of indebtedness for kindness or support received. It represents a long-term bond where the recipient feels personally committed to repaying the favor — sometimes over years — through loyalty, service, or future help.

Gyosei Shido - 行政指導
Administrative guidance; informal but influential government instructions to companies.

Hansei - 反省
Reflection or introspection, especially after mistakes or failures.

Honne - 本音
One’s true feelings or honest opinion, often hidden to preserve social harmony. In a business setting it can be the justification for *not* sharing important but distressing information, from a simple as “no” to as complex as an upcoming restructuring. It is not

meant to mislead – it is an intentional omission for the benefit of the listener. See also Tatemae, which is the speaker's publicly expressed opinion.

Hoshin Kanri - 方針管理

Policy deployment method aligning strategy with day-to-day execution.

Ishin Denshin - 以心伝心

Tacit communication; understanding without words, common in Japanese teams.

Jinji Ido - 人事異動

Personnel rotation or HR movement across departments and functions. A person becomes an expert at the Company as a higher priority than becoming an expert at a particular function. This helps with employment stability, as employees are more broadly (but less deeply) trained. When working with overseas counterparts in global markets, this lack of depth in their function puts them at a disadvantage.

Jishuken - 自主研

Voluntary study groups or improvement circles in companies.

Jocho - 情緒

Emotion or sentiment; often affects decision-making and relationships.

Kaikaku - 改革

Radical or transformational change in contrast to continuous improvement.

Kaizen - 改善

Continuous improvement; small, incremental changes for better performance.

Kanban - 看板

Scheduling system for lean and just-in-time manufacturing.

Karoshi - 過労死

Death from overwork; a recognized workplace risk in Japan. The company commits to the individual for a lifetime of stable employment, and employees are expected to do whatever the company needs, which can lead to Karoshi.

Keiretsu - 系列

Corporate groupings with interlocking relationships and shareholdings.

Kikubari - 気配り

Sensitivity to others' needs; proactive thoughtfulness. Kikubari, for an American, for example, can be providing positive feedback about their work performance.

Kone wo tsukuru - コネを作る

Literally **"to make connections"**. Refers to the act of building personal networks or relationships that can later provide opportunities or favors in a business or social context. *Kone* (コネ) is a borrowed abbreviation of the English word *connection*, and in Japanese usage, it often carries a nuance of **relationship-based advantage** or **informal networking**.

KPI - 重要業績評価指標

Key Performance Indicators; increasingly used in Japanese firms practicing a hybrid management approach balancing Japanese management style with Western management style to be more competitive in global markets.

Kyosei - 共生

Living and working together for the common good; corporate social responsibility.

Monozukuri - ものづくり

Art of making things with pride, skill, and continuous improvement.

Mottainai -もったいない

Sense of regret over waste; a sustainability mindset.

Naiyou - 内容

Contents or substance; often used in reports and planning documents.

Nemawashi - 根回し

Preliminary groundwork or informal consensus-building before formal decisions. Important decisions take longer, but once made, there is already alignment. This contrasts with rapid decision making followed by alignment, which you find with empowered global leadership operating in fast-moving markets.

Nemoto Kaigi - 根本会議

Root-level or fundamental meeting to address core issues.

Obeya - 大部屋

'Big room'; project management space for real-time collaboration.

Omoiyari - 思いやり

Empathy or consideration for others, thoughtfulness; essential in team environments.

Ongaeshi - 恩返し

Definition: The act of repaying a favor or kindness received. Rooted in the concept of 恩 (on) — long-standing personal indebtedness — ongaeshi reflects the Japanese cultural value of showing gratitude through reciprocal actions. In business, this can take the form of loyalty to a mentor, returning business opportunities, or long-term support for a partner or client.

Ringisho - 稟議書
Formal written proposal document used in the ringi system.

Ringi Seido - 稟議制度
Consensus-based decision-making system involving multiple approvals.

Sakidori - 先取り
Anticipation or taking initiative ahead of time.

San Gen Shugi - 三現主義
The three reals: real place, real thing, real situation—practical problem solving.

Sarariman (Salaryman) - サラリーマン
White-collar salaryman; symbol of Japanese corporate work culture.

Sempai / Kohai - 先輩・後輩
Senior-junior relationship foundational to organizational hierarchy. Think of Japanese corporate titles and their corresponding levels like a military hierarchy, with corresponding deference and formality.

Senmonka - 専門家
Specialist or expert; used for internal consultants or technical leaders.

Setsumeikai - 説明会
Briefing session or explanatory meeting for new initiatives.

Shikata ga nai - 仕方がない
It can't be helped; acceptance of uncontrollable circumstances.

Shokuba - 職場
Workplace or job site.

Shunto - 春闘
Annual spring labor negotiations between unions and employers.

Shuchu - 集中
Concentration or focus; often emphasized in operational excellence.

Tatemae - 建前
Public stance or façade used to maintain harmony.

Teian - 提案
Proposal or suggestion; often used in quality circles.

Teian Seido - 提案制度

Suggestion system encouraging continuous improvement.

TQM - 総合的品質管理

Total Quality Management; applied widely in Japanese industry.

Yokoten - 横展開

Horizontal deployment of best practices across departments.

Zangyo - 残業

Overtime work; part of Japan’s long-hours culture.

Zisshu - 実習

Practical training or field study; often part of development programs.