
“Nemawashi” A Technique to Gain Consensus in Japanese Management Systems: An Overview

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ABSTRACT:

“Nemawashi” is an activity to build support for a project or decision through communication in advance mainly to gain consensus. The Japanese term “Nemawashi” comes from the gardening activity of nurturing and preparing the ground to transplant, and it says that without a proper Nemawashi, a plant transplanted to new soil may die. The principle of gardening is much applicable to organizations and people who require nurturing prior to an official declaration or a new course of action / decision. This paper gives a detailed description of “Nemawashi” technique as one of the important decision making tools prevalent in Japanese Management Systems and practices. Even though the “Nemawashi” process is viewed as time consuming by inviting more members of the organization to endorse on a project / decision it still ranks high in appreciation for its nature of participatory management with collective decision making process in an organization.

Key Words:

Nemawashi, Nurturing the Roots, Consensus, Decision Making, Japanese Management Systems

INTRODUCTION:

The origins of Japanese Management Systems present the view that history and culture play an important role in the most of the current Japanese Management System. Some of the possible roots and their characteristics related to Japanese business practices include Confucian philosophy (respect for elders, loyalty, harmony), Buddhism (humility, work ethic, working for collective good), Bushido (obligation, duty, honour). And the practices of rice farming village communities in pre-modern Japan provide insights into the origins of many key characteristics of modern business practices such as paternalism and collective behaviour.

POWER / AUTHORITY AND DECISION MAKING:

In most cultures the power / authority, responsibility are associated with the significance of the decisions and their impact on the organization and the environment. In some cultures power of an individual is demonstrated by making decisions individually in other cultures those in positions of authority are expected to delegate decision making to a defined group or at least reach a consensus like in Japanese organizations. However, final decisions that emerge reflect

the different amounts of power mobilized by the parties in competition. Decision making can therefore be seen as a critical process in which outcomes are a function of the balancing of various power vectors (Keeley 2001: p.154).

THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS:

A decision is supposed to be convincing, reasonable, should have a validity and needs to contain built-in justifications and excuses if it results in unexpected outcomes (Keeley 2001: p.154). The process of decision making is a set of interactions through which demands are processed into outputs (Pettigrew 1972). Decision makers are expected to produce outcomes that are consonant with their own or their system's goals, and the decisions are influenced by power in the organization and by corporate communication. Decision makers strive for mutually acceptable solutions countering with different values, personalities, backgrounds leading to delay in process and conflicts. While deciding on the most suitable decision making method, it is important to consider the real need of full participation as it is a time consuming and causes unnecessary delay.

Managerial activities may range from setting of goals and targets for the entire business enterprise to specific decisions regarding day-to-day activities. Some of them may have only short-term implications, while others may have long-term implications on the enterprise. In organizations managerial decisions can be broadly classified into three categories, namely, strategic, tactical and operational decisions. And traditionally organizations count on three different types of decisions:

- 1. Strategic:** relate to the identification of long term interests and means of achieving goals.
- 2. Organizational:** relate to the way different aspects of a group being arranged to become more efficient.
- 3. Operational:** relate to the way employees of an organization chose to work on daily basis. It is observed that it is important to seek maximum of participation on agreement for strategic decisions as they have impact on long term goals of an organization.

THE PROCESS OF CONSENSUS BUILDING IN DECISION MAKING:

Arietta and Wallace (2000) define consensus as "a journey and a destination". It is said that as a process, consensus is the means by which groups can productively resolve issues, make choices or develop strategies. It is a cooperative process in which all group members participate and agree to support a decision in the best of the interest favouring an organization. The consensus process is often referred to as "consensus building", and it is a journey of preparing participants to make a decision. In consensus, the input of every participant is carefully considered and there is a good faith effort to address all legitimate concerns. (Dressler, 2006).

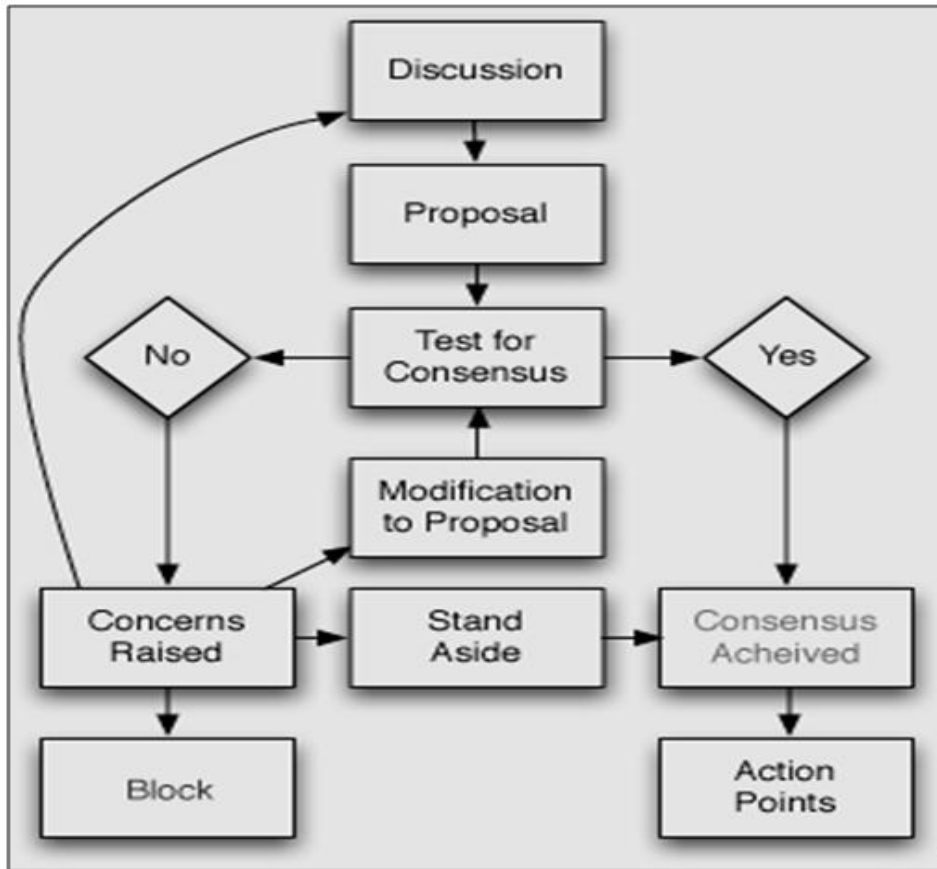


Figure: 1 – Consensus Flowchart

Source : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Consensus-flowchart.png>

JAPANESE MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION PROCESS:

The Japanese corporate communication system is anchored in the socio-cultural values of the society as a whole the effective corporate communication system is related to the high level of productivity and technological innovation (Erez 1992). Communication networks in a Japanese corporation are highly complex formal and informal systems with top-down, bottom-up, horizontal and diagonal channels (Erez 1992: 50). Ballon (1988) states that in contrast to the linear pattern with a definite point of origin for the communication flow and the decision making process, in the Japanese case the pattern is circular, whereby any single point in a circle can become the origin (in Keeley 2001, p. 149).

THE CONCEPT OF NEMAWASHI:

“Nemawashi” is a Japanese term for preparing the ground and it is a basic technique of gardening. In gardening, it means “to dig around the roots of a tree to prepare it for transplantation”. The term “Nemawashi” comprises of two words *Ne = roots; Mawasu = go*

around, it is often translated as “laying the groundwork” and it is deeply embedded into the Japanese organizational culture.

In a business context, the concept of “Nemawashi” helps to lay the groundwork to take a good decision by integrating the key issues and concerns of stakeholders into a recommendation or a proposal before making it an official decision. It is a consensus building technique prior to the meeting that aims at removing obstacles in decision making or approval of a proposal from the audience. This cannot be taken as lobbying because with lobbying there is an involvement of unprofessional conduct of politics and manipulation. In the “Nemawashi” process, people use informal meetings to seek approval so that the process can take less time to get everyone at same level of understanding and more so it fits into the culture norms of collectivist society of Japanese.

THE PROCESS OF NEMAWASHI:

The primary reason of following a “Nemawashi” technique is to maintain a harmonious environment among the employees. In practice, it means that the groundwork for a new proposal must be carefully prepared in advance if it is expected to take root, survive and prosper. This preparation includes talking with those affected by a new proposal, getting their reaction and feedback, and modifying the proposal accordingly. The decision making process through “Nemawashi” technique is diffuse, recursive, nonlinear, and multi-step. The steps listed below present a more structured picture of the process but in practice the process can be more informal. One very formal type of “Nemawashi” is the pre-meeting, which takes place before a structured meeting. In a pre-meeting, any issue /s planned for discussion in the structured meeting that might prove to be controversial are discussed in detail ahead of time. Any new project or a proposal that is going to be presented can be floated in the pre-meeting, in order to avoid any surprises during the main meeting. The key concentration of the “Nemawashi” meetings is to explain the proposal or idea that is being promoted, and assess the reactions from audience for rejecting or passing. It is important to take note of their reactions such as some present specific suggestions for improving it, some are indifferent with their suggestions or they are hinting that it can be accepted.

NEMAWASHI IN PRACTICE:

The best way to conduct these small one-on-one meetings is to schedule them at the end of the day for about fifteen minutes. The presenter will eventually spend a fair amount of time meeting with everyone, but the key is everyone else would invest only their fifteen minutes. If the presenter receives contradictory inputs or if two stakeholders have differences of opinions, the presenter brings them together to work out a resolution in private, so that the final proposal has the support from both. If their differences prove to be irreconcilable, the presenter brings the matter to the decision-makers for further guidance.

For a person who is pursuing this process for the first time, it may seem a little onerous to explain and schedule the meetings repetitively. However, these meetings conducted for “Nemawashi” process are fairly short and tend to fit easily into people’s schedules. Once an

organization uses this method consistently over time, it will rarely be necessary to schedule meetings for long periods to take decisions. It is observed that in “Nemawashi” system it’s enough to stop by a person’s desk, and ask if they have a few minutes, and then go ahead and proceed to run through the proposal and collect feedback. The total time used by the average program manager will be about the same as it was under the old system when one considers the amount of time spent preparing the presentation, attending a meeting, receiving and incorporating feedback, and then, having to go back to another meeting to get a decision and approval.

CONCLUSION:

Nemawashi is a technique to get everybody on board right from the beginning of any proposal / decision making process. It is evident that in the process the responsible employee is building agreements and consensus for the final decision. The result of effective use of “Nemawashi” is that by the time a proposal is finalised, the problem or the root cause is clearly being identified through the one-on-one meetings and pre-meetings of this technique. This technique has given greater adaptability in institutions like Toyota and in recent times a lot of non-Japanese business entrepreneurs and managers started to appreciate it. The main fear people have of “Nemawashi” is that it may give chance for decisions to be made behind the scenes under the disguise of consensus. The decision making process depends on the situation that is being solved and requirement of building consensus is also depending on the situation. According to the Toyota way the art of “Nemawashi” brings success to an organization and it helps to gain consensus slowly but facilitates to implement rapidly. To make this possible, organizational and physical setting must be such as to encourage regular and frequent face-to-face interaction and it calls for an organizational culture of sharing a strong sense of understanding and values among participants.

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