

Nemawashi (根回し)

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Nemawashi is a consensus-building technique commonly used in Japanese society, especially in the business and political world (Fetters, 1995). It is also defined as a process by which an informal agreement or conclusion is made prior to final and official decision making on a particular issue (Keys & Miller, 1984). *Nemawashi* is often used to bring an individual or group idea to an organizational decision. In *nemawashi*, there is usually a facilitator who works with the group, especially directly affected superiors and stakeholders, to secure their cooperation and achieve group consensus (Fetters, 1995; Wolfe, 1992).

Saito (1982) compared *nemawashi* with similar concepts in other cultures such as *pre-arrangement* in English, *barangay* in Filipino, and *musyawara* in Indonesian. However, the author emphasized that *nemawashi* is unique to Japanese culture and different from these concepts, especially because it is rooted in the cultural value of *wa* (和) or group harmony. Saito (1982, p. 212) described *nemawashi* as a “group harmony, a *wa*-oriented behavior mechanism” that aims to “establish transactional relationships among people.”

Nemawashi is an agricultural metaphor that originates from the act of transplanting a tree. The Chinese character for “ne” (根) literally means root and “mawashi” (回し) means turning around. Prior to transplanting a large tree, a gardener performs groundwork by digging fine roots around the main root to make the ends of the roots in a smooth and round shape. With this preparation, the tree can successfully adapt to a new environment and grow healthily when it is transplanted (Saito, 1982). Similarly, in a decision-making

process, careful and meticulous groundwork, including obtaining informal approval and cooperation before circulation of the proposal, enables successful consensus building (Ala & Cordeiro, 2001).

According to Saito (1982), *nemawashi* has a dual structure. The upper level is administrative and task-oriented, while the base level is relationship oriented and characterized by the Japanese concept of *wa* (harmony). The base level creates an interpersonal communication and the proper atmosphere that encourages honest exchanges of ideas and reinforces the sense of loyalty to the group to which participants belong.

In order to successfully carry out *nemawashi*, it is critical to follow the right steps (Saito, 1982). First, an appropriate individual to carry out *nemawashi* for the group must be selected with proper attention and caution. This person, the facilitator of the process of *nemawashi*, needs to be fully aware of the desires of the decision makers and authorities, while having clear understanding of the issue and objective. In addition, the facilitator needs to have strong interpersonal and communication skills in order to establish trusting relationships and interpersonal transactions, often through personal and informal communications. The facilitator needs to be able to read between the lines and sense concerns or objections from others that are not expressed overtly. The next step is exploration to assess what other people think about the objective and whether consensus is achievable. If the majority of the group agrees with the objective and consensus appears to be reachable, then the facilitator will try to persuade individuals with opposing opinions or doubt, often through appealing to their sense of camaraderie and loyalty to the group and emphasizing intended benefit to the group as a whole. After the consensus is achieved, the

ringi system (see the entry on Ringi) is used to confirm and formalize the decision that was agreed upon (Saito, 1982).

Nemawashi has both pros and cons. One obvious downside is the amount of time it takes to make a decision. This might be especially frustrating for individuals who are from a culture with a top-down decision-making style. For example, in many American organizations, decision making tends to be more top-down than in Japan and leaders are expected to make decisions, although an overly authoritarian approach is not accepted. Rochelle Kopp (2012, personal communication), the president of Japan Intercultural Consulting, noted that it is common for Western managers working in Japanese organizations to complain that they are not given enough authority to make decisions on their own, feeling that they look weak as leaders. Another disadvantage of *nemawashi* is that it can potentially inhibit open discussions because of the group pressure that hinders a frank expression of opposing ideas (Saito, 1982). Avoidance of debate and prioritization of group harmony are characteristics that distinguish *nemawashi* from consensus building in many Western countries (e.g., Netherlands, Germany) where consensus is achieved

through active discussions and negotiations (Fetters, 1995; Kopp, 2012).

Nevertheless, because *nemawashi* can build all parties' commitment to the project in advance, it can promote smooth and effective implementation. Furthermore, it can give individuals a sense of participation in the decision-making process, create a cooperative atmosphere, and enhance group solidarity (Saito, 1982).

SEE ALSO: Decision Making; Groupthink; Ringi

References

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