

Creating Group Consensus

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

I witnessed an interesting scene years ago. One of my Japanese neighbors was punishing her child by shutting him outside of their home. Crying and pounding on the door, the boy was frantic to be let back in. His mother sternly warned him that he couldn't come back into the house until his behavior improved. For the child, being banished from his family — his group — was about the worst punishment imaginable.

When I was a child, the punishment levied by my American parents was just the opposite: I was "grounded." This meant that I could not go out and play with my friends; I was confined to the house. Sometimes I would be grounded for a weekend or several weeks. Apart from attending school, going to piano lessons or the dentist, I had to be at home. Figuratively, I was on the other side of the front door pounding to get out.

In Japan the group is all important. This includes work groups, hobby groups, neighborhood associations, and so forth. One is brought up with the sense that being banished from a group for any reason is one of the tragedies of life. School groups are so solidified that middle-school class reunions are not unusual even for people in their 50s and older. I sometimes think back to the Japanese boy pounding on the door to get into his house and think that it must be elements such as this in an upbringing that reinforce the importance of belonging.

Although my American friends and I formed groups, group identity was



much weaker. Our individual identity was more important. We joined and quit groups freely, and if we felt uncomfortable in a group activity, there was no real shame in bowing out. Although there are college and high-school reunions, I don't know anyone who attends reunions of their elementary or middle-school

classmates, not to mention on a yearly basis.

Groupism is quite naturally fostered in Japan and has many positive aspects. For instance, it is not unusual when a Japanese group goes out for dinner that after the first person orders something, everyone orders pretty much the same thing.

Or, quite opposite from my experiences in the West, when a group plans an outing involving mountain climbing even the members who don't like this type of activity will attend in order to spend time with the group. The activity itself is not the top priority — being together is.

In the United States and Europe, it is often hard to get a group of people to agree to participate in the same activity. We may plan a picnic at the beach, but several members will inevitably decide not to come along because they don't like picnics or they dislike the ocean. They will join us next time if the activity is something more to their tastes. The way of spending the time, in other words, seems to be valued more than the group experience.

What confuses me, though, is the frequent use of the phrase "group consensus" in reference to Japan. We are told that the Japanese have a system of group consensus and this is what causes decision making to take so much time. Everyone must agree to a policy. I am told that this is a much more democratic system than the top-down management style in many American companies, where the person with power makes the final decisions.

Another word which is usually coupled with the phrase group consensus is "nemawashi." This expression refers to the traditional process of cutting the roots of a tree a year or so before moving it, in order to prepare it for the move. Today, "nemawashi" alludes to the process of informing a group individually before starting something or making an important decision. It creates the group consensus.

My dictionary defines the meaning of consensus as "general agreement or accord." Although I have worked in several large Japanese corporations, I have never come across anything

that I would call "group consensus" even though decisions under that label were constantly being made. Business management and even group decisions always appeared to be top down, even more so than in the United States. I've grown to see the process of "nemawashi" as a kind of hard-armed back scene negotiations. It always appeared that once something was decided, no one dared to come up with another idea or to disagree. I view this as a type of pressured compliance, quite the opposite of consensus.

I came face to face with this situation during my early days in Japan. I was the only foreigner at a company and when suggestions were asked for at meetings, I was full of comments and new ideas. These were met with grim silence from my colleagues. I was later advised that it was out of order to speak up in this way. When discussion meetings are held, often the decision has already been reached — the meeting being merely a formalized ritual. I was told rather discretely by one of the staff that if I wanted to keep my job, I'd better keep my ideas to myself.

Perhaps the phrase "group consensus" is just a problem of

semantics, just another item in a long list of mistranslations that have piled up over the years. In an old English textbook I have seen, the Japanese word used for what we call chipmunk is squirrel. The word commonly used for a pigeon in Japan is dove. Hip, pronounced "hi-ppu" in Japanese, means buttocks, not at all the same area of anatomy that we Westerners think of when we use the word.

But if mistranslation is the case, the word "consensus" is given a misleading nuance to what seems to be automatic or even involuntary acceptance of decisions. Meetings to decide policy are usually fully choreographed and scripted before they start.

In any case, there is an undeniable consensus in business-world-Japan about the impossibility of going against what the leaders have decided. No protests, no complaints, no alternative possibilities are easily brought up, except perhaps in extreme cases by labor unions.

A young ex-employee of Japan Railways explained to me that unless one has a really good reason to go against his seniors' decisions, it is common sense to say nothing. He added that if young employees like himself have new ideas they can talk informally with a senior about them, but they should never mention them at a meeting. He warned that if the idea is really a new one, it is likely to make you look like you are criticizing the system that is in place, the very system your superiors built. This, he assured me, is not a good idea.

It strikes me that finding "group consensus" may be considerably facilitated in Japan due to a delicate kind of holding back on the part of employees. JTI

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