

ENHANCING WORKPLACE CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN MALAYSIA: LESSONS FROM JAPAN'S CONSENSUS-BUILDING PRACTICE OF NEMAWASHI IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

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Abstract: *This study examines the conflict-mitigating potential of 'Nemawashi', a Japanese consensus-building practice, in Malaysian workplaces. In Malaysia, conflict often results from gaps in communication and misaligned goals between employees and management, which affects the company's performance. 'Nemawashi' advocates informal dialogues in advance and can be applied during scenarios like negotiating workplace policies or arising disputes over job assignments to gain consensus on both parties of a dispute. By building common understanding and securing agreement up front, this practice aligns with the cultural values of harmony and fulfils statutory obligations, namely Sections 18 and 20 of the Industrial Relations Act 1967. However, it may face resistance to change since each workplace has different dynamics and consensus-building calls for training. Recommendations include embedding 'Nemawashi' in company policies, holding consensus-building skills development workshops, and establishing open communication channels. This strategy fosters a collaborative Nemawashi', Workplace Conflict and Industrial Relations and proactive working environment, benefiting Industrial Relations in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Judiciary, strike laws and industrial actions*

Introduction

Based on the study by Makhbul (2021), workplace disputes arise when the acceptance and understanding of the organisation's goals vary from someone to another. For instance, when an organisation decides on a policy to enhance customer satisfaction, some workers will think of it as good news. At the same time, others will consider it an annoying addition, quickly leading to disharmony at work. Furthermore, workplace conflict statistics from Jeremy (2024) show that 49% of conflicts at the workplace are contributed to by personality clashes and ego conflicts, 34% by workplace stress, and 33% by an overload of work. These statistics demonstrate that workplace conflicts are complicated, pointing out interpersonal dynamics, emotional pressures, and operational demands as major contributors. The Malaysian workplace, with various cultural and social backgrounds in its midst, may also further these conflicts due to differences in communication and expectations between everyone. Therefore, the top management of the organisation should master communication skills when employees have conflicts in the workplace so that the opposing parties can resolve their disputes fairly and meet their respective requirements, which is the way to resolve the conflict or negotiate. Worker relations and conflict resolution techniques have been promoted globally to solve workplace disputes, such as the Thomas-Kilmann conflict management model: avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating (Herrity, 2024). If the workplace conflict is not resolved well in the organisation, it can raise fundamental challenges impacting productivity, employee satisfaction, and organisational effectiveness. The workforce faces rapidly changing job conditions worldwide, so acquiring and applying effective dispute resolution abilities is vital for organisations seeking to develop their people, build strong connections, and improve performance.

Besides that, organisations' working environments in Malaysia face workplace conflict issues like uncertainty between accountability and authority, job stress, and workplace bullying. According to Dansereau (2024), this issue occurs due to power struggles between employees because it is unclear who is responsible for which tasks. For example, suppose two employees are assigned overlapping tasks without clear boundaries and job titles. In that case, they may feel the other is overstepping or failing to contribute to the jobs, resulting in conflicts at work. Nevertheless, inadequate employees for organisations result in massive work tasks, prolonged hours of labour, and a lack of balance between work and personal life, which have increased job stress and exhaustion among Malaysian employees, exacerbating workplace friction and disputes (Morhan, 2024). According to the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), psychological concerns in work settings are crucial and sometimes disregarded. The absence of proper psychological education for healthcare and security employees, as well as the cultural prejudice associated with concerns regarding mental health, worsen these issues. MEF has urged cooperative actions between the government, companies, and trade unions to address these difficulties and prevent the danger of severe influences on employees, including decreased employee productivity and increasing the rate of suicides (Tilo, 2022).

Moreover, according to Chan et al. (2019), people recognise relatively little regarding the seriousness of Malaysian workplace bullying, even though the fact that it is becoming recognised as a serious threat to public health in the workforce. Based on Reddy (2023), a poll conducted in 2020 presents that around 65% of Malaysian employees have encountered workplace bullying. The poll discovered that verbal harassment was the most prevalent type of workplace harassment, after emotional harassment and physical violence. It also found that

workplace bullying has become more widespread in private industry (68%) than in the public sector (54%). It showed women to be at greater risk than males to encounter harassment in the workplace, with 70% of female workers reporting bullying instead of 58% of men in the workforce. Then, it revealed that many sufferers of workplace bullying remain silent about the incidences, with just 7% reporting their experience to their superiors or management. The situation exists because of various factors, like fear of reprisal, a lack of confidence in the reporting system, and the belief that nothing would be done about it. According to Robinson and Smith (2024), over time, these problems can lead to psychological issues for the person who is bullied, starting to appear with some symptoms of mental health problems such as insomnia, depression, anxiety, stress, and social and economic effects such as absences from medical leave and resignation.

Globally, the prevalence of workplace conflicts necessitates methods that encourage collaboration and understanding to solve them. One such method is ‘Nemawashi’, a Japanese practice emphasising informal groundwork before deciding major company policies and plans (Kato et al., 2022). Compared with other aggressive approaches to conflict resolution, this strategy focuses on collaboration, a common understanding, and participation in decision-making, providing beneficial insights for promoting unity and cooperation in workplaces (Chang, 2023). This approach involves consulting all stakeholders and encouraging open dialogue to ensure their concerns and ideas are acknowledged and incorporated into the process, preventing them from becoming conflicts. ‘Nemawashi’ aligns well with addressing issues like personality clashes, work stress, and communication barriers highlighted in global workplace statistics. Applying ‘Nemawashi’ can resolve differences in styles and expectations in communication among the diverse workforce in Malaysia. For example, organisations could reduce conflict over undefined roles and expectations by involving the employees in the development of defining their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, with ‘Nemawashi’, empathetic communication and mutual respect encourage the root causes of job stress and workplace bullying to be addressed in Malaysian workplaces. Through the creation of consensus and emphasising inclusivity, this method helps managers create a harmonious environment where differences are respected, a more supportive and safe work environment that is sensitive to cultural needs and attuned to organisational goals.

Although many studies have discussed workplace conflict resolution methods, there is still a lack of research that has explored in depth the possible adaptation of Japanese cultural approaches such as Nemawashi in the context of industrial relations in Malaysia (Bakhtiar et al., 2016; Kamal et al., 2020), which is pluralistic and multi-racial. Furthermore, this early consensus-based approach has rarely been discussed in terms of its practical effectiveness in supporting social dialogue, reducing confrontation between employers and employees, and building a harmonious working environment. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by assessing the potential for integrating Nemawashi principles into workplace conflict resolution strategies, particularly in improving efficiency, acceptability, and procedural fairness in industrial relations management in Malaysia.

Discussion

Benefits of Applying ‘Nemawashi’ in Industrial Relations

The ‘Nemawashi’ approach offers numerous benefits when applied in industrial relations, especially within diverse and dynamic workplaces. By encouraging early involvement, informal discussions, and shared understanding, this method not only strengthens communication but also builds trust and unity across all levels of an organisation. It supports better decision-making, increases employee commitment, and promotes smoother operations. The following sections outline the key advantages of implementing ‘Nemawashi’ in enhancing workplace harmony and organisational effectiveness.

Improve Decision-Making Effectiveness

‘Nemawashi’ can improve the organisation’s decision-making effectiveness by collecting unique viewpoints from different talents. According to Muscad (2024), this team-based approach guarantees that choices consider all aspects of the problem. Gathering all stakeholders’ suggestions can drive more innovative and effective decisions to improve the project’s success rate and smooth conduct. Based on Clifford (2024), Toyota has applied and mixed ‘Nemawashi’ as one of the principles in the Toyota Production System as a first phase of the decision-making process to collect employee opinions and obtain their consent on the organisational decisions by sharing information about the upcoming modifications within the company. This approach encourages people to collect and listen to new viewpoints in the conversation, allowing choices to be evaluated at all levels of the organisation, which are the opinions from top management to subordinates (Cuofano, 2024). Thus, the collaborative method will reduce the risk of carelessness while ensuring the final plan is robust, realistic, and aligned with the organisation’s goals.

Enhance Higher Employee Commitment

Applying the ‘Nemawashi’ can garner higher employee commitment and support at work because it helps engage stakeholders by actively engaging them in the decision-making processes. According to Wilson et al. (2024), this method’s inclusivity ensures that all interested parties’ concerns, insights, and suggestions are considered during a conversation to find a better resolution. When this action is implemented effectively, it will get broader employee support and let them understand decisions. Additionally, based on Cuofano (2024), this engagement in conversation also promotes a sense of ownership among stakeholders and enhances their commitment to decisions and outcomes. When employees feel their opinions are valued and see their ideas reflected in organisational decisions, their commitments to execute the plan are enhanced, and their feeling of opposition is reduced. Therefore, this engagement will boost employee motivation, job satisfaction, and loyalty, ultimately driving improved organisational performance and innovation.

Promote Smooth Operation

Using ‘Nemawashi’ can help to decrease resistance to change organisations’ decisions from stakeholders, preventing conflicts in the working atmosphere and conducting the project more smoothly (Barnard-Bahn, 2024). Because it allows stakeholders to express their arguments and grievances informally, it helps identify and resolve potential objections before they escalate into significant issues. For example, Sony encourages its employees to be familiar with and apply ‘Nemawashi’ to obtain buy-in from key stakeholders and smooth operations before

conducting a new project (Horne, 2024). Moreover, Shiina (2023) states that the consultation and discussion laid down at an early stage helps to minimise the misunderstanding and opposition of stakeholders, making the implementation work phase more efficient. As a result, this preventive conflict resolution solution will minimise conflict and facilitate a smoother transition when new policies, processes, or changes are implemented within the organisation, promoting a more harmonious work environment.

Improve Organisational Communication

The ‘Nemawashi’ strategy fosters an environment that values open communication, naturally enhancing organisational communication at all levels (Wilson et al., 2024). For example, Bain & Company uses ‘Nemawashi’ to promote smoother cooperation between multicultural project groups, such as conducting informal meetings to break down barriers and allow the free flow of information between everyone (O’Keeffe, 2019). The reason is that applying ‘Nemawashi’ before making major decisions ensures that all stakeholders’ perspectives are heard by encouraging informal and shared thought discussions, resolving cultural differences, and promoting mutual respect in multicultural environments like Malaysia (Kaio, 2024). People from different cultural backgrounds and value systems tend to get confused if there is no effective communication between and among the parties concerned. According to Boiser (2024), this inclusive process makes gaining buy-in for decisions and policies easier, as stakeholders better understand and appreciate the impacts on their work lives. Hence, involving employees in decision-making can build trust and confidence between team members and management and improve workplace morale, ensuring the organisation's long-term success.

Strengthen Organisational Unity

The fundamental underlying aspect of the ‘Nemawashi’ approach involves attaining consensus among all organisation members so that the majority will accept and actively support decisions. According to Emilyluijbregts (2021), consensus building is conducted through the early engagement of stakeholders in the decision-making process in a virtuous cycle of discussion and feedback, enabling any concerns and objections from them to be addressed and solved before the plan moves forward. Focusing on consensus means having broad support within the organisation for the decision to minimise objections and foster a cooperative work culture, as it unites the goals and efforts of different departments and teams. Then, early inclusive communication ensures that everyone understands the rationale behind decisions and fosters a sense of unity and morale (Muscad, 2024). Therefore, establishing consensus at work can enhance the company's cohesion, make decisions and plans more smoothly implemented, and make the organisation's response to challenges more adaptable and unified.

In conclusion, applying the ‘Nemawashi’ approach in industrial relations offers various advantages that contribute to a more effective and harmonious workplace. It improves decision-making through inclusive discussions, enhances employee commitment by promoting ownership, and supports smooth project implementation by addressing concerns early. Furthermore, it strengthens communication across different levels and departments, fostering a collaborative and respectful work culture. By building consensus and unity, ‘Nemawashi’ not only helps prevent conflicts but also supports long-term organisational success and resilience.

Impactso Resolving Workplace Conflict Using ‘Nemawashi’ in Industrial Relations

Resolving workplace conflicts through the ‘nemawashi’ approach can bring positive impacts to industrial relations in Malaysia. By encouraging early, informal discussions and mutual understanding, this method supports compliance with key labour laws and helps create a more harmonious, respectful, and inclusive work environment.

Enhance The Industrial Relations Act 1967 (IRA)

Based on IRA, it oversees the relationship between companies and their staff regarding labour negotiations, conflict resolution, and trade union actions. The ‘Nemawashi’ method, which emphasises anticipatory consensus-building, may complement provisions of the Act that promote peaceful conflict resolution (Chau & Nacharoenkul, 2023). Section 18 of the IRA highlights the importance of conciliation and fosters agreements before conflicts proceed to the Industrial Tribunal. Section 13 of the IRA also specifies procedures for companies and trade unions to negotiate labour agreements, namely salaries, working environments, and benefits. For example, before entering legally binding conversations, management can informally conduct ‘Nemawashi’ by negotiating with union leaders to obtain perspectives and comprehend more about problems such as wage disputes and shift-hour changes. This informal dialogue will lead to more amicable dialogues, ending with acceptable solutions for both parties and a reduced risk of strikes or industrial disputes without disrupting the business. It also raises the efficiency of traditional conciliations and reduces the load on industrial tribunals.

Improve Workplace Safety

In terms of the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (OSHA), employers are supposed to take responsibility for the safety and health of their employees while at work. Section 16 of OSHA reinforces the interaction of employers with their employees when adopting new work procedures for safety. Therefore, the application of ‘Nemawashi’, through which employers have an informal discussion with employees regarding security policy updates, is compatible with OSHA's evaluation criteria. For instance, a construction company should use ‘Nemawashi’ to ask and know its employees’ limitations with existing safety devices before starting a new safety policy, resulting in establishing a new safety policy that uses more humanised equipment to address the safety issue promptly and ensure employees' safety at work. Organisations that welcome opinions are more likely to develop better security plans, comply fully with the law, and establish a work environment promoting safety and mutual respect. Hence, the resultant measures taken are practical and agreed upon, reducing the occurrences and the associated legal liabilities (Mehra, 2025).

Promote Multicultural Sensitivity

A diversity of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds characterises the demographic composition of Malaysia. Implementing ‘Nemawashi’ practices within a heterogeneous workforce, which promotes respect and consensus among individuals, aligns with Malaysian cultural values, including a focus on community and collective well-being. The Employment Act of 1955 captures relevant matters concerning the welfare of the employees, and the principle of ‘Nemawashi’ responds to these concerns through active communication between the employer and the employee to meet the employee's needs. However, according to Bahrain et al. (2023), one of the challenges often faced in Malaysian workplaces is communication barriers caused by language and cultural differences, resulting in misunderstandings and ineffective operations.

For example, employees from different cultural backgrounds find it difficult to express and exchange their ideas, which will build disharmony in group work and lead to workplace conflicts. In addition, workplace bullying also happens in Malaysian workplaces, such as employees suffering discrimination based on specific types: age, race or gender at work (Lee Hishammuddin Allen & Gledhill, 2023). For example, a senior female colleague may request the newbie to do the work tasks she should finish because of discrimination against the newbie younger than her.

Addressing these challenges in cultural sensitivity, ‘Nemawashi’ ensures that every point of view is considered in tandem with Malaysian labour laws that prescribe fairness and respect. For example, if an organisation is planning a change in the rules of the working environment, then issues associated with cultural differences can be resolved by applying this technique so that views of all ethnic groups are included to create a harmonious work environment and avoid conflict altogether.

However, contract workers, gig workers and migrant workers are often marginalized in conflict resolution practices because they do not enjoy the same legal protections as permanent workers (Liu & Renzy, 2025). The uncertainty of their employment status and limited access to formal negotiation processes or grievance channels puts them at high risk of becoming victims of unresolved conflicts (Shaiwalini & Malhotra, 2025). Adapting Nemawashi to encompass all levels of workers, including those who are not permanent, can help create procedural justice and a more inclusive work environment.

Facilitate Constructive Dismissal Resolutions

Section 20 of the IRA highlights that employees who feel dismissed unfairly can complain to the Industrial Relations Department. The preference for the process is negotiation before going to the Labour Tribunal. The ‘Nemawashi’ process is consistent with this provision of IRA to resolve disputes. Before organisations fire employees, they can practice ‘Nemawashi’ with the employees to understand their views and look for alternatives such as reassignment or further training (Armitage & Guidetti, 2024). Management applies active listening during the negotiations with union leaders and shows an active attitude toward resolving issues, which will prevent misunderstanding and potential lawsuits. When a company has resolved to cut down on the workforce, having done ‘Nemawashi’, the employees will know why there has been a decrease. It may help attain spontaneous agreements, such as amiable separation arrangements. This plan benefits the IRA, preserves the employer-employee relationship, and reduces legal confrontation.

In summary, the use of the ‘Nemawashi’ approach in resolving workplace conflicts brings meaningful improvements to industrial relations in Malaysia. It supports existing labour laws by encouraging early consultation, promoting safety, respecting cultural diversity, and managing dismissal processes more constructively. By fostering open communication and mutual understanding, organisations can reduce workplace disputes, enhance cooperation, and maintain a more harmonious and legally compliant work environment.

Conclusion & Recommendation

To sum up, the benefits of applying ‘Nemawashi’ in Malaysia's Industrial Relations include better decision-making, increased commitment from employees, and building a harmonious

work environment. For instance, Toyota, Sony, and Bain & Company applied 'Nemawashi' in their organisations to increase their organisational performance. By way of anticipatory consensus-building in the management of conflicts at work, 'Nemawashi' reinforces the Malaysian legislation that embraces the Industrial Relations Act 1967 and the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994. The alignments are appropriate with legal conciliation, safety, and cultural inclusivity provisions. To effectively implement 'Nemawashi', organisations should include it in formal policies, hold training workshops on consensus-building skills, and open channels for dialogue with employees. For example, informal consultations with employees before the introduction of changes in the workplace can increase their buy-in and reduce resistance to change. Integration of 'Nemawashi' into conflict resolution practices, such as collective bargaining or discussions about job reassignment, can bring about agreements from employees with less workplace conflict. In short, by applying 'Nemawashi' as a proactive, culturally attuned approach, Malaysian organisations can meet statutory requirements while adapting the multicultural values underpinning the nation and establishing a harmonious workplace environment. In this manner, mutual respect is nurtured, organisational communication improves, and Industrial Relations are secured to enhance productivity and higher staff satisfaction.

This proposal has strategic value to policymakers, human resource managers, and enforcement agencies in developing a more harmonious, dialogical, and early prevention approach to conflict resolution in line with the spirit of MADANI Malaysia.

Suggestions For Smoothly Applying 'Nemawashi' In Industrial Relations

Merge The 'Nemawashi' Concept Into Organisational Policies

Malaysia's organisations should consider using 'Nemawashi' as an essential part of their human resource and Industrial Relations activities. Organisations may institutionalise the value of informal, consensus-driven discussions by adopting this strategy into policies. Baker (2024) presents eight steps for employing 'Nemawashi' within the organisation. The first step is to identify the change in the organisation, whereby management must clearly outline the organisational changes or future plans. This includes explaining the reason and purpose for change, along with its potential effects on the organisational structure, processes, or culture. Next, identifying and engaging critical stakeholders is vital. Management must determine who will be most affected by the change and whose opinions are essential. Involving these stakeholders from the beginning ensures that their views are acknowledged in the early stages of informal consultation.

Following that, encouraging informal conversation is crucial. This step creates a less formal environment, enabling key stakeholders to express their ideas freely without the constraints of a formal setting. It also promotes brainstorming and generates more refined recommendations. In the fourth step, management is expected to seek opinions from stakeholders. This allows them to gather insightful feedback from stakeholders concerning the proposed changes, particularly regarding potential limitations and challenges in implementation. The fifth step is to rewrite the final proposal for organisational change, incorporating the feedback received. This enables management to enhance the proposal to reflect collective insights and address raised concerns. Then, the focus shifts to building stakeholder support, where management works toward gaining acceptance and commitment from stakeholders. Demonstrating how

their input has shaped the final proposal creates a sense of joint ownership and encourages alignment. Once support has been secured, formal approval for the change is sought. This involves submitting the refined proposal to decision-makers or governing bodies within the organisation, thus formalising the plan and paving the way for implementation. Finally, the change is implemented in the organisation. The management systematically and transparently executes the changes while ensuring open communication throughout. This helps address concerns and reinforces collaborative efforts.

Based on these steps, organisations can strengthen employer-employee relationships, expedite the resolution of potential conflicts, and align with the requirements outlined in the Industrial Relations Act 1967 (Baker, 2024).

Provide Training About Consensus-Building Programmes

According to Cuofano (2024), organisations should develop training that educates the executives and employees about the techniques required for successful ‘Nemawashi’ practices, including active listening to the problems, being patient, and active consensus-building with others. Active listening involves training participants to listen carefully and understand others without judgment, hence creating an atmosphere of trust and ensuring that problems get solved successfully. The other necessary technique in deliberations is the incorporation of patience to avoid hurried decisions, ensuring ample time for the analysis of every viewpoint and enhancing inclusion in problem-solving. Given the background of Malaysia, their programs should also address practical issues of language barriers in training. For example, training materials need to be provided in various languages to ensure organisational consensus is achieved in Malaysian workplaces. As a result, this method may contribute to creating a harmonious working atmosphere.

Build Open Channels For Dialogue With Employees

The company can build an informal conversation platform, such as a monthly meeting or a feedback medium, like an online anonymous suggestion box. Therefore, this approach will enable employees to voice problems before they become a source of contention and bring them to management's attention to resolve them promptly. According to Wilson et al. (2024), conversations can assist management learn more about the requirements of workers and address problems before they arise. This method corresponds with the concept of mediation outlined in Section 18 of the Industrial Relations Act of 1967, which supports peaceful workplace resolution. Additionally, this advice complies with Section 16 of OSHA, which is the crucial communication between employers and employees regarding workplace security issues, based on the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1994. For example, organisations can provide open channels to allow employees to incorporate feedback into safety procedures, which will improve compliance and reduce workplace accidents.

Enhance Malaysian Legal Legislation On ‘Nemawashi’

Malaysia's Ministry of Human Resources can draft amendments to existing Malaysian laws, namely the Industrial Relations Act of 1967 (IRA), integrated with ‘Nemawashi’ to motivate organisations to learn and use ‘Nemawashi’ practices in arbitration processes. Furthermore, the government should make training on ‘Nemawashi’ techniques a required part of compliance programs under the Employment Act 1955. For example, it could include formal workshops on communications, active listening, and cultural sensitivity. The government should initiate

certification programs for human resource practitioners, like mediation certification, to develop skills in consensus building following the 'Nemawashi' methodology. Moreover, the government might also enforce financial or tax incentives for companies that proactively use 'Nemawashi' to settle disputes and avoid costly litigation. For instance, the government provides tax deductions for companies where there is a reduction in arbitration cases because of the effective use of informal consensus-building mechanisms. Thus, when organisations implement the 'Nemawashi' concept as the preferred method for resolving workplace disagreements, they can communicate and resolve issues more peacefully with people in disputes, quickly reducing disputes.

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