

Understanding Nemawashi

Why Technical Capability Alone Does Not Win Business with Japanese OEMs

Executive Briefing for Manufacturers Seeking Opportunities with Honda and Other Japanese OEMs

Many North American manufacturers assume that supplier selection is driven primarily by technical capability, pricing, quality performance, and commercial competitiveness.

While these factors are essential, they are often not sufficient.

One of the most misunderstood aspects of working with Japanese OEMs is the role of **nemawashi**—the consensus-building process that occurs before formal decisions are made.

Organizations that fail to recognize this process often become frustrated when opportunities progress slowly, decisions appear delayed, or customer interest does not immediately translate into awarded business.

Understanding nemawashi can help suppliers position themselves more effectively and avoid common mistakes that undermine long-term customer development efforts.

What is Nemawashi?

Nemawashi (根回し) literally translates to:

“going around the roots.”

In practice, it refers to the process of building alignment among stakeholders before a formal decision is made.

Rather than relying on a single decision maker, Japanese organizations often seek consensus across multiple functions and levels of management before committing to a supplier, program, or strategic direction.

By the time a formal decision is announced, much of the evaluation and internal discussion has already taken place.

How Nemawashi Affects Supplier Development

For suppliers, this means customer development is often less about delivering a single successful presentation and more about establishing confidence over time.

Multiple groups may influence supplier selection, including:

- Engineering
- Purchasing
- Quality
- Manufacturing
- Supplier Development
- Program Management
- Executive Leadership

Each group evaluates suppliers through a different lens.

Technical capability alone rarely determines the outcome.

The organization must develop confidence that a supplier can become a reliable long-term partner.

Common Western Misconceptions

Misconception #1

“The Meeting Went Well, So We Should Expect an RFQ Soon.”

A positive meeting often represents the beginning of the evaluation process rather than the end.

Japanese OEMs frequently continue gathering information, validating assumptions, and discussing observations internally before taking the next step.

Misconception #2

“We Found the Decision Maker.”

In many Japanese organizations, supplier selection is rarely driven by a single individual.

Even highly influential champions often seek alignment across multiple stakeholders before moving forward.

Misconception #3

“No News Means Lack of Interest.”

Periods of limited communication may simply reflect ongoing internal evaluation activities.

Patience and consistent engagement are often more effective than aggressive follow-up tactics.

What Japanese OEMs Are Evaluating

During the nemawashi process, organizations may assess:

Technical Capability

- Product knowledge
- Engineering resources
- Problem-solving ability
- Innovation capability

Manufacturing Capability

- Capacity
- Process control
- Operational discipline
- Continuous improvement culture

Quality Systems

- Process robustness
- Corrective action discipline
- Customer responsiveness
- Quality performance history

Organizational Stability

- Leadership commitment
- Financial strength
- Long-term viability
- Strategic alignment

Cultural Fit

- Communication style
- Responsiveness

- Professionalism
 - Relationship development
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Why Trust Matters

Western suppliers often focus on proving capability.

Japanese OEMs frequently focus on reducing uncertainty.

The question is not simply:

“Can this supplier build the product?”

The question is often:

“Can we trust this supplier to support us over the life of the program?”

Trust is developed through repeated interactions, consistency, transparency, and demonstrated commitment.

This is why relationship development frequently occurs alongside technical evaluation.

How Suppliers Can Support the Nemawashi Process

Successful suppliers typically:

- Provide clear and consistent technical information
 - Demonstrate manufacturing discipline
 - Respond promptly to customer requests
 - Support multiple stakeholder groups
 - Maintain regular communication
 - Show long-term commitment to the relationship
 - Avoid high-pressure sales tactics
 - Focus on credibility before commercial discussions
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The Zielinski and Associates Perspective

At Zielinski and Associates, we view nemawashi as one of the most important concepts for manufacturers pursuing opportunities within Japanese OEM supply chains.



Organizations that understand how consensus is built are better positioned to support customer evaluation activities, strengthen technical credibility, and develop relationships that ultimately lead to production opportunities.

While every OEM has its own culture and decision-making process, suppliers that recognize the importance of alignment, trust, and long-term relationship development consistently improve their ability to engage successfully with Honda and other Japanese manufacturers.

About Zielinski and Associates

Zielinski and Associates is an engineering-led business development firm focused on helping manufacturers build technical credibility, strengthen customer relationships, and create opportunities within Japanese OEM supply chains.

To learn more, visit:

www.zaa-llc.com