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# Barriers to Implement TQM in Japanese Way: A Study on Companies in Malaysia

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*This paper investigates barriers of implementing Total Quality Management (TQM) the Japanese Way. The study employed qualitative and quantitative method of personal interviews and questionnaire survey on Malaysian manufacturing companies. Data was analyzed using SPSS with Chi-square goodness-of-fit test and mean analysis to explain the scenario for the difficulties in TQM the Japanese Way implementation, while inferential statistics of Spearman Correlation was employed to investigate further relations among Japanese Management Style (JMS), TQM Japanese way, barriers to the TQM Japanese Way; and perception of Organizational Performance (OP) from TQM implementation in Malaysia. The initial finding suggests that people issues as the main cause. Further, the study indicates that as these barriers to TQM the Japanese Way were significantly correlated to the adoption of JMS in the companies studied, it could be the reasons to explain on why JMS variables were not significantly correlated to OP, despite positively correlated to TQM Japanese Way variables.*

**Key words:** Total quality Management, Japanese Management Style, Malaysia.

## 1. Introduction

Total Quality Management (TQM) has been recognized by many practitioners, researchers, and academicians for various positive benefits, be it in macro term of nation's competitiveness (Shaari & Nariai, 2005; Porter, Takeuchi & Sakakibara, 2000) or to the micro perspectives such as increase firm performances (Evans and Lindsay, 2002; Abdullah, Uli & Tari, 2008), greater market shares (Deming 1982; Evans and Lindsay, 2002), increased financial performances (Agus & Abdullah, 2000; Agus & Hassan, 2000), increased customer satisfaction (Agus, Krishnan & Kadir, 2000) and for strategy and innovation (Lorente, Dewhurst & Dale, 1999; Samaha, 1996; Bessant et al., 1994).

Yet, many also argue against these benefits. Parncharoen, Girardi & Entrekin (2004) cited that *two third of quality programs fail to show improvement in organizational performance*. Some blame on TQM poor implementation (Zairi, 1994; Evans, 1995; Dale et. al, 2000; Nwabueze, 2001), cultural differences (Parncharoen, Girardi & Entrekin, 2004; Shaari & Nariai, 2005; 2006; Shaari, 2007a; 2007b ), while others argue on the real intention and understanding of TQM implementation itself (Shaari & Nariai, 2005; 2006; Shaari, 2007a; 2007b). As such, what would be the possible justification for these failures in TQM?

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This is an extended study for the author in attempt to look into aspects of TQM in the Japanese way and practices of Japanese Management Style (JMS) simultaneously; investigating on their relationship in Malaysian context with the idea of enhancing Malaysian quality management programs from Japanese experiences. While the author has suggested on the existence of JMS' essence in Malaysian companies, though it only plays passive role in improving organizational performance via TQM (Shaari, 2007a); which led to the proposal of AFC'S model for a strategic adaptation of TQM and JMS (Shaari, 2007b); and also found that Malaysian managers do implement TQM the Japanese way to a certain extent (Shaari, 2008); this paper meant to dwell and focus on the difficulties for Malaysian in implementing TQM the Japanese Way.

## 2. Literature Review

### Why Japanese Way?

In describing two dimensions of JMS, namely '*functional rational dimension*' reflecting individual effort and '*groupism-affective dimension*' for team/group-work, Okamoto suggests for the creation of "*Japan plus alpha*" composite system by urging companies to strategically find the right Japanese management style to match the local available resources (Okamoto (2000) quoted in Abo, 2004). The proposal came from the argument that due to the uniqueness of JMS's *groupism*, "affective dimensions are irrational at least outside Japan and thus do not have general applicability…" (Abo, 2004).

Similar proposal was made by the researcher with the focus on finding synergistic relations in adapting JMS to local Malaysian practices (Shaari & Nariai, 2006; Shaari, 2007). The author argued that Japan success was the result of the efficiency of TQM operating on the effectiveness of JMS, where the optimum results-put forward by the author as *synergistic result* of the relationship, was proposed. The author had also suggested that without synergistic results, adapting JMS to local systems would not only far than optimizing the outcome, but could also jeopardize the organization's performance, not to mention bringing in bad name to the decision of 'copying' the JMS, or towards the JMS and /or TQM itself. With such a thing in mind, we should not be surprised with some blames and criticism on TQM or JMS appearing in literatures (Nwabueze, 2001a; Nwabueze, 2001b; Shaari & Nariai, 2006).

On a more important matter, Malaysia, being the apprentice of Japan with more than quarter decade of Look East Policy launched to emulate the Japanese; it would be ironic not to learn TQM the Japanese Way when others are doing so; or to stop learning when there are so much more to learn. The gap of Japanese product vs. Malaysian product quality is the simplest indicator. Hence, the more important issue here is: are there barriers for Malaysian to practice TQM the Japanese Way? And what are they?

### A Look at the Barriers.

A study by Suzuki (2000) on 503 Japanese companies operating in 9 Asian countries reveals that not all of the methods brought in by Japanese works in these companies. The result is summarized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1 Acceptance of JMS methods in Asian Countries**

| Hard to accept | Effective in accepting |
|---|---|
| 1. Ringi<br>2. Job prescription (flexible)<br>3. Reducing gap (equality)<br>4. Seniority wage<br>5. Promotion by seniority<br>6. QC<br>7. Suggestion scheme<br>8. JIT | 1. TQC<br>2. 5S<br>3. Information sharing<br>4. In-company training<br>5. Job security<br>6. Promotion by insiders<br>7. Labor-management cooperation |

Adapted from Suzuki (2000)
Not listed according to level hard/effective acceptance

Looking at the result of Suzuki (2000) study, the first five-listed Japanese method found to be hard to accept, could be directly linked to Japanese Management System (Shaari & Nariai, 2005). This explains that JMS might had supported these method for Japanese use in Japan, but they are clearly not the right approach for these foreign nations to adopt nor for Japanese companies to practice in their overseas companies. The finding of QC to be one of the hard acceptances despite being well known as a popular adoption could suggest that probably there is some Japanese methods were being practiced for popularity, not for effectiveness. This might also infer the lack of focus on synergistic result produced between the adoptions of a method to the organization's management style (Shaari, 2007b).

In different scenario, Hill (1996) found that some British companies introduced slight changes into their new teamwork after dropping QCs by ensuring mandatory participants instead of voluntary; and projects to be done were not necessarily specified by only the members. This is an example of how TQM tools could be molded to fit into anyone's own culture, when the concept is well understood.

Motivation requires understanding and commitment (Bateman and Snell, 2002). When one does not have clear picture of what kaizen is, this could lead to lack of motivation to embrace the philosophy of continuous improvement. Sebastianelli, R. and Tamimi, N. (2003) reveals five underlying barriers to TQM namely:

1) Inadequate human resources development and management;
2) Lack of planning for quality;
3) Lack of leadership for quality;
4) Inadequate resources for TQM;
5) Lack of customer focus.

From past literature mainly but not limited to Liker (2004); Kanji & Wallace (2000); Brunet& New (2003); Lorente, Dewhurs& Dale (1999) and from qualitative personal interviews conducted, 12 items were identified. These items were proposed to make up the variable for respondent's perceived barrier to successful implementation of TQM the Japanese Way in Malaysian organization. The difficulties in implementing TQM the Japanese Way were identified as:

**Barrier 1:** Management decisions are always short term oriented.
**Barrier 2:** Common belief that problem is something to avoid; hiding them, without realizing they offer opportunity to improve and to learn.
**Barrier 3:** There is not so clear idea on waste themselves (non-value added process; people/machine overburden; uneven schedule).
**Barrier 4:** There is still belief that quality is expensive, a trade to cost and price.
**Barrier 5:** There is lack of motivation to wholly embrace Kaizen/Continuous Improvement philosophy.
**Barrier 6:** Tendency to adopt latest technology without checking on the reliability and the need for it.
**Barrier 7:** Management seems to have lack of understanding in particular issues, leading them to not giving full commitment.
**Barrier 8:** There is lack sense of unity and loyalty to the organization.
**Barrier 9:** Employees' attitude of resisting change is the main hindrance for successful TQM implementation.
**Barrier 10:** Lack of knowledge and skills.
**Barrier 11:** Lack of understanding on TQM concept.
**Barrier 12:** Lack of commitment from workers.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a survey research methodology by random sampling of Malaysian manufacturing companies. 200 questionnaires were mailed out and each was attached with personalized cover letter and prepaid postage self-addressed envelope for the respondents' convenience. The questionnaires were meant to be answered by the CEO/GM/MD or the quality manager of each company. A pilot study was performed to pretest the questionnaire. In addition to test for reliability, the pilot test was important in refining the questionnaire to ensure the ease of participation by improving the style and presentation, and also for the purpose of clearing up any ambiguity in the questionnaire.

### Survey Instrument

Six-page questionnaire prepared in English was used as the survey instrument for this study. Considerable effort was given particularly to ensure that the questionnaire is eye-catching enough to attract respondents' interest, while at the same time easy-to-follow instructions and well-arrayed questions were set to make it easy for respondents to participate. Malaysia, being a multiracial country; questions deem to be sensitive and/or private to the respondents such as race, religion, age and educational background were avoided by the author. It was anticipated that it would take respondents about seventeen minutes to complete the questionnaire.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Respondents were asked to give their opinion on their perceived difficulties in implementing TQM the Japanese Way. Chi-square goodness-of-fit test was done and

the findings are presented in Table 2 below. Respondents' choices were summarized into frequencies in Table 3. Results from Table 3 supported by data in Table 2 reveal the mixed response of respondents toward identifying factors being the barriers for TQM the Japanese Way implementation. 25% of the respondents identify short term oriented as one of the problem, while about one third labeled traditional way of thinking in which quality is a trade to cost and price (33.3%); and lack of understanding, thus no commitment by the management (33.4%).

**Table 2**
**Chi-Square Test for Difficulties Implementing TQM the Japanese Way Variables**

| | *short term decision* | *avoid problems* | *no clear idea* | *costly quality* | *lack motivation* | *unreliable adoption* | *no commitment* | *lack unity* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chi-Square | 16.667 | 7.333 | 6.333 | 10.667 | 8 | 7 | 11.667 | 15.667 |
| df | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Asymp. Sig. | 0.005 | 0.197 | 0.275 | 0.058 | 0.156 | 0.221 | 0.04 | 0.008 |

| | *attitude* | *knowledge skills* | *understanding concepts* | *workers commitment* | *Diff_ Employees* | *DIFFICULTIES* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chi-Square | 7 | 7.667 | 11 | 15.667 | 14 | 18.667 |
| df | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Asymp. Sig. | 0.221 | 0.176 | 0.051 | 0.008 | 0.016 | 0.002 |

**Table 3**
**Responses for Difficulties Implementing TQM the Japanese Way Variables**

| | **short term decision** | | **avoid problems** | | **no clear idea** | | **costly quality** | | **lack motivation** | | **unreliable adoption** | | **no commitment** | | **lack unity** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % |
| **Strongly Disagre** | 5 | 13.9% | 7 | 19.4% | 5 | 13.9% | 6 | 16.7% | 4 | 11.1% | 6 | 16.7% | 5 | 13.9% | 6 | 16.7% |
| **Disagree** | 13 | 36.1% | 9 | 25.0% | 9 | 25.0% | 11 | 30.6% | 11 | 30.6% | 10 | 27.8% | 13 | 36.1% | 14 | 38.9% |
| **Fairly Disagree** | 9 | 25.0% | 8 | 22.2% | 7 | 19.4% | 7 | 19.4% | 5 | 13.9% | 7 | 19.4% | 6 | 16.7% | 4 | 11.1% |
| **Fairly Agree** | 5 | 13.9% | 4 | 11.1% | 7 | 19.4% | 8 | 22.2% | 7 | 19.4% | 6 | 16.7% | 4 | 11.1% | 6 | 16.7% |
| **Agree** | 4 | 11.1% | 7 | 19.4% | 7 | 19.4% | 3 | 8.3% | 7 | 19.4% | 6 | 16.7% | 6 | 16.7% | 5 | 13.9% |
| **Strongly Agree** | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 2.8% | 1 | 2.8% | 1 | 2.8% | 2 | 5.6% | 1 | 2.8% | 2 | 5.6% | 1 | 2.8% |
| **Total** | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% |

| | **attitude** | | **knowledge skills** | | **understanding concepts** | | **workers commitment** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % | Count | % |
| **Strongly Disagre** | 2 | 5.6% | 3 | 8.3% | 2 | 5.6% | 2 | 5.6% |
| **Disagree** | 8 | 22.2% | 7 | 19.4% | 8 | 22.2% | 7 | 19.4% |
| **Fairly Disagree** | 6 | 16.7% | 6 | 16.7% | 5 | 13.9% | 7 | 19.4% |
| **Fairly Agree** | 8 | 22.2% | 8 | 22.2% | 8 | 22.2% | 8 | 22.2% |
| **Agree** | 9 | 25.0% | 10 | 27.8% | 11 | 30.6% | 12 | 33.3% |
| **Strongly Agree** | 3 | 8.3% | 2 | 5.6% | 2 | 5.6% | 0 | 0.0% |
| **Total** | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% | 36 | 100% |

These explain some of researchers' previous findings; such as there were some lacks of understanding in JMS concepts and in definition of waste (Shaari, 2007a; 2007b). The researcher had also discussed on the issue of sellers' market. One of the NPC personnel interviewed had argued that Malaysians are operating in a seller

market (personal interview, 2006). The traditional believe that one has to pay more for quality describes the advantage for the producer. The producers dominate the power and the people, where the customers are bound to abide. Kano (1999) argues that TQM is not needed in a sellers' market. As a business strategy, producers might found that it is not necessary for them to practice TQM teachings, when the belief that 'you have to pay more for better quality' is still there.

Among other reasons for difficulties of implementing TQM the Japanese Way, 33.4% respondents identified lacking sense of unity and loyalty to the organization. Hiroshi Itagaki (2004, pp. 97) points out that what "*make the application of Japanese system difficult are the high mobility of employee who change jobs frequently in pursuit of higher wages, however small the margin of increase…*". A Jetro survey done in 2004 on Japanese affiliated manufacturers in ASEAN and India found that *'high ratio of workers leaving their jobs' is highest in Malaysia as in year before* (pp 33). The same research also identify Malaysia's highest problem in production to be *difficulty in recruitment and retention of competent engineers* (pp 30).

On another important focus, one observation is made clear to the researcher. As could be seen, Table 2 and Table 3 exhibit a continuing pattern of issues concerning employees. Significantly at level of confidence of 99%, respondents quoted employees being the main factor for difficulties implementing TQM the Japanese Way.

**Table 4**
**Average Scores for Difficulties Implementing TQM the Japanese Way Variables**

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|
| short term decision | 36 | 2.72 | 1.21 |
| avoid problems | 36 | 2.94 | 1.492 |
| no clear idea | 36 | 3.14 | 1.437 |
| costly quality | 36 | 2.83 | 1.342 |
| lack motivation | 36 | 3.22 | 1.495 |
| unreliable adoption | 36 | 2.97 | 1.444 |
| no commitment | 36 | 2.97 | 1.502 |
| lack unity | 36 | 2.81 | 1.431 |
| attitude | 36 | 3.64 | 1.437 |
| knowledge skills | 36 | 3.58 | 1.442 |
| understanding concepts | 36 | 3.67 | 1.414 |
| workers commitment | 36 | 3.58 | 1.296 |
| Diff_Employees | 36 | 3.6181 | 1.3316 |
| DIFFICULTIES | 36 | 3.0255 | 1.16048 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 36 | | |

Table 4 continues to exhibits similar results. Lack of employees' understanding on TQM concept is being reasoned out as the highest caused (3.67) for the difficulties implementing TQM the Japanese Way. While employees' attitude is also being cited (3.64), from Table 2 before, chi-square test however could not reject the possibilities of random chance due to the mixed answers by the respondents. On the other hand, workers commitment is another factor cited to be the reason for difficulties implementing TQM the Japanese Way. Bateman and Snell (2000) suggested that an

effective implementation requires employees' commitment, and employees' commitment comes from their understanding.

Common sense would call for one to understand the Japanese Management Style in order for one to successfully implement a program such as TQM the Japanese Way. On another issue one might still argue that TQM the Japanese Way is for the Japanese; and so does the JMS, reliving the debate of JMS is not transferable beyond Japan. However, since we had statistically proven that Malaysian do practice JMS and also TQM the Japanese Way, moving beyond that, it is then suitable now for us to see the impact of the above identified barriers to the relationship between JMS; TQM the Japanese Way; and the perceived organizational performance from implementing TQM the Japanese Way.

**Table 5**
**Spearman's Correlation between TQM the Japanese Way and Items in Organizational Performances**

| Spearman's rho | profitability | market share | OP1_EMPLY | OP2_PVALUE | OP3_CUST | ORG_PERFORM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TQM | .400(*) | .353(*) | 0.195 | .368(*) | 0.227 | .370(*) |
| | 0.016 | 0.035 | 0.255 | 0.027 | 0.183 | 0.027 |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 exhibits the result of Spearman's correlation for TQM the Japanese Way variable and the Organizational Performances variable. Positive correlation infers that as the more companies practice TQM the Japanese Way, the higher will be their beliefs that TQM would benefit them via profitability (0.4), via market share (0.353), and via product value (0.368) will be. However, OP1_Employee and OP2_Customer are not significantly correlated.

The researcher had dwelled in this issue that Malaysian companies do not really expect the benefit of TQM through their employees (Shaari, 2008) which might be one possibility for this, that even by implementing TQM the Japanese Way they would not expect much from their employees in benefiting the company. Organizational performances for them are merely defined by the benefit in product value, market share and profitability. This narrow perception on organizational performances acquired through TQM implementation nevertheless reflected the type of market arena that Malaysian companies are actually operating within.

**Table 6**
**Spearman's Correlation between JMS, Difficulties Implementing TQM the Japanese Way, and Organizational Performances**

| | | JMS | DIFF | OP |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Spearman's rho | JMS | X | | |
| | DIFFICULTIES | -.347(*) | X | |
| | ORG_PERFORM | 0.135 | -0.279** | X |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.1 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 reveals basic suggestions on the relationship that exist between JMS, Difficulties in implementing TQM the Japanese Way, and the Organizational performances.

Initial looks suggest that JMS at the significant level of 0.05 has an inverse relationship with Difficulties implementing TQM the Japanese Way at r = -0.347. Guilford (1956), as quoted in Frederic Williams and Peter Monge (2001, pp 133) would classify this level as a *low correlation; definite but small relationship.*

Notwithstanding the suggested classification, *interpretation of the magnitude of a correlation is often a subjective matter…a relationship that might be considered moderate in one situation might be considered relatively negligible in another* (Frederic Williams and Peter Monge, 2001 pp 133). As in the context of this study, these findings are important impetus for further investigation. Frederic Williams and Peter Monge (2001, pp 133) had suggested on the importance of viewing results from the practical implication, other than from the magnitude of the statistical sense.

Looking back at the inverse relation between JMS and difficulties implementing TQM the Japanese Way; this finding infers that higher essence of JMS in Malaysian companies would help to reduce the barrier in implementing TQM the Japanese way.

On another aspect, JMS is found not to have significant relation with 'organizational performances through TQM.' There is one possible explanation that could be offered here. Recalled Table 5; important findings were on no significant relation between TQM and organizational performances' items of employee and customer. Reconciling both findings, there is a pattern suggesting lack of focus by Malaysian companies on human issues. While the finding from Table 5 is proposing a greater desire for product value, market share, and profit in contrast to concerns on internal and external customers (employees and final customers), Table 6 is suggesting a passive role of JMS in improving companies' perception on rewards from implementing TQM (Shaari, 2007a; 2008).

This passive role of JMS could also be seen from the finding that variable of 'difficulties implementing TQM the Japanese way' is on the other hand, has a negative correlation of r = -0.279 at 0.1 significant level. This implies that the Malaysian managers perceived that reducing barrier to implementing TQM the Japanese way would help in getting result or benefit out of TQM implementation. In

other words, while practicing JMS alone would not increase people's perception on the benefit of TQM, practicing JMS could reduce the difficulties of implementing TQM which later has the relationship of increasing people's positive perception on TQM.

Another point to make here is that Malaysian managers view JMS and TQM as two separate entities**.** Whilst the former is related to the latter, only the latter has direct relation to boost people's perception on the outcomes of TQM. This also suggests that JMS in fact could not play its role in improving company performances via TQM without first adapting it to the way Japanese implement TQM. As one AOTS personnel said,

> *"Having Japanese TQM without JMS is like having a body without the soul"*
> (Personal communication, 2006)

## 5. Implication and Conclusion

The findings suggest that barriers to TQM Japanese Way were significantly correlated to the adoption of Japanese management style in the companies studied; it could also be the reasons to explain on why JMS variables were not significantly correlated to OP, despite positively correlated to TQM Japanese Way variables. Hence, these signify the importance of overcoming these barriers as means to ensure that adoption of JMS would bring positive result in enhancing quality management practices in Malaysia using Japanese experience.

However, after reconciling the difficulties, it is important for us not to ignore the possibility that for these companies operating in a sellers' market to find that it is not necessary to practice TQM, they would not be committed to implement it. Thus, the blame should not be on the employees' lack of understanding and/or commitment alone. The awareness of a community which might decide a seller's or buyer's market should also be considered.

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