

Transforming for a better future

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Comment

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IDEA: Malaysia Inventors' Challenge made its debut with the first of 10 episodes appearing on TV3 at 7pm last week. This first of its kind of reality show in Malaysia was launched on Aug 13 at the Theatre, Sri Pentas, Petaling Jaya by Deputy Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation Fadillah Yusof. The programme is sponsored by Proton, organised by SIRIM and supported by the Malaysian Productivity Board (MPC). The hosts for the show are Daphne Iking and Mejar Dr Faiz Khaleed.

The show is aimed at promoting innovation and creativity among Malaysians from all walks of life. The idea is to acculturate the public to innovative thinking, and at the same time dispel the myth of innovation belonging to only certain category of people such as professionals and researchers.

And that it must always be earth-shattering!

Such an elitist notion of innovation is often an obstacle to many who feel that they are not "good" enough for such an adventure. This is made worse by an education system that is exam-orientated, emphasising rote learning. Thinking-out-of-the-box is not allowed, so are autonomy and flexibility in decision-making. Creativity eventually gives way to fear of being different, and independent thinking to compliance. In a situation where the bosses know all, many innovative ideas die prematurely. So the question posed by futurist and innovation guru Joel Barker: "What is impossible to do today in your business, but if it could be done, would fundamentally change for the better?" has no chance of being asked at all, let alone being answered.

In Barker's term, you are therefore imprisoned in your own "paradigm" — a system of rules and regulations that imposes limits or establishes boundaries. Compliance with such set limits and boundaries will lead to "paradigm paralysis". However, for a "paradigm shift" to happen, a change in the rules that break the limits and boundaries is a must! In short, a transformation — the buzzword of the day — is needed.

So IDEA is about making that "shift" and "transformation".

And judging by the turnout for the tryout in Kuantan, Pahang, we can say that there are plenty of hopefuls. Otherwise, how can we explain the selection process, which lasted way past midnight, given the number of contestants who were eagerly waiting to demonstrate their inventions. These ranged from a simple idea called "multi-mask" to a sophisticated "chain-less" bicycle! There were about 60 inventions that were presented to the judges in total.

Only six were selected for the next round! A tough call indeed! If the Kuantan segment of the show, aired recently, is anything to go by, we have little to worry about. As soon as we cure "paradigm paralysis", we will unleash a myriad of innovations.

"Think about moving from the use of vacuum tubes to transistors, or petrol powered cars to hybrid cars. For that matter, from radios to mobile phones, from telephones to the world wide web, and wireless communications today! Each of these redefined the boundaries and capabilities of entire industries," said Barker.

In the same manner many have successfully done the same during the Kuantan show, although there are still rough edges that need to be smoothen out. But this is what IDEA is all about — to find potential inventions, and polish them further before they proceed to the next rounds.

And finally, to commercialise some of the top inventions and demonstrate that innovation is not as mysterious as it seems, or made out to be!

I sense that IDEA is going to be a popular show in its effort to promote innovation to the community. What is most encouraging is the number of young Malaysians displaying their creativity with confidence and knowledge. It is not difficult to imagine what they are capable of in a more innovation-conducive educational environment that encourages self-discovery and self-learning. While IDEA can be a one-time impetus to innovative thinking and learning, classrooms all over Malaysia must be the space that allows this to be done on an extended basis.

Are we ready for this?

We cannot expect Malaysians to be innovative if everything else around them is downright outmoded.

After all, innovation is about transforming for a better future, and the younger generation must be empowered to make decisions in the most innovative and courageous ways!

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