

Kaizen way to innovation

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Comment

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It was immensely satisfying to listen to Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad speak on a subject as tricky as "technology-based innovation".

His one-hour encyclopaedic exposé at the Akademi Sains Malaysia International Conference last week took the audience from the mundane issues of innovation to more challenging ones.

He cited clear examples from the world of pharmaceuticals, electronics (ranging from the Walkman to microchips), language, space and agriculture.

His usual wit and humour drove his points home — rather unusual for a serious topic such as "innovation" which is usually presented in a clinical way. But then as the Chair quipped: "Dr. Mahathir is an unusual sort of person!"

Dr. Mahathir started his keynote address by making a rather grim assessment of Malaysians whom he portrayed as conservative and do not like changes. They are comfortable with old mindsets and do not accept change easily; neither are they willing to take risks. All these do not augur well for innovative thinking.

That said, he, however, gave a number of examples where Malaysia has executed innovative thinking successfully.

First, when Malaysia (then Malaya) brought in the Brazilian species of rubber tree and turned it into an income spinner before the synthetic version appeared on the scene.

And in some sectors, especially in healthcare, natural rubber continues to dominate, thanks to research and development (R&D).

Later, it was the use of rubber wood as furniture and the nurturing of trees with bigger trunks for this purpose.

Next, is a similar move to turn Malaysia into the top world producer of palm oil, especially when rubber lost its place as a strategic commodity.

Like rubber, the use of palm oil could only be diversified through rigorous research initiated by Malaysia.



A rubber tapper in Kg Bukit Budu, Kuala Krai. In some sectors, especially in healthcare, natural rubber continues to dominate, due to R&D

Due to such innovative ideas, Malaysia is able to lead globally in certain areas of Science and Technology in a sustainable way.

It is timely to repeat some of these experiences but using a different platform. However, it is now more competitive and complex since knowledge — Science and Technology in particular — has advanced.

R&D needs to be promoted so that we can compete in newer areas of knowledge. This calls for a high R&D allocation while acknowledging that it can be a risky venture.

You cannot be certain to expect a return on investment from R&D, instead it would seem to many as a "waste" of money.

While Malaysia has put aside some allocation for R&D, the amount is small relative to those at some giant companies.

These firms are willing to bear considerable risks, knowing full well that with successful innovations, they will be able to recoup losses and, in fact, have more funds to invest in further R&D.

This is where Intellectual Property (IP) becomes an important issue.

At this point, Dr Mahathir satirically drew a parallel with the phenomenon of "brain drain".

In spite of the government's investment to train millions of talent in order to realise a handful of "gems", there are those who would lure them to leave Malaysia without paying compensation equivalent to the notion of IP.

Without the necessary brainpower, R&D and, therefore, innovation is difficult to realise.

More so since the former Prime Minister noted that relative to the so-called non-science subjects, Science and Technology is "moving knowledge" by virtue that new data is added to it all the time.

He expressed his unhappiness with the teaching of Science in Bahasa Malaysia.

He reasoned that since the "new" knowledge comes in a different language, it is better to master the language so that acceptance to change is immediate and enables you to keep abreast of the latest developments.

In a nutshell, Dr Mahathir urged Malaysians to embrace the innovative mindset within the framework that all things can be improved over time in the manner that the Japanese kaizen envisages.

And this is done on a continuous basis until such time it necessitates a complete change altogether — normally recognised as an "earth-shattering" innovative breakthrough!

However, it should start with a curious mindset that challenges every assumption in the search for new and improved solutions to further enhance quality of life as stated in the New Economic Model.

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