

Stop being 'clever', just be smart

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Comment

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THE Malaysia Productivity Corporation held a timely conference on "Competitiveness: Enhancing Competitiveness through Creativity and Innovation" last week.

The aim was to provide more engagements in realising the aspirations to develop a high-income economy where growth is driven by productivity in the context of creativity and innovation.

The corporation, which was set up 43 years ago, is the national body responsible for the enhancement of productivity, quality and competitiveness, and is committed to work for a better standard of living of Malaysians.

Its work was carried out through various and diverse programmes to enhance competitiveness, and this time, more to acculturate creativity and innovation in profound ways in the public and private sectors.

The response has been overwhelming. For example, between January and June, there is an increase of about 29 per cent in participants for its training programmes, up to 82,178 from 63,947 for the same period last year.

The corporation is therefore poised to play a significant role in the search for the new economic model for Malaysia.

The international trade and industry minister, in his address, highlighted innovation and creativity as "simply the creation and implementation of new processes, products, services and methods of delivery that will result in significant improvements in outcomes, efficiency, effectiveness or quality".

It is pertinent to note that innovation and creativity is all-encompassing, and not limited only to technical or scientific discoveries; but extends to the socio-cultural dimensions as well.

It must be realised that creativity and innovation are multi-faceted and are interrelated and interlinked.

While Malaysia has made improvements in the various competitiveness indices accepted worldwide, it is its position in the Global Innovation Index 2008-2009 (published by the Institute of European Administration and Development) that must be focused on.

In 25th position among 130 economies, Malaysia has a score of 4.06 compared to the average 4.95 score of high-income Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.

Amongst others, innovation areas that Malaysia need to improve is its research and development (R&D) expenditure as the percentage of gross domestic product (now ranked 36) is below the world's recommended measure of at least 2.5 per cent.

Another is in the area of Intellectual Property Protection (now ranked 26). R&D and intellectual property are two factors that are very much intertwined.

More importantly still, acculturating creativity and innovation means starting at a very tender age.

Because this is where respect and tolerance of new ideas, and flexibility in learning should be inculcated as part of the education system.

In this regard, Finland has made notable strides over the years after the restructuring of its educational system to allow for innovation-driven learning.

In contrast, a rigid and over-regulated education system will more often than not kill creativity and stifle innovation since mistakes are not tolerated in the search for the one and only correct answer.

Whereas in a creative and innovative environment, the emphasis is more about asking the right questions, rather than looking for the single right answer.

As Alice Wellington Rollins puts it: "The test of a good teacher is not how many questions he can ask his pupils that they will answer readily, but how many questions he inspires them to ask him which he finds it hard to answer."

Unfortunately, in a system that puts premium on examination outcomes alone will find this strange, if not

irrelevant because "teachers always know best"!

That Malaysia is now in the "middle-income trap" reflects on its education system that has been for too long trapped in the "teacher knows best" mode, and consequently in "bosses not knowing best, but are always right".

No wonder many creative and innovative ideas usually die at the door-step of schools and offices of bosses and the little Napoleons.

Ultimately, ours is a mindset trap that is impervious to new, let alone, innovative ideas which is inherently built in our education system.

To move forward, let us ponder on what the Nobel Laureate for Literature, Naguib Mahfouz, said: "You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions."

Our preoccupation thus far is to show how "clever" we are by benchmarking (a polite word for copying) others.

This is clearly not enough, since benchmarking is designed as a "catch-up" game. It is time to wise up and ask questions that will lead us to the next level.

This is even more pertinent since Malaysia is looking for a "new" model for a more sustainable future, hopefully beyond any benchmarking.

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