

Think deeply about the future

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Comment

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THINKING is no doubt an important activity! We often hear of complaints that "thinking" is missing in our classrooms and that it has been over taken by rote learning.

Some research seem to claim that thinking in organisations is also not that common. Only two per cent are said to think, three per cent do not think; and the remaining 95 per cent think they think!

This is not surprising given that thinking is actually hard work. It is allegedly equivalent to three hours of labour-intensive work under the hot sun, according to some comparisons.

The energy expended during serious thinking could even light an electric bulb. All these point to how complex and intricate thinking is.

It has often been said that from a single thought flow streams of words, that then become actions. These develop into habits, and eventually colour the character. This is what shapes our destiny.

If this is true, one wonders why so little time is being devoted to thinking and much more is being spent teaching this skill and delving into the specifics, like creative and innovative thinking.

After all, these are skills that can be learned and acquired just like speaking and writing, except that the latter two are more visible and, therefore, more appreciated. Yet, these are dependent on thinking. Would it not be better to learn thinking to support all the other learning skills?

Perhaps the prevailing tendency is to memorise and regurgitate stuff, rather than attempt to produce fresh perspectives -- more creative ones. Our tendencies are often slanted in the direction of imitating.

Now that we are seeking a new economic model for the country based on innovation, we are pushed into a corner. We have little choice if we wish to evolve dramatically into a high-income country that thrives on new ideas as the basis for competition in meeting the demands of the future.

Indeed, predicting the future requires a lot of creativity and a higher level of tolerance for divergence and dissent.

Unfortunately, this is what Malaysia has not yet got used to. We are still in the "either-or" black or white mode of thinking whereas the future is mostly shades of grey, that is, full of uncertainties.

Everything is becoming more complex and intertwined with one another. The simple, linear and direct relationship no longer holds today. Just look at the ecological system currently under threat.

There is no one discipline (read: thinking) that appears to offer a solution. Neither will there be any solution based on one just model. More fundamental still, the one-size-fits-all approach will not do any more.

Understanding this new reality is vital if Malaysia is to shape its future destiny, which will be vastly different from today's.

And it must necessarily start with a "new" -- if bold -- thinking where the authority of ideas must replace the prevalent idea of authority.

We have lived by the maxim of the latter, which has taken us up to this level today. The next level needs the former, and quite urgently too.

This is where the barrier is: way of thinking, like mindset, cannot be changed overnight without first changing the atmosphere that promotes the typical way of thinking.

Even then, it takes quite a while to acquire the confidence to change, especially when it is culturally-bound.

Ironically, the smartest are always the last to change because they have the most to lose, when they are presumably already successful.

Yet, this is the group that is endowed with more sophisticated ideas to make a difference. While there are techniques and methods to allow change to happen, unless there is a willingness to change it will not create much impact.

At the recent Glion Colloquium held in Switzerland, which ended last week, it was observed that even countries

in Asia that have made it into the echelon of global research still lack the innovation-driven mentality.

Culturally, they are not brought up as risk takers, rather they fear mistakes and "losing" face where kiasu-ism is the name of the game.

This is in stark contrast to their European counterparts where taking risk and making mistakes are part of learning. Indeed, learning is about making mistakes.

So as Malaysia welcomes the new cohort of students into the university community this week, we congratulate all of them for their well-deserved success.

And we look forward to the making of a new breed of innovative thinkers who will shape the future of this beloved nation.

Collectively, this is now our shared responsibility to make a lasting difference. Best wishes and good luck.

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