

Don't repeat mistakes of past year

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THIS column enters its 13th year this week. Many opinions have been expressed during these years, so too during the exchanges and engagements with fellow readers. Many are very memorable, some are indeed most inspiring.

This time is no different. Some of the memories experienced last year are difficult to let go. They have created such a keen impact.

Fifty years of nationhood is one such instance. The other is, of course, the launching of the first Malaysian angkasawan. Both gave us a sense of pride, strength and inspiration.

In most instances, however, what matters is what could be measured. This can be anything from the economic index for the year, to the country's position in whatever ranking there were: trade, transparency, corruption, bureaucracy, and so on.

For some, it would be the crime rate or the percentage killed in road accidents or workplaces, the number of students getting straight. As in public examinations, or the unemployment level.

In short, as long as there is a number or figure that can be attached to it, some kind of an assessment could be made out of it - some good and some bad. The latter, ironically, gets to make the headlines. They say bad news sell better and there is some truth in this because the human mind is more easily tuned towards it.

So one cannot be entirely faulted for feeling overwhelmed by the negative vibes, rightly or wrongly. This is especially now when there is a sense of openness.

There are those who are eager to exercise their newly found democratic rights. What matters for them are their rights; that of others do not matter much.

This is not unlike in the jungle where a mischievous beast may decide to do what it feels like doing although it may cause an upheaval in the lives of the rest. Can we expect any better from animals?

The question then is: should we feel overwhelmed? It all depends on how wise we are. After all, the word "sapiens" for the human species, means "to act wisely".

In other words, it depends on how we use the wisdom bestowed on us, which incidentally is not endowed to animals. For a start, it is certainly unwise to appeal to the animal-like behaviour or appeal to animal instinct, the moment we feel overwhelmed.

It is better to remain calm and collected as much as possible so that our ability to exercise our wisdom is not jeopardised.

Indeed, it is at times like this that words like "wise", "trust", "tolerance", "sanity", "reliable", "sincere" and so on become operational.

They give more meaning to the number games that we are so fond of which act as the barometer of the day. Yet, these words are fast losing their significance as we are no longer taught to treasure or live by them until the situation seems dire. And, in most instances, it is rather too late to inculcate them effectively.

To borrow from what Stephen Covey implied (in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, 1990), we have not built enough of the much needed "emotional bank account", that is "the amount of trust that's been built up in a relationship" (page 188). This does not allow us to draw from it even when we are badly in need, just like a poorly maintained "financial bank account".

To bank entirely on the "financial bank account" alone is unreliable. Time and again, we have observed how easily it is for those with a "fat" financial bank account to flee as soon as they sense something is not right. And lock, stock and barrel, literally! In short, they can make matters much worse! Remember the 1997 crisis! Their loyalty is first to their financial status and not that of the country!

Again, Covey in another book (*The SPEED of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything*, 2006) suggests that trust has a bottom-line impact as well. Greater trust can produce better results since trust is needed for a relationship to thrive, without which it is superficial at best, hypocritical at worst. It shows starkly in times of crisis.

Like an iceberg, trust is the 90 per cent which is submerged under water that keeps the 10 per cent afloat above the surface. Yet, why is it that only the 10 per cent always get noticed, measured, rewarded and so on. Why are factors like trust often taken for granted?

Learning from the lessons of yesteryear, we now need to strengthen and assess the state of our "emotional bank account" for the nation vis-a-vis the "financial" ones in determining the true health status of the country.

Of late, we are beginning to hear more frequently words like "trust", "respect", "tolerance" being bandied around. This is not enough. They need to be measured as another set of bottom lines that we all must work for. And not taken for granted any longer. Otherwise, we will always be vulnerable to the negative vibes projected by others. This is unbecoming of a "wise person"—the *Homo sapiens*.

To all readers of this column, thank you for your support for the past 12 years.

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