

Thinking outside the box to build innovation

MALAYSIA can be a nation of endless possibilities. We do face problems from time to time, which is a normal thing for countries. Dealing with problems the best we can is what we should strive for.

We should be proud that, despite the ups and downs, we have been able to resolve our problems pretty well. As the saying goes, where there is a problem, there is an opportunity. We only need to know where the opportunities lie in building a great nation. We should be prepared to grab those opportunities and turn them to our advantages.

The truth is, nothing is impossible if we really put our minds to it. Take career development, for example. I have just watched a video produced by a journalist from our neighbouring Indonesia. The video talks about how a son of rubber tapper in Malaysia has risen to become the Prime Minister and CEO of the nation. The video

refers to our Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri who had his early beginnings in a rubber tapping family. We all know for a fact that if your family earns their keep tapping rubber, the entire family would be doing the trade. But I also know of many other Malaysians who rose from rubber tapping beginnings to assume leadership positions in the country. The late Tan Sri Abdul Rahman Arshad, my ex-teacher, also had a poor beginning as the son of a rubber tapper. He rose to become the DG of education. I am sure there are many more.

Education, of course, made it all possible. That is why we should pay special attention to our education system. If such personalities can make it to the top from relatively poor upbringing, there must be something working in our earlier education model. Those days, education was not about forcing everything down the children's throats. This is unfortunately what

is happening now. No wonder children have to carry big bags to school. No wonder many children lose interest in schooling.

In the 1960s and 70s, the burden on learning was not as heavy. Schooling was enjoyable and interesting. It was a combination of serious study and recreation. Those who went to boarding schools would testify to that. Whenever we had the term breaks, we could not wait to get back to schools. Instead of the rote learning that children now experience, those days we were guided on the art of learning and acquiring knowledge. We were taught how to communicate well and think critically.

As we enter this era of an innovation-driven global economy, thinking and communication skills become even more critical. At a recent forum on innovation at MRANTI Park in Bukit Jalil, Germany's Fraunhofer Institute, IEM, based in Paderborn, spoke

about their partnership with UiTM and UTHM in driving innovation among our SMEs.

Funded by the German Ministry of Science and Economy, the partnerships have been running innovation labs, one in UiTM Shah Alam, and the other at UTHM Batu Pahat. Judging by what has developed in the last three years of their operation, both labs, which operated on the innovation model of ideate, create and collaborate, have substantially lifted the innovation interest among the participating SMEs. In fact, I think the innovation labs idea should be replicated in all our higher learning institutions.

I would hasten to suggest building the innovation labs even at the school level. We know innovation always start with an idea. How to create new ideas should be taught at schools. This is where the thinking-out-of-the-box skill is useful.

Ideas are never perfect when first mooted. They require critical evaluation and debate. The culture of agreeing to disagree is a good way to generate ideas. The ability to accept criticism is also an important part of the ideation process. Unfortunately, I have experienced dealing with officers in government ministries who take criticisms personally. Such an attitude is a big obstacle to innovation. Innovation is all about making changes for the better.

The other important attribute of innovators is that they dare to fail. They look at failing as the path to success. Innovation labs can be an effective way to sow the seed of the nation's innovation culture to build a great nation.

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