

New work ethics become way of life

15 OCT 1990

By Rose Ismail

"GOOD work ethics are the sine qua non of the 'well' society. Nothing can be done in a society where good work ethics of some degree do not prevail.

Thus a willingness to work hard and honestly whether for one's own self or for one's employer must bring about some degree of success whatever the other factors are.

Of course if the other factors such as resources, climate, political stability, finance and administrative systems are also reasonably good, the chances and degree of success would be even better.

In Malaysia we have all those other factors. What we need is an improvement in our work ethics.

We need to do an honest day's work honestly.

We need to be disciplined and dedicated.

We need to acquire skills through enforced experience or deliberate learning.

We need to consider work as duty not merely to oneself but to the community and the nation.

These are the qualities we need in order to make Malaysia a healthy and strong nation, a nation capable of sustaining its independence, of defending itself, of being at par with the more advanced countries of the world."

(Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the August, 1988 issue of 'Buletin Intan')

EIGHT YEARS HAVE passed since the Prime Minister made this statement on work ethics. He was adamant then that Malaysians shed their passive, easy-going ways and adopt a more assertive and positive attitude towards work in particular, and life in general.

To bring discipline to the huge, lumbering civil service, he introduced the clocking-in system. To inject a sense of accountability and responsibility in civil service staff, he insisted on name-tags. And to get people working, he called for an open-office concept so that no one could hide behind pillars and opaque

glass walls.

Then, in an attempt to erase the stodgy attitude that he felt many Malaysians had towards their employers and places of employment, he introduced the Look East Policy, a policy which turned heads towards Japan, Korea and Taiwan and persuaded Malaysians to appreciate the resilient, dynamic nature of these societies and the work ethics that guide their people.

The effects of all this were stunning. The reactions, mixed.

Many Malaysians, especially those in the private sector, were elated. Now, at last, some of them said, things would move faster. In the public sector, many responded positively to the changes but there were the occasional complaints.

Now, eight years later, good work ethics remain an intrinsic aspect of the Mahathir philosophy. He does not dwell on the topic as much as before but he is as eagle-eyed and determined in his desire to push Malaysia into the top ranks in terms of quality products and services.

The stress on quality, says National Productivity Centre director Haji Arshad Marsidi, is part of the natural progression of things. Earlier, the emphasis was on productivity so there was a need to stress output.

Now that Malaysia's productivity rate is, with the exception of Singapore, way ahead of its neighbours, a new element must be considered: competitiveness.

This, says Haji Arshad, means that the price of the product must be reduced because everyone else is involved in the same game and, at the same time, the finished product must be of a certain quality that it can be considered one of the best.

In the final analysis, he adds, quality sells. "You can't produce a highly polished diamond from a poor quality polishing machine. Likewise, you cannot produce something of quality if the person making it is totally disinterested in the product."

This is why attitude is

important, he adds. "Quality products can only be produced by people who value quality."

But if the mechanisms which demand punctuality and efficiency are removed, will Malaysians continue to work as hard as they appear to be doing now? Or, will they slacken in their commitment to produce products of quality?

Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz says she does not allow any slackening in her Ministry. "I teach my staff to loathe laziness, sloth, and apathy. I tell them that each person must carry his or her weight."

Datuk Seri Rafidah says the Ministry staff attend courses regularly on work ethics. Invariably, at all these sessions she makes a point of meeting them so

Good work ethics remain an intrinsic aspect of the Mahathir philosophy. He does not dwell on the topic as much as before but he is as eagle-eyed and determined in his desire to push Malaysia into the top ranks in terms of quality products and services.

that she can explain what happens when work is not done quickly and efficiently.

"I tell the office boys, for instance, that if they fail to deliver a letter on time, the Government may lose millions of dollars."

To ensure that a sense of urgency is maintained throughout, she reminds her staff "every week ad nauseam of the importance of work ethics!"

She has also found ways to determine whether her words are being adhered to; every few days, she checks the float files — files containing incoming and outgoing mail from each section of the Ministry.

"If I find that an officer took three weeks to reply to a query from a potential investor, I call up the section head. If I see a letter that is topsy-turvy and badly written, I get the head to organise English classes for his staff. Now, the section head checks the float files before I get to them and the system becomes more efficient with time.

"So, as far as my Min-

istry is concerned, and I would include the Government as a whole, I think there has been tremendous improvement in work ethics," she says.

Many senior civil servants agree. One officer says improvements in the public sector should persuade the private sector to pull up their socks as well. Counter services in some banks, says the officer, are so bad that they remind him of "counter services in the pre-Mahathir era!"

Haji Arshad says the new work culture has persisted because the public scrutinises the services provided by the Government. In fact, he adds, it would be difficult to find any area which has deteriorated in the last eight years. "There is no chance of this happening in the public sector because the public has been educat-

ed to complain."

Another senior civil servant also believes that if the clocking-in system is removed, government servants would still come to work early. "These people have internalised the new ethics. Even if they are late by several minutes, it would not be due to lack of discipline. Have you noticed how crazy the traffic jams have become of late?" he asks.

But not all civil servants are as generous in their comments about the new work culture. "I think the overall achievement made over the past eight years is less than expected. If the people were truly committed, we would have achieved 80 per cent of what the Prime Minister wanted. As it is, we have achieved 50 per cent only," says another senior civil servant.

If clocking-in is removed, he is also certain that punctuality would be sacrificed. "This means they are not doing what they are doing now voluntarily."

Even Datuk Seri Rafidah says she is unhappy with

some aspects of the clocking-in system. "The civil servant clocks in at 8am but at 8.15, he goes down to the canteen for teh tarik, nasi lemak, jambu and what not. Why clock-in early when you are not at your desk working?" she says.

Monitoring of the staff after they clock-in, therefore, must be fine-tuned. She says her senior staff tell her that the junior staff are the culprits who run off for breakfast. "But if the senior staff cannot haul in their juniors then clocking-in and the stress on punctuality is meaningless!" she says emphatically.

Another criticism of the work culture is related to the slogan *Cekap, Bersih dan Amanah*. According to one senior civil servant, the civil service might be efficient but its clean and trustworthy image has been questioned by some quarters.

However, a private sector officer says: "I think corruption has been reduced tremendously over the years. The more sophisticated operators are, of course, the hardest to catch."

Datuk Seri Rafidah says there is no room for corruption in her Ministry, at least. "The private sector should be chastised for abetting corruption. Sometimes they are in too much of a hurry to get things done. They want decisions made quickly. But if they pay the processor and consequently label him as corrupt, it does not mean that the entire Government is corrupt. Only the processor is corrupt."

"There is absolutely no necessity for the private sector or for the public to pay under-the-counter money. If they do it, they do it out of their own folly."

Unlike their civil service counterparts who offered mixed views on the new work culture, private sector executives who were interviewed gave a consistently positive assessment of the new culture. They said they welcomed the changes taking place in the public sector. According to Wan Ahmad Wan Shafie, Group Personnel and Manpower Manager of Dunlop Malaysian Industries there

a definite improvement
those agencies which
have direct links with the
people.

"In hospitals, postal services and RTD, for example, the service is prompt, the staff polite and they are at their place of work most of the time. When we call at 1.30am, there will invariably be someone to help us out."

Wan Ahmad says Mida is also a good example of "how well things can work if you want them to work". The one-stop agency gives the Government a credible image. "It tells investors that we are competitive and efficient in our work."

He says the private sector welcomed the Prime Minister's message on good work ethics. "It reinforces our stand on work. We have always been insisting on quality. Now we say, look, the PM is saying the same thing. We feel encouraged by his vision."

However, Wan Ahmad says that even though changes are taking place, the Government must move faster. "With computer technology, facsimile and satellite transmissions, there is an urgent need to gallop at a quicker pace. The Government faces stiff competition from countries within the region. If it does not work faster, the investors will go elsewhere."

Encik Kamaruddin Mohamed Jamal, Esso's Human Resources Director, says the positive work culture in Government service has substantially narrowed the gap between the private and public sector.

It has also had a tremendous impact on the private sector, he adds, forcing companies and organisations to tighten up their acts as well.

"Things are getting better now. What took a number of days to do before now takes half the time. In the past, you would catch civil servants at 9am, now you get them at 8."

Taken as a whole, he says, "we are getting there but the support rituals (like clocking-in) should not be removed. At least, not yet," he adds.

It will take an entire generation to fully absorb and internalise the new work culture, says Encik Kamaruddin.