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Creating an efficient, productive staff

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IT is matter of management and discipline. That sums up what was behind the exhortation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the civil service must be revamped to reduce red tape, which can delay the approval of applications urgently needed to revive the economy.

He also said that public servants could no longer operate at the current pace in today's economic climate.

The Prime Minister's statement involves two aspects of the civil service, namely the system and the people who operate the system.

First the system, popularly known as red tape. There is really not very much that can be done which has not already been done because the system is designed to ensure that everything is in order and that the laws are complied with.

As the Prime Minister's immediate concern is to revive the economy, applications for planning approval are very good examples.

Take, for instance, an application to build a factory.

The applicant would have purchased a piece of agricultural land for the purpose. He must first convert the title of the land from agricultural to industrial use.

The Land Office will then have to refer the application to the Agricultural Department, the Department of the Environment, the Local Planning Authority, besides others, for their comments before approval can be given.

Of late, much of this hassle has been removed by State Governments creating industrial zones with set guidelines for the types of factories that may be established within each industrial zone.

Still, there are people who prefer to establish factories outside industrial zones for one reason or another and delays ensue.

Perhaps one way of overcoming delays is for the District Planning Committee to meet once a month to consider applications in a sort of one-stop-agency where all the relevant government departments are represented, including the companies for the supply of electricity, water and telecommunications. A standard application form should be supplied to the applicant containing all the required information with sufficient copies to be sent simultaneously to all the relevant departments and agencies for their separate investigation in time for the monthly meeting. The Government could then set time-limits for the approval of such applications.

Next is people and their attitude to work. Before and for some years after Merdeka, the rule was that one had to clear the desk before going home each day even if it meant going home after office hours without overtime pay.

Sadly this is not so today. With people having to clock-in on time, it is said that they have a right to clock-out on time also. Work piles up and a back-log accumulates resulting in delays.

There was a time when government servants, except teachers and nurses, were mostly male. Now in most offices, the majority of the support staff are female. They are good and diligent workers but from time to time they go on maternity leave and the real workforce is reduced. At the moment, I have an administration staff of 20, all women, but at any given time one third of them are on maternity leave. Perhaps the Public Services Department should make a survey of staffing positions and create a leave

reserve so that a real and effective workforce is maintained at all times.

Discipline in a large organisation is of prime importance. The mode of dress at work instills discipline. Uniformed staff like the military, the police, fire and rescue, the prisons, customs, immigration and nurses create an impression of discipline. Judges, lawyers, registrars and court staff are required to comply with a dress-code when in court, thus creating an environment of discipline and decorum.

Perhaps the civil service should also have a dress code for male and female officers and staff. On a visit to the courts in Manila, I was impressed with the uniforms worn by all the court office staff. They looked disciplined and could be easily distinguished from members of the public. At home, the staff of Bank Simpanan Nasional wear uniforms, so do airline staff and several other organisations. Uniforms project a corporate image and a sense of pride in belonging to an organisation. It is much more economical to wear a uniform than one's own set of clothes because there is no need to own so many suits and dresses. The invention of the black dinner suit for men at functions, for example, has the twin aim of formality and egalitarianism but at the same time it is economical because one need only have one such suit for the purpose than several lounge suits!

Good management and with it effective supervision of the staff is what makes a department tick with efficiency and productivity.

At one commercial bank, when the doors open for business at 9.30am, all the cashiers at the counters were neatly dressed and all counters were open. They had the cash at the ready to serve customers. At another bank, also at 9.30am, nine out of 10 counters had Tutup signs. The sole cashier with the open counter was just settling down for the day's work. He had to go to the chief cashier for cash, count the money and so on before attending to the first customer. The other cashiers took their time to open each counter! None of them were smartly dressed. It is obvious which bank is more efficient and creates confidence.

All these years we have been repeatedly told that we have the best civil service. Even foreign visitors say so. Perhaps they were just being polite because of our well-known hospitality!

Have we really fallen prey into believing our own propaganda? Or was the Prime Minister only asking the civil service to go the extra mile to revive the economy? He most probably was, because the occasion for the exhortation was the presentation of excellent service awards to his staff!

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