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Innovate or be left behind

IN this competitive global business environment, intensified by the information technology age, it is imperative that Malaysia innovate and keep improving its products. While the alternative may not be a complete demise as the familiar warning goes, the country will surely lag far behind others who are more enterprising.

Earlier this month, a pertinent reminder came from the Japan External Trade Organisation and the Institute of Developing Economies following their joint survey. While it was pointed out that the views expressed were those of the individual authors, nonetheless they are a useful guide. According to their report, if Asean countries are to compete with their rivals outside the region and ensure long-term growth, they must upgrade the structure of their industries, particularly their export industries. This means that they should adopt "a pattern of growth led by improvements in productivity brought about by introducing new technologies and developing a more skilled workforce".

Malaysia's top leaders are by no means unaware of the need for the country to move in this direction if the plan to become an industrialised nation by the year 2020 is to become a reality. In particular, the nation has to possess the capability to innovate home-grown technology to manufacture products for local and foreign consumption. This has in fact been Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's clarion call. On Tuesday, launching the Malaysian Advanced Science, Technology and Engineering Research Centre at the Bukit Jalil Technology Park Malaysia, he delivered another reminder to Malaysians and industries alike. Dr Mahathir gave the necessary impetus in stating that "we must believe fully in our ability to invent and produce world standard products". The Government, he stressed, will always be supportive of local endeavours.

To translate the nation's dream into reality, human resources development and the infrastructure to produce new products and methods are prerequisites. Professionals such as product and packaging designers, engineers and material scientists are essential manpower.

Government financial and other assistance to facilitate research and development, standards testing, patent registration, marketing and advertising as well as production of trial products are vital. One important area is patent registration which has to be made easier and less expensive. Perhaps, Malaysia should emulate the Germans with their one-stop centre to provide fast guidance and information on patent registration to the nation's innovators and inventors, without hassle and huge expenses.

Clearly, our schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning must be fully geared for the important task of producing the required technocrats. The relevant government departments and agencies, too, should be well equipped to effectively play their role of facilitating assistance. If local expertise is not available, steps must be taken immediately to introduce the relevant courses and training to create the required pool of resources. Overseas training should be considered if it is necessary and this is a priority.

Undoubtedly, it will be a long haul towards realising such a vital national goal. Given the commitment by all concerned to work at it, there is no reason why we cannot succeed.

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