

09/10/1999

Rewards for those who sacrifice and strive

Tan Sri Lim Kok Wing

NATIONAL leaders are known to set the parameters of their nation, within which their population and various sectors in society work towards success. It is a task that calls for visionary leadership.

The same can be said of the better-organised industries in the private sector. Top management defines the goals, and corporate staff strive to achieve them.

In each case, the parameters and the goals are constantly widened and enlarged. The overall process may be called development, or progress. It is therefore most appropriate for governments, and governments in the developing world in particular, to embark on a series of public campaigns to harness the energies of their peoples and direct it for constructive purposes.

But how are "constructive purposes" to be defined?

Every country will have its own traditions, priorities and objectives, and therefore the purposes that it deems constructive. Every sovereign nation is entitled to what it considers valuable and worth preserving or pursuing.

However, for most countries there are certain shared interests and common areas of concern. In the context of development in particular, the desired goals would include a society that is responsible, productive, and committed to continual striving for the betterment of self and society. In short, what is required is a strong commitment to excellence. This is an attitude that covers all fields of activity, and concerns people from all backgrounds.

The various differences and divisions in society do not matter, so long as people as a nation are bound to deliver quality performance whatever they do. Indeed, when such objectives and attitudes are a common factor in society, the different groups and communities can work more closely together in building a strong and united nation.

Gearing society to think and act in this achievement-oriented manner is no easy task for any government. From the experience gained from around the world, discipline is clearly a major factor.

But since different societies have different histories and traditions, some countries find it easier to adopt a disciplined and productive approach. Social discipline that is both productive and which contributes to a peaceful and civil society can either be imposed by the government, or it can result from the traditional values and habits of a culture. The most quoted example of a disciplined culture is Japan. Seldom has there been another society, through its own motivation, been quite as driven, performance-minded and quality-conscious. Japanese society as a whole seems to be obsessed with the need for constant improvement, if the products of their labours are any indication.

The result is that today, just a few decades after the Second World War that devastated Japan's infrastructure and national morale, the country is a world leader in the production and sale of motor vehicles and electronic goods, including visual equipment like cameras.

It is also a society that is relatively peaceful and little-troubled by crime. Although increasing pressures are placed on Japanese society today, perhaps partly through its greater opening to the rest of the world, it remains one of the "most disciplined" societies.

Recent years have seen Japan's economy in the doldrums. However, this

current lacklustre atmosphere does not negate the fact that the economy is still the second-largest in the world, for a country that is only a fraction of the US in population size and usable land area.

What country comes close to Japan's attitude and achievement? Germany is often mentioned. Indeed, some have even said that Japan took its approach of constant fine-tuning for self-improvement from Germany.

However, even where there is some truth to that, Germany today seems to be slipping in its admirable reputation. With the reunification of Germany, less competitive East Germans nurtured on state subsidies suddenly joined their West German cousins, expecting "the good life" practically overnight before they were educated into the self-initiative and risks needed to justify such optimism.

Despite its economic problems, Japan today still represents one of the better role models. Its current problems have come despite, not because, of its cultural strengths and attributes.

Over the last two decades, two Asian countries took their cue from Japan: Malaysia and Singapore. They adopted a "Look East" policy to emulate the work ethics of the Japanese, who are generally seen to be loyal, dedicated, hardworking and thrifty.

To some extent, such policies and campaigns do work. They first make citizens aware of the need for greater self-discipline and self-improvement, and they then show where and how such attitudes have succeeded. Rewards come naturally to those who are first prepared to sacrifice and strive.

Accompanying such public campaigns must be leadership by example, where national leaders work tirelessly and selflessly for the greater good of the nation. Again, Malaysia and Singapore have provided this.

Among national leaders around the world today, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is perhaps the best-known workaholic. The results are there for all to see: In less than two decades, Malaysia has developed its economy and infrastructure to an extent never before thought possible.

The regional economic crisis has hurt the country's financial standing and robbed it of much of its strength. Nevertheless, Malaysia today has not only survived but bounced back, displaying growth figures that are better than anyone could imagine just one year ago. With care, Malaysia's development from now on would be stronger and more solidly grounded, having learned from the problems of the crisis.

Although there are still problems to be resolved, the worst of the crisis is over for Malaysia. Confidence, which is the key ingredient, has returned to the country both within Malaysia and abroad. Malaysia's achievement in overcoming the crisis is now cause for other developing countries to learn from its experience.

However, much remains to be done. The nation's leaders have shown vision, dedication and leadership by example. Much of the rest is for the people themselves to take up.

It does not matter whether people are self-employed, blue-collar workers or the professional middle-class. What matters is that people are dedicated to excellence, and committed to a sense of professionalism in the work that they do.

When different groups in society feel likewise and work accordingly, society as a whole will not only develop in stages but advance rapidly. The results will be most obvious, and very impressive.

To help ensure this, government campaigns cannot work alone. They must be supported by complementary campaigns in schools, colleges and universities as well as at the workplace.

This is why senior staff in educational institutions, as well as senior

management at work, must continually urge their colleagues to strive for greater output and higher standards. Full, concerted efforts are required, since single-issue campaigns of limited span cannot be sustained for long. An achievement-oriented mentality must be inculcated in every citizen from young, so that their striving can be observed from their school performance onwards. Acquiring such a mentality must lie at the core of the educational process, and nurturing it must be a lifelong task. In short, every individual citizen, regardless of age, occupation or background, should be educated into a mindset of constant striving. Anything less will not do justice to the best efforts of the nation's leaders.

This applies as much to the public sector as to the private sector. Any civil servant or private employee who fails to meet the mark becomes a burden to the rest.

In contrast, when everyone does their best by pulling hard together, success is both deserved and practically assured. And when both the public and private sectors complement each other in doing so, the result is a meaningful "smart partnership" that can only benefit the nation as a whole.

When a country succeeds, the rest of the world tends to notice even without its government publicising the fact. The credit is then usually shared between government and industry leaders, for providing the environment and the leadership for achievement.

However, when a country succumbs to breakdown or decline, blame is put almost entirely on the government. Media reports and commentary often cite policy problems -or personal failure as a means of explaining the situation.

The reality is that governments can only do so much to help organise, encourage and inspire the whole nation to develop and succeed. As always, much depends on the people in their different capacities acting in the country's various sectors.

After the demise of the Cold War in particular, capitalism became fully universalised and the market a common factor among nations. Economic performance became the key defining feature of countries: growth and development became the standard measures of national success, or failure. Nonetheless, it should also be remembered that this condition need not mean that materialism is the only guidepost to national achievement. What is even more important is the standard of living, or quality of life, that can be made available for the people.

Gross national product and gross domestic product are not the only measures of progress. In recent years, international agencies have come round to an informal consensus that real development has more to do with the quality of life than to a set of academic numbers.

In policy terms, what this means is that the hard work and perseverance required for meaningful development are not less, but more. This is precisely because since national development cannot rely entirely on numerical data but has to be derived from actual, lived experience, it is the visible results that matter.

And in ensuring those results, no effort should be spared in pushing all fronts forward. Indeed, why should there be half-hearted efforts and compromises when all concerned in society are agreed that sustained striving is for the betterment of both the individual and society?

It must be remembered that success is cumulative, if not also failure. Success is said to breed success, since the successful become better encouraged to strive harder, and at every stage continue their striving from a higher level.

Similarly, failure creates dejection and gloom that can be discouraging

and dispiriting. But even here, inculcating the right attitude helps. Instead of being overcome with frustration and giving up, those who encounter failure can be more positive and persistent by redoubling their efforts.

While we may like to think that nothing succeeds like success, one failure also need not mean more failures to come. Instead, it could serve as a basis for more determined efforts to succeed.

Ultimately, the right attitude is one of the most important ingredients to decide one's destiny. This is as true for a nation as for an individual person. And developing the right attitude, which encompasses a sense of responsibility and dedication, is one of the key tasks of education.

Quite apart from requiring students to do well in tests in the examination hall, education relates to the fullest development of a person's abilities and potential. Given this importance of education in society, the more enlightened countries like Malaysia have always given education its rightful position in policymaking and governance.

Where differences in priorities and approaches to education exist among countries, these differences tend to be reflected in their development performance. They are also reflected in the way a society conducts itself.

Malaysia today is already a generally peaceful and very stable society.

Where there are risks of isolated acts of offensive behaviour, the authorities need to exercise their role in maintaining civil order.

The task of all Malaysians should be to conduct themselves in a civilised manner at all times, while working hard for greater achievements in society. It is a joint responsibility for all true patriots.

All nations will need to find their own way to success. And each nation is entitled to find the right combination of discipline and productivity to serve its own purposes.

(END)