

08/03/2003

Dr M to the fore on yet another 'Mission Possible'

Felix Abisheganaden

THEY came, the 200 or so Non-Aligned Movement leaders and their officials. Many of them spoke their minds, some in not so non-aligned terms.

They were all full of praise for Malaysia's six-star hospitality, our flawless administrative arrangements and they expressed amazement at Malaysia's first-world-like development.

For many delegates, Malaysia was a case study for NAM nations to emulate in their re-vitalisation programme.

While the global political situation got its fair hearing, NAM countries were particularly concerned about the economic future of member nations and that of the grouping as a whole.

In fact, the proceedings of the NAM business forum organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel, drew as much or even greater attention than the goings-on at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The delegates have all returned to their respective countries. They've entrusted Malaysia - or, rather, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, with the responsibility of leading the way in "revitalising" the 48-year-old grouping.

It's going to be an uphill task. But Dr Mahathir simply loves challenges. He thrives on them. To him, this job is another "Mission Possible".

Revitalising or "re-positioning," as I prefer to call it, is not going to be easy, especially in this information age.

More information and data are being flung at people today than at any point in history. Whether you are positioning or re-positioning, the "battleground" is the human mind - only now the battle-ground is more crowded than ever.

If Dr Mahathir decides to engage a firm of international marketing specialists to help in this re-positioning exercise, the first thing the experts would do is sit down and prepare carefully crafted arguments on behalf of NAM and its services.

But people's minds are under attack from an overwhelming barrage of information. The more detailed the marketing arguments, the less chance it has of standing out and being noticed.

To illustrate, here are some examples:

\* More information has been produced in the last 30 years than in the previous five thousand years.

\* One weekly edition of the New York Times contains more information than the average person is likely to come across in a lifetime in 17th Century England.

\* More than 4,000 books are published around the world very day.

\* In 1975, there were 300 on-line databases. Today there are thousands of databases with literally billions of bits of information.

All this information coming through is simply too much for people to ingest. So they pick and choose. They use what social scientists call the mind's "three rings of defence".

The outer-most ring relates to "selective exposure". Here, people choose whether or not to expose themselves to the information. They can, for instance, decide not to read a newspaper or magazine.

"Selective attention" is the second ring of defence. While people may be exposed to the information, they can choose whether or not to pay

attention. How often have we tuned out TV commercials during breaks in a movie?

The third ring of defence is "selective retention" - the choice of whether or not to remember information. You might see a commercial and ignore it. Or you might make a conscious choice to retain the information to buy the product.

The job for Dr Mahathir and his team would be to get their messages past the three rings of defence and planted firmly into the minds of the respective NAM leaders and to position NAM as a cohesive, relevant movement in global affairs.

It appears that over the past 48 years, NAM has done little or nothing to keep in step with change. Hence the need for "revitalisation" - or, better still, re-positioning.

The first thing in leading change would be to develop a vision.

Our Prime Minister is a master at this, having provided us with Vision 2020. A vision is essential to any change process for three reasons.

First, it clarifies the direction the organisation is taking. (Often people disagree on the direction of change, are confused about what is happening, or wonder whether significant changes are necessary.)

A vision tells people: OK. This is where change is taking us.

Second, a vision helps to motivate people to take an action that is not necessarily in their short-term interests.

Change often takes people out of their comfort zone, requiring them to work differently or with fewer resources. A good vision shows people the better future for which they are sacrificing today.

Third; a vision helps to co-ordinate action. If everybody knows where the organisation is going, they can make decisions and take action without constantly checking with "the boss".

Without a shared vision, as a few NAM delegates had pointed out, member countries would be unsure of the future.

Finally, the NAM re-positioning team must practice effective communication for this is the key to mobilising member nations behind the new vision.

One of the keys to effective communication is to keep NAM's message simple.

Unfocused rambling phrases stocked with jargon create confusion and alienation - and convince no one. Metaphors and analogy, examples or just plain colourful language help communicate complex ideas simply and effectively.

Communication should be a two-way process. Explain the vision then listen to feedback.

Communicating the vision effectively will get people to act. And action, it appears is what's been lacking with NAM.

Leaders of NAM have done well in electing Dr Mahathir to inject life into the 48-year old body. He can - and he will - because he's on yet another "Mission Possible".