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Learning from a visionary leader

BUSINESSMEN and entrepreneurs can learn something outside of the Harvard School of Business by listening to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

For years, during his tenure as Malaysia's longest-serving Prime Minister, he tried to inspire Malaysians to take pride in whatever they did with confidence and conviction.

Using his own business strategy, he put into operation a long-term plan encompassing his vision in building an economically developed Malaysia. That's exactly what this country needs desperately - strategic thinking and planning.

The realisation of his vision is truly inspirational. It makes sense that companies that specialise in strategic business planning take their cue from Dr Mahathir.

SCQuARE's unique concept in taking an idea or a problem from the inception to the decision-making stage follows along the same path in turning visionary ideas into realities.

When the SCQuARE concept was introduced in Malaysia in 1997, one of the hurdles the company had to overcome was bridging the gap between idea generation and project implementation. This gap continues to exist in many of our industries and organisations.

It was quite apparent even then that many ideas were not being filtered through the management levels effectively. Executives in companies had a tendency to follow instructions without ever proposing better alternatives - and they were quite content with being followers rather than leaders.

This often resulted in impulsive initiatives that frequently degenerated into sub-optimal results. How disappointing that a vital source of creative solutions was being wasted and ignored!

Authoritative management leaders may get results for the short term, but they may not necessarily be the best solution. Tyrannical managers, especially those who abuse and undermine their staff, will not only be resented, but will not gain any support from the ground up.

A good leader is one who stimulates others to aspire to greater heights. He involves the team in every relevant aspect of the project, and champions them to the finish line.

Ideas must flow freely in an organisation. If only ideas generated by management are adopted by the company, then there is no room for the creation of a new pool of future managers.

Indeed, when bosses use their authority to try to make flawed ideas work, implementation can hardly be complete or satisfactory.

The quality of ideas often matters more than their source. Interestingly, Dr Mahathir once said of his political life, "I feel that my contribution even in Malaysia is in terms of ideas - not so much as authority, but ideas. Authority is necessary to implement ideas. Without ideas, authority is useless, so that's my contribution."

His recognition of good ideas, whether his own or from his team, has enabled Malaysia to realising Vision 2020. His words proved prophetic when he announced his retirement plan, and shocked the world of politics.

The accepted idea has been that power and authority cannot be given away, but Dr Mahathir made way for his younger successor because he felt that, "if I overstay my welcome and wait until people hate me, then it won't be very nice". Authority, he felt, if overused could have an adverse effect.

In his book, A New Deal For Asia, Dr Mahathir writes of whether Asia can reinvent itself for the new millennium, particularly after the chaos and turmoil of the Asian crises.

According to him, the crises could only be dealt with by re-examining the way the global economy functions, and not by recriminations. These are the sentiments of a great visionary who believed that progress meant looking ahead and focusing on the future.

He also worked towards uplifting the Asian countries surrounding us. He believed that Asia should rebuild itself and duly become a key player in the world economy for years to come.

He believed that Asia, with its rich culture and heritage, must make efforts to retain control of its own fate. This has been illustrated very aptly in his book Recreating Asia: Visions For A New Century.

One of Dr Mahathir's greatest legacies has been his advocacy of freedom of speech. He firmly believed that if one wanted to practise freedom of speech, then one must be ready to accept the inevitable criticism along with any praise.

It is indeed gratifying to hear an Asian leader reiterating the importance of free speech. Asia, which has often been criticised for the continual banter about "Asian values", has long put up with the common inference that democracy, human rights, and free speech are Western concepts.

Dr Mahathir proved the sceptics wrong. His example, in corporate terms, is to listen for the good ideas in our organisations at all levels.

SCQuARE is not the only benefactor of his ideals. That his contributions are invaluable is highlighted by the fact that a Mahathir Institute of Strategic Thinking is being established.

Furthermore, there are plans for an official Mahathir Library where tens of thousands of Malaysian university students will have the opportunity to study the thoughts of Dr Mahathir. From this initiative, his thoughts can continue to take shape in reality.

Dr Mahathir, who is widely regarded throughout Malaysia as "the father of modernisation" for his efforts in raising the country's image in the eyes of the world, has stepped down after completing a premiership spanning 22 years, but his legacy will remain in all that he has done for our country.

Dr Mahathir had a vision of a Malaysia and he set out to turn it into reality. Despite setbacks and reversals, he always emerged as the champion of our nation's finest qualities to set us on the path to wealth and stability.

From all of us at SCQuARE, we take this opportunity to salute this great leader of our country who has not only inspired Malaysia to its current status, but has also shown the world how effective strategic thinking can be - a lesson which should be learned by us all.

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