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Look what Effendi, Shahrizat have done to their offices

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HAVE you visited a government office lately? If not, I suggest you do so soon. Not just any government office, though. Try the offices of Agriculture Minister Datuk Effendi Norwawi and Minister of Family and Women Development Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil. If you do, I assure you of a pleasant surprise.

These two corporate figures-turned-successful politicians have transformed old, boring and lifeless offices into bold and excitingly adventurous ones. And better still, it didn't seem to have cost too much for the changes to take place. But they do require some very creative thinking and a willingness to experiment and be different.

Effendi's office is at Wisma Tani in Jalan Sultan Salahuddin. The Agriculture Ministry has been located there for a very long time while Shahrizat's office is at the Government Complex in Jalan Datuk Onn. They are among the few ministers who have yet to move to Putrajaya, the administrative capital.

When I first stepped into Effendi's office, I wasn't sure whether I was on the right floor. I thought I had pressed the wrong button in the elevator and was at a showroom instead. I was assured by friends that I was on the right floor and that I wasn't the first one who had the wrong impression.

Effendi has turned his floor into a small agricultural showcase. Gone are the old, tired-looking counters and colourless furniture. There are glass casings filled with almost-real agriculture produce. A hew of colours greets visitors when they see red chillies standing side by side green padi seedlings and other agricultural items.

His own office is very much like a businessman's. A new sofa draped in bold, statement-making orange gets you excited and a conversation with the minister will get you equally excited about the prospects of agriculture in the country.

I would even go as far as saying Effendi has succeeded in making agriculture a born-again industry. I'd rather stop here in describing the office and would prefer you to make a short trip and see the changes for yourself.

It's the same with Shahrizat's office and ministry. In her case, the first change I noticed was in the form of Hello Din, the security guard in dark glasses and beret at the entrance who greets visitors with a smile. The name tag says he is Hello Din, which is enough to raise one's curiosity.

Shahrizat's explanation: "When the Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) visited the office some time back, he greeted the guard saying 'Hello Din.' His real name is Kamaruddin. Somehow, Hello Din seems more catchy and he has been known as such since."

Hello Din greets VIPs with a salute and has given his task new vigour and image.

With a thin MGR-like moustache, Hello Din cuts a fine figure of a friendly and helpful guard, lending the ministry a somewhat warm impression.

The ministry itself is something else after undergoing a general inside-out change in layout and concept. One can see the hand of an interior decorator in the layout and thought has gone into what is a pleasant, cosy and comforting atmosphere.

When colleagues and I visited Shahrizat and her ministry a few days ago, she took us on a tour, one that yielded "oohs" and "aahs". There were paintings done by Malaysian students on the wall, woody furniture that beckons you to sit and chat, drapes that allow you privacy and yet offer a view of the mature greens on the outside.

Meeting rooms too have been given a new look. Wallpaper has replaced white paint and this has lent an informal and creative feel to the surroundings. There's also a powder room on the minister's floor with small paintings done by local artists. In Shahrizat's office, there are framed pictures of family members while a big, framed picture of her spouse, Datuk Dr Mohamad Salleh Ismail, occupies pride of place behind her desk.

I believe that since we spend a good portion of our waking hours in the office, we should make our office as comfortable as possible. In her case, the ministry often deals with issues that burden and add pressure to families. A warm, friendly and comfortable atmosphere allows for creative solution-seeking exercises that the ministry undertakes from time to time.

Shahrizat was quick to add: "The physical setting is good but that is not the most important. What is really important is what comes out from the ministry - what can the ministry do to add value to family systems, ease problems facing families especially women who carry big responsibilities in shaping family outlook, ways to overcome abuses and instil deeper and more meaningful love. I'm more concerned with that."

The changes these two ministers made to their working environment are exciting and tasteful. Effendi has been busy transforming the mindsets of those involved in agriculture while Shahrizat is actively pursuing her agenda of transforming families to be more caring, informed and involved.