

Emulate Bhutan's way to Gross National Happiness(GNH)

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MY friends tell me that the two holiday destinations I must include in my Bucket List are New Zealand and South Africa. As one of them puts it, "They are simply heaven on earth."

I fully agree, having watched countless nature documentaries of these two countries in high-definition from the comfort of my living room.

But I am going to add another country to the list, Bhutan, which is currently celebrating the marriage of its king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, to the beautiful Jetsun Pema.

And the reason is that it is the only country in the world that is more concerned about Gross National Happiness than with Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Said Karma Tshiteem, head of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Commission: "You can be sure that our happiness is increasing."

King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (L) and Queen Jetsun Pema take part in an honour guard ceremony during their wedding celebrations at the Tashichho Dzong in Thimphu October 15, 2011. Bhutan's "Dragon King" married a young commoner in an ancient Himalayan monastic fortress on Thursday, sipping a chalice of ambrosia symbolizing eternal life in a Buddhist wedding that has transfixed a reclusive kingdom slowly embracing globalization. - Reuters

Readers of *StarBiz* are familiar with GDP, of course, but what is Gross National Happiness all about?

Well, when the current king's father was crowned king in 1972, he declared he was more concerned with the happiness level and contentment of his people than mere economic growth.

The four pillars of measurement are economic self-reliance, a pristine environment, the preservation and promotion of Bhutan's culture, and good governance in the form of a democracy.

His idea that public policy should be more closely tied to wellbeing – how people feel about their lives – is catching on, though no other country has taken the bold step to fully subscribe to it.

But the reality is that policy makers everywhere, including in Malaysia, do try their best to make the people happy.

When the Prime Minister unveiled Budget 2012, we can see that ordinary people are not so interested in the hard financial figures as they are about how their lives are impacted by the slew of announcements.

To a young man just starting out in his career, he is more interested in paying less income tax or getting some breaks to buy a new smartphone. The fact that parents of school-going children do not have to pay any school fees is totally irrelevant to him.

Bhutanese children wait on the roadside for their newly married Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck with his wife and Queen Jetsun Pema, in Thimphu, Bhutan, 14 October 2011. Will the Gross National Happiness be as high as it is now when they grow up? - EPA

Politicians, of course, also believe, that if they make the people happy, these very same people will say thank you to them in the ballot box. But the realities of today do not make that a certainty.

Richard Easterlin, an economics professor at the University of Southern California who pioneered research into happiness economics, believes that "we have been misguided in dismissing what people say about how happy they are and simply assuming that if they are consuming more apples and buying more cars they are better off."

According to Easterlin and other researchers in the same field, once basic needs are met, policy should focus not on economic growth or GDP, but rather on increasing life satisfaction or Gross National Happiness. Bhutan, it seems, is the only country that takes their advice.

But what about happiness at work? I believe that every company, especially the big ones, should have some form of Gross Work Happiness index to gauge the happiness and contentment level of their employees.

In the area of remuneration, for example, bosses should look at the gap between the high-income earners and the low-income earners. Promotions and rewards should be administered in a fair and transparent manner.

Staff will be happy if bosses understand that workers are not just economic units crucial to the bottom line but are real people who desire a quality of life that includes intangible benefits.

A company's sensitivity to the life satisfaction expectations of its workers holds the key to having a happy and contented workforce. And, really, it's more than just about money.

□ *Deputy executive editor Soo Ewe Jin's happiness level has risen a few notches now that his taste buds are slowly but surely healing.*

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