

BUILDING FOR A FUTURE THAT KEEPS EVOLVING

TEACH a man to fish, and he'll eat for a lifetime.

That was the simple way leaders approached talent development in the past. They aimed to equip their workforces with the right kind of talent, and growth could continue endlessly.

And why not? Economies progressed in steady, predictable arcs, the training set up executives for leadership roles, and all was good. We could once predict what kinds of skills were needed in the near future.

But here's the problem - the world is now changing at an unprecedented pace, and it's beginning to dismantle some of the business practices and strategies of the past. As the current digital and technological revolution accelerates, "keeping up" is barely enough.

Let's begin with what we have learned. Generally, people learn from past precedent. There's a lot of use of evidence, testing and benchmarking. But there are also lessons that arrive through insightful observations of life around us - hard to measure, even harder to benchmark, plus there probably wouldn't be any precedent to support it. What do we do?

Similar things happen in the process of planning something as complex as a nation's economic development. While we can rely on a few universally proven principles, but it's the differences that create brilliance. And these differences are found deep within ourselves, driven by factors such as our history, immigration patterns, assimilation (or lack of) etc. The biggest elephant in the room (yes, there is more than one) is to fearlessly tackle how we can have a deep and honest look at how we got to where we are, both good and bad.

In the beginning, it will be much easier to point out the bad - in fact, every keyboard warrior on social media has already done so. What's truly difficult, is applying the leadership and vision to be able to take the good parts of who we are and use that to drive our strategies moving forward.

So what are the good parts? One example is our sense of practical innovation. No, we may not have put a man on the moon - but look at the humble kampung and you'll see great examples of architectural sustainability (modular homes that are expandable and grow as families do, or can shrink and be carried on a few strong shoulders to a new location) planned around a shared green space that creates a strong sense of security and community.

This was the norm before the world even thought about sustainable living and gave it a name.

There are also many seemingly natural-born Malaysian strengths such as hospitality, diplomacy, a sense of community and teamwork as opposed to confrontational individualism for example - arguably, very attractive traits in the modern business world.

Think about diversity - which this nation has been greatly blessed with - from young, we speak more than one language, can quickly understand the nuances of multiple cultures, and tend to be more sensitive and flexible in our responses. These are the hallmark of agile, quick-thinking executives who can bravely and confidently navigate minefields if need be. For all those who proclaim business is war, let's take an example from real wars.

Back in 1960, Malaysia was selected to join the UN's peacekeeping force in the Congo. Since then, Malaysian infantry battalions have been internationally recognized as highly capable. Few know this, in the early 90's, the UN Operation in Somalia was led by a Malaysian force commander - active duty even saw them rescue first-world military teams trapped behind enemy lines. Was it due to our brute force coupled with the best technology? It's more likely that we must have had some soft skills the other guys didn't.

The examples above are not anywhere near a complete list of soft skills that's been ingrained in us - dig deeper and there's always more to discover. And what about the other part of the equation: Are we fishing in the right places?

Keeping humanity ahead of the pervasive growth of robotics, data and AI will take the deepest elements of humanity itself. The answer may lie in better harnessing our soft skills - empathy, a combination of logic and creativity, vision, dreams, the agility of our mind to give us abilities that machines are still far from mastering.

These types of skills have been identified as major economic drivers globally. A standout example is South Korea. In its journey from a poor, war-torn country to an industrial powerhouse, it owes part of its success to something as soft as "cultural exports" - its pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas and movies.

Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye defines this as "soft power" - the intangible power a nation wields through its image, as opposed to military or economic might. It creates a unique, desirable image and it's been estimated to have contributed US\$11.6bil to South Korea's GDP in 2014.

This soft power also helps its giant corporations market automobile and electronics brands all over the world. Selling their culture helped multiply what their other industries could achieve. What's amazing is this was planned - I think we can all agree that this is as creative, bold and insightful as any marketing exercise can get.

Can Malaysia achieve similar success? We can. Imagine if we pitted the best of our soft skills (how to fish) against some of the planet's most pressing issues - food security, sustainable housing or transport (where to fish) for example. Imagine if we could dedicate some real effort into connecting our hard experience to our soft skills and put it up against these issues in powerful, imaginative and transformative way.

In a constantly changing world, as we move ahead to plan our economy and figure out how value can be built and captured, we will all have to learn to fish differently. Lessons are in life all around us. And the best teachers may really be ourselves.

About Datuk Seri Tajuddin Atan

Datuk Seri Tajuddin Atan is the chief executive officer of Bursa Malaysia. A seasoned banker before taking on the exchange's leadership role, he believes that innovation and creativity can tackle the fundamental changes facing nations, businesses and the capital markets of today.