



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

THE BOOTLICKING CULTURE

How many times have you been at a meeting and the chairman who is the boss suggests something which you think is not too professional or valid, but to your surprise, one or two others at the meeting immediately agree with the statement made and actually add on to it. In fact they then go overboard by praising the chairman for his wisdom, vision and his analytical skills, which then makes you want to throw up in disgust.

Welcome to the world of bootlicking, sucking up and currying favor or to Malaysians, the 'ampu bodek' phenomena. Bootlicking can be simply defined as behavior on the part of a subordinate with the intention of making the boss feel good, so as to serve personal vested interests. It could be anything from praising your boss to giving him gifts to laughing at his jokes, even when it is not funny.

As much as we loathe it, it is a fact of Malaysian organizational life. There will always be people who due to lack of talent, skills and credibility, take the easy option of winning the boss's favor by practicing facets of the bootlicking culture. As someone said in a recent newspaper article, "Ours is a culture of bootlicking. If you are good at it, chances are you will do well. And that's what keeps us from progressing at a faster rate, because the capable ones who do not practice bootlicking get left behind, and those who are good at bootlicking may not be good at doing the real job."

I cannot but agree with the above as when there is a bootlicking culture prevailing, then merit goes out the window and everyone in the organization become actors and actresses in order to attain the goodwill of the boss.

Some common bootlicking tactics, practiced in our local environment are as follows:

Showing adulation to the boss. A favorite way to show this is by making every effort to sit beside the boss at meetings or lunches, and then taking the opportunity to ensure that the boss's every whim and fancy is fulfilled. This could be from personally serving the boss tea to even lighting up his cigarettes. How many times have we seen demonstrations of this when a VIP arrives at the airport and there is a string of people who are there to welcome him/her. Some people even park themselves permanently at the airport doing this full time!!

Flattery. Every opportunity is taken to compliment and flatter the boss, from his personal attire right down to the one foot routine golf putt that he makes! These people get away with it, as many managers are not averse to receiving praise and compliments, although they may be aware that it is not genuine. We often see this in Malaysia, when individuals get awards and there are full page advertisements taken out to congratulate them. We even see full page advertisements thanking VIPs for officiating at ceremonies.

Mimicry. Forms of mimicry include adopting the mannerisms, speech or dress of the boss. The bootlicking types are taking advantage of the fact that psychologists have found that superiors are more comfortable with employees, who think and act like them, as it gives the superior, a sense of camaraderie.

False dedication. Many of us work long hours as a matter of routine. On the other hand, those trying to curry favor, work long hours at the right time i.e. when the boss himself is working late. Secondly, when they genuinely have to work late, they ensure that the boss and the whole organization is aware of this by sending mails out to the boss, with an opening phrase like, 'Still in the office although it is 9 pm, but wanted to ensure that you will have this on your desk first thing in the morning.'

Presents. This is a favorite way to gain favor as we Malaysians have a weakness for gifts. The gifts can range from 'rambutan from my orchard'(the rambutans were actually bought) to expensive watches. This can extend even to the spouses. The more expensive the gift, the more goodwill is attained. We often see this when VIPs are asked to officiate an event and end up getting an expensive gift just for cutting ribbons in the function.

The major problem with this bootlicking phenomena is that it corrupts and harms the organization because it distorts decision-making. To be effective, organizations must make decisions based on merit and rational thinking, whether the issue is promotions or the development of staff. Influencing these decisions through bootlicking will weaken the organization, as it means that the vested interests of certain individuals will be served, rather than that of the organization.

The solution to this bootlicking culture is to reward people for achieving specific, measurable work goals rather than for just showing up and making the boss feel good. This obviously is easier said than done as this culture of bootlicking is so ingrained in our culture that sometimes we do it as a matter of fact. I guess we will just have to learn to live and let live. Or else, just buy the boss the watch that he has been hinting at for some time now!! It may just pay off!!