



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

FRAILTIES IN MALAYSIAN MANAGEMENT

As part of my profession as a training and management consultant, I regularly visit many organisations on my marketing drives and usually get an opportunity to speak to senior management staff. During my discussions with them, one of the clichés that I often hear is that ‘human resources are our most important resource, and we have to ensure that we manage this resource effectively in order to reap its full benefits’. As a training consultant, this is music to my ears. I tell myself, that from a management perspective, senior Malaysian management staff have got their management philosophies right, and these are the types of views that will propel Malaysian organisations towards world class status.

Unfortunately, I always find out later that this is just rhetoric. Mere extracts of quotations taken out from a Peter Drucker or Tom Peters book, with the intent of demonstrating that the person concerned is keeping up with latest management thinking or is aimed at informing me that they are well read. Later as I interview or else do a survey of the staff, I find out that these words are not matched by deeds. More often than not, no pro-active action is taken to practice what has been preached. But why is this so? This is a question that I have asked myself many times over. Why is it that intelligent, very qualified people, who hold senior positions in organisations, do not match their words with action? Why do they not practice what they know and acknowledge as ‘best practices’.

This is something that has bugged me for a long time. I am not too sure if I know the answers, but I will try to give four reasons why I think this phenomenon exists.

RHETORIC IS ALWAYS EASIER THAN DEEDS

I suppose this is the basic reason for the above malady. Coming up with solutions in a meeting room is easy. The difficult part is the realistic implementation of the solution. For example, we are all aware that employees have to be motivated on a consistent basis in organisations so as to improve quality and quantity of work. This realisation is the easy part. The difficult part is the actual execution and implementation of strategies to make this a reality. How do you translate this ‘theoretical concept’ into operational management? How do you do it on a long term basis? How do you ensure that everyone down the hierarchy practices this concept effectively? These are tough questions for any CEO to answer, and many take the easy way out by half answering it or worse still, just ignoring it. They allow the organisation to be guided on the road called ‘reactive management’. They speak about it, but do not take decisive action to put it into practice. It is ironic that leaders expect so much change from people but very little from themselves.

This is the reason why we always see a lot of symbolic manifestations of change in organisations, like nice pamphlets, nice tag lines, and new organisational structures. These are only effective or practiced for a few months and then after the initial enthusiasm has waned, everything inevitably goes back to normal. Senior management then simply shrug their shoulders and say, “Well we tried our best”.

LACK OF A GOOD MANAGEMENT TEAM

I have always believed that the senior management team in any organisation can only come out with strategies and plans. It is left to the management team to actually translate and implement these plans operationally. This is where the problem starts as the best strategies and plans badly implemented become bad strategies and bad plans indeed. As Jack Welch the former chairman of GE says in his book ‘Straight from the Gut’, “Getting the right people in the right jobs is a lot more important than developing a strategy. We learned the hard way that we could have the greatest strategies in the world, but without the right leaders developing and owning them, we would only get good looking presentations and so-so results.” This is I believe a major problem in Malaysia. I have experienced instances when companies have hired consultants to come up with strategies, only for these strategy booklets to collect dust in the corner of the CEO’s room as the team is not able to translate these strategies into reality. Excuses like ‘I inherited them’,

'they are long term employees, so I have to keep them', does not hold water anymore. It is the duty of every CEO to get the best team who will be able to translate his vision into operational reality. In a sense, a CEO is only as good as his management team makes him out to be!

THE CULTURE FACTOR

I once saw this quotation on the wall of a senior manager, on the rules of management. It said

Rule Number 1 The Boss is always Right

Rule Number 2 If the Boss is wrong see Rule Number 1

I could not help but feel that the above perhaps sums up the cultural aspects of Malaysian management philosophy appropriately. We, Malaysians have always been brought up to respect our elders and superiors. At home we have always been subservient to the views of our parents, even though we may have disagreed with them, and the reason was simple; we respected them. It was a similar story in school as we were always taught to respect our teachers, as they were the 'knowledge givers'. It therefore seems natural for us to bring this mindset over to the organizations we join. We respect our bosses as they are our superiors and we acknowledge that through their experience, knowledge and authority, they have every right to tell us what to do and we have to abide even though we do not agree. In a sense we have misinterpreted the concept of respect to also mean unquestioning subservience to authority.

What is bad about this is that the 'control' system in the organization then disintegrates, to the detriment of the organization. For instance, let's take the example of a CEO advocating a policy of change in the organization, but does not adhere to the very instructions he issued. From a cultural perspective, no one will have the moral courage to tell him and secondly, anyone who is foolhardy to do so; will most likely pay for it in terms of negative consequences in the future. In cases like this, even when I, as a neutral party suggest that change will only occur if it is practiced from the CEO down, I am repeatedly told by the management team that the CEO cannot be expected to participate. The reason given is simple, he is the CEO! My answer to them has always been that the best strategies will not work unless everyone from the CEO down to the office boy are subjected to the same standards and values. Culture is fine, but it must be managed well so that it does not work or be allowed to work to the detriment of the organization.

THEY DON'T KNOW HOW

Many times too, I have noticed that although senior management know what is supposed to be done, they do not know how to go about it. And because they have surrounded themselves with an average team, there is no one who is dynamic enough to take the role of informal leader to drive the change process. What happens then is a situation where there will be lots of rhetoric but very little action. Engaging consultants would be a possibility except that the cost factor would usually be a hindrance. On the other hand, consultants also have a limited role of providing solutions, but the team will be responsible for making it into operational reality.

This is where it is important that CEO's and MD's surround themselves with smart and intelligent people. There is no way whatsoever that they will have the intelligence and intellect to come out with all the change ideas to make their organisations more efficient and effective. They will have to use the creativity and ingenuity of their team. From a cultural perspective, it is not easy for Malaysian managers to want to have 'smart' subordinates. I would even go so far as to say that Malaysian managers prefer loyal subordinates who toe the line as compared to 'smart' subordinates who tend to question when they see things wrong. The price you pay for the former is mediocre results in any change process.

I do contend that the four reasons I have stated are not exhaustive nor are they valid all the time. I am however very certain that most Malaysians have experienced situations where the above scenarios came into play at their workplace. To remain 'relevant' I believe it is time that Malaysian managers make efforts to discard some of these outdated, culture-influenced 'mental models' and to adapt to the changing needs of the very competitive business environment. A positive start would be for CEO's and all managers to adhere to the following three simple principles:

- a. Indulge in less rhetoric and more action in terms of best practices.
- b. Surround yourself with good managers/people.
- c. Accept and encourage contradiction at all times.

Practice of the above will most certainly go a long way to ensure continued success of Malaysian organizations in the current volatile business environment. This is something that Malaysia can do with, especially with the looming economic threat of China in the horizon.