Breathing fresh ideas into an age-old eco-system

By Behonce Beh

Soft skills development was once a grey area SMEs threaded upon with caution. In the era of globalisation, many entrepreneurs are seen to be too focused on making money and utilising of the best technology that could offer. The sad fact remains that SMEs tend to ignore and under-develop the soft skills and competency of its organisation personnel in order to move forward.

“Over the years, many SME employers begun realised that proper soft skills development can enhance productivity and efficiency,” explained Universiti Tun Abdul Razak deputy director of the Centre for Executive Education (CEE) Associate Prof Dr Pua Eng Teck.

Once thought to be an expensive exercise limited to large multinationals, SMEs are starting to realise that they too can benefit from a proper soft skills development programme.

Entrepreneurs and their staff who are better trained and equipped with soft skills are reported to be more productive as they are aware of their job requirements and in handling situations.

“At one point in time, it was well recognised that those who control technology control the market. But this scenario has changed as technology can be bought and used as tools, but those who possess soft skills tend to dominate as their capabilities are inherent through continuous learning and improvement,” said Pua.

From a business point of view, consumers and customers have migrated away from product-oriented purchase; placing greater emphasis towards service delivery.

“The new-age customer demands not only the best that we sell but also the service that we provide to them.

“As an entrepreneur, we should ask ourselves if we are competent enough to serve them? If no, where can we develop the skills needed to complement our business and meet our customer’s expectations?” said Pua.

Pua explained that soft skills are non-technical skills that include the capability of handling and communicating to people. As with the common scenario, he noticed many business professionals may be knowledgeable about their business, but lack the skills to convey the message effectively to their stakeholders.

Hence, he explained that SMEs need to realise that knowledge developments in the area soft skills is important for an organisation to improve itself. In order to do so effectively, SMEs need to develop core-competency of human’s capabilities, which become the important “drivers” to attain such goal.

As an institution of continuing education and professional development, CEE aims to provide necessary knowledge and soft skills for emerging entrepreneurs and management personnel to pursue a successful career as managers in both SMEs and MNCs.

Their Entrepreneurship Development Programme is a ground-breaking program tailored to the needs and challenges faced by successful entrepreneurs. Rather than focus on business plans and balance sheets, participants will examine the world through the eyes of real-world entrepreneurs who will share the mindset that enables them to transform opportunities into successful new ventures.

Meanwhile, the Leadership Development Programme looks into defining leadership roles found in organisations. The programme approaches leadership in the form of understanding one’s ability to understand and direct the external environment via goals, motivations, mindsets and emotions.

Also, the Innovation Development Programme leverages on the practical approaches to incorporating innovation into business models. The programme will examine key aspects involved in taking a company up and along the innovation curve.

From the CEE standpoint, there are three fundamental ingredients paramount to soft skills development in entrepreneurial eco-system that complements today’s competitive environment. And that implicated the integration of innovation, leadership and entrepreneurship,” he said.

The entrepreneurial eco-system, mentioned by Pua, refers to the stages of evolution an entrepreneur grows with; from the early stages of start-up to maturity.

“The question remains on the sustainability of your business at every stage. An entrepreneur has different roles to play as there is a lot of expectation from them.

“At different stages of their business life cycle, it is important for SMEs to know how to handle people of various levels and diverse backgrounds.” For an SME who just started out, he revealed that they need to understand that working hard 24 hours a day, seven days a week is not enough. That’s where innovation comes into play.

“Innovation is not about inventing new products; it is about processes, how to improve and find better ways of getting things done in the shortest period of time and create values.

“How many people are willing to invest in an innovation programme? For them, it is not just about money, it is also about time and the manpower they have to sacrifice in order to develop the company,” said Pua on some of the reasons why SMEs fall short on the soft skill development front.

He added that SMEs need to open up to new ideas in order to help them move on to the next level of business.

In assuming a leadership role to move the business forward, entrepreneurs are encouraged to assess their performance as a leader.

Outside looking in, there are times where a leader needs to take a step back and gauge their performance from external parties.

“The perception held of you might differ between stakeholders; as a leader, your employee might think that you are arrogant but to your clients, it might be another case altogether.

This perception of leadership covers the ability to lead, mentor, provide direction and the ability to delegate.

“At the start-up stage, you might be a one-man show, but as you grow, leaders need to know how to delegate tasks to people. This is something than an entrepreneur needs to understand.”

As the entrepreneurial role changes according to their growth stages, an entrepreneur needs to understand that in order for a business outlook to be long term, competency of the team to perform is important to meet such expectations.

CEE as part of Unirazak has established strong collaborations and partnerships with world renowned institutions and offers professional training programmes related to these areas, to help SMEs move faster and better.

Their programmes address the stages within the entrepreneurial eco-system; from start-up to maturity.

Moreover, the programmes are not limited to managers alone, but are also open to staff in order to help them enhance their work performance.

CEE’s programme content places greater emphasis on practical orientations of the current business world; and is consistent with the industry norms and practices.

“It boils down to human capital development and soft skill development is one of the key factors,” stressed Pua.