Grooming effective and ethical leaders

UniRazak aims to nurture and develop its students into exemplary managers through innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership.

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NOTHING is more significant in our life then to make our deeds, words and actions impactful. What I mean by impactful is that what one does brings benefit to as many people as possible by inspiring meaning into their lives.

As an academician at Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UniRazak), naturally I am intrigued by the top management’s efforts to focus on three niche areas namely innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership.

All our academic programmes, research, training, public lectures and workshops inclusive of student activities now revolve around the three key areas.

Initially these areas did not arouse my curiosity, but as I began to delve deeper into recent studies and literature, its significance dawned on me.

These three key areas are in fact the cornerstone in building effective future leaders and managers for both the public and private sectors.

Let us start with innovation, the buzz word of today. Professor Michael Porter says that “Innovation is the central issue in economic prosperity”.

It is said that those who embrace innovation, also embrace change. Why do we need to embrace change? Well, the answer to that question is quite simple: change is always happening around us, it is a constant in life whether we like it or not.

If we are not ready to ride the tide of change we will probably be swept under by it. Innovation and change are critical challenges in today’s workplace and thus inextricably linked together.

Many people fear change and it is this state of fear that results in the stifling of their creative juices required for innovation.

This is perfectly encapsulated by Jeremy Gutsche, a Canadian innovation expert who says, “at the end of the day it boils down to how ready your organisation is to embrace change”.

In the new knowledge economy, quality and efficiency are no longer sufficient for competitiveness.

Innovation holds the key to the continuous and sustained future competitiveness of a country.

Importance of innovation

Why is innovation so important to the growth of organisations? Innovation is no doubt the key for sustainable growth for the economy, industry and organisations.

The New Economic Model (NEM) launched by the Prime Minister has included innovation as a necessary pre-condition to achieve a high income nation status by 2020.

The only way to increase the income of our people from a high middle income to high income is through innovative and competitive products and services that are valued by consumers.

As a start, the year 2010 was launched as Malaysia’s Innovation and Creativity Year to inculcate innovation as part of our culture.

In advancing towards a high-income economy, the Government took a new approach based on innovation, creativity and high value-added initiatives. The Budget 2012 focuses on developing human capital, creativity and innovation, with 2012 inaugurated as the National Innovation Movement year.

In line with this was the establishment of the Commercialisation Innovation Fund for SMEs (small and medium enterprises) totalling RM500ml, this will create broader opportunities for SMEs to innovate and grow especially to commercialise their research products.

Innovation is not just about creating new products and services.

It is about changing the way we do...
things, the way we think, the process, the approaches, the systems and the mechanisms and finally to the way we treat our people.

Lateral thinking expert Edward de Bono framed it succinctly when he said, “there is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all.

Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns”.

Organisations that encourage continuous innovation will generate or manufacture new market for products and services. The resources that are required for innovation are vision and strategy, a quality workforce, processes, practices, culture and systems that support innovation, a top management team that works closely with cross-functional teams that can help to pave the road for innovation.

We need to know how perception, style and culture affect our thoughts and actions towards innovation and creativity and how they can create a sustainable climate of innovation and creativity in the organization we work with either public or private.

A McKinsey research in 2008 found that making top talent available for projects to meet innovation goals is the single biggest challenge for senior executives in America. Some 40% of them also believe that they do not have enough of the right kinds of talent for the innovation projects they pursue.

It also revealed a wide gap between the aspirations of executives to innovate and their ability to execute.

While senior executives cite innovation as an important driver of growth, few of them explicitly lead and manage it, with about a third managing innovation on an ad hoc basis when the necessity arises.

Human capital

The culture of innovation has to be imbed in the organisation and has to begin firstly with the presence of innovative human capital.

Groupthink is one of the greatest hindrances towards innovation as rightly pointed out by the writer Walter Lippmann who once said, “When all think alike, then no one is thinking”.

Innovation is obtained by people who always think of creative ways to grow and those who have an aptitude and positive attitude in solving problems.

They are then able to convert their brilliant ideas into reality. Innovative people can be nurtured effectively in an academic institution in which the culture and the academic programmes are moulded to produce innovative graduates.

This is the significance of innovation as one of the three niche areas emphasised by UniRazak.

Moving on, I then looked at the following niche area of UniRazak which is leadership. I asked myself “why leadership and what makes leaders so important?”

In a nutshell, leaders inspire their people to get the right things done right and achieve the mission and vision of an organisation.

Driving growth

The culture of innovation has to be spearheaded by visionary leaders who at their core must themselves be innovative. But how is this connected to innovation? Steve Jobs once said, “Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower”. We need people who are actively involved in leading innovation, creating and defining the kind of innovation wanted that serves to drive growth and helps meet strategic objectives.

The culture and spirit of innovation can be nurtured among the people in the organisation if leadership allows and tolerates diversity, relentless change and is open to communication at all levels.

Innovation requires us to listen deeply, speak candidly, question constantly, challenge openly and encourage curiosity.

This innovative work culture can be inculcated via the addition of innovation to the formal agenda at regular leadership meetings, the setting up of performance metrics and targets for innovation and design innovation networks.

Failure is to be expected and even welcomed in an innovative culture because failure is a learning process.

There is a huge role for leadership in creating and living a culture that values innovation.

Such an environment can be more effective than monetary incentives in sustaining innovation.

In fact Daniel Pink argues in his book Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us, that once you get above rudimentary cognitive skills, monetary incentives have a negligible effect on performance.

He argues that, for the 21st century work to function effectively, we need to realign values to promote autonomy, mastery and purpose.

A leader should also be a thinker who thinks about what and how he or she can do something better than his or her predecessor, nurture innovative people and fashion an organisation that can find new ways of doing things or produce new and better products and services.

In other words innovation which is the driving force towards sustainable growth and profits can't function without innovative effective leaders.

Leadership is not just simply about leading or managing an organisation.
But more importantly it is a meticulous process in ensuring a sustainable growth for an organisation while simultaneously creating value for all stakeholders.

In other words we not only want innovative leaders but also ethical leaders who are at the forefront of championing social issues while simultaneously contributing back towards society through dynamic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes.

The question remains, where and how are these innovative ethical leaders to be nurtured to meet the growing needs of both the government and the industries?

One of the best places to nurture innovative ethical leaders is none other than in the university especially one imbued with academic programmes that emphasise innovation and leadership.

In line with this the university has introduced programmes to nurture innovative and ethical leaders to not just fulfil the needs of the government and the industry but to be at the vanguard of change through the creation of both policies and products that will help to spur development.

This is the reason why UniRazak places so much emphasis on leadership and innovation.

Entrepreneurship

Finally we move on to entrepreneurship. How do we connect innovation, leadership and entrepreneurship?

In order for leadership to drive innovation, it has to be done with an entrepreneurial mind and spirit within an organisation that values the culture of innovation and creativity though the hiring and nurturing of innovative ethical leaders.

Innovation is part and parcel of entrepreneurship.

The entrepreneurial spirit and mind should not be limited solely to the private sector as its talents are more than welcome in the public sector.

This is to ensure that effective and efficient methods of management prevalent within the private sector can be further emulated by government agencies and ministries.

The question now arises where we can find these entrepreneurial leaders imbued with an innovative mind and spirit?

Again we don’t have to look far; the university is a fertile ground for breeding entrepreneurial leaders.

Therefore there is an urgent need to take a closer look into our curriculum both in schools and institutions of higher learning to ensure that innovation, leadership and entrepreneurship related academic programmes are inculcated.

One needn’t look far as UniRazak offers a highly acclaimed innovation, leadership and entrepreneurship model in producing human capital.

UniRazak has taken up this challenge of going into unchartered waters to produce visionary future leaders and managers. Its students are trained to be holistic and interdisciplinary in their perspective and thinking.

It is no longer sufficient for them to solely be specialists in their fields of interests but the challenges of the modern workplace requires them at the same time to possess innovative, entrepreneurial and leadership qualities.

This is the type of education and training you will find at UniRazak.

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