Having an adaptable workforce

HUMAN resource managers know that workers must be imbued not only with technical skills but also with leadership and organisational talents. However, academic institutions may tend to emphasise more on academic skills leaving the need for soft skills to be met by employers. Many organisations often prefer to source talented people from the market by offering them good salary terms.

A World Bank Study undertaken jointly with the Economic Planning Unit and the Department of Statistics in 2002/03, covering Malaysian private sector workforce, at various levels of occupations, produced interesting findings for human resource trainers.

The study, which was published in 2005, discovered that about 47.2% of the workers interviewed displayed low proficiency in the English Language, the language of commerce and business.

Another 13.9% had low communication skills. About 8% were found to lack social skills while another 6.6% were not good team players. In addition, another 4.4% of the respondents were found to have low leadership skills.

Thus, over 78% of the workers surveyed lacked one or a few of these five skills necessary for good work culture, adaptability, infusion of technology, and a good disposition towards teamwork.

No doubt the study was done about eight years ago and therefore, the data is dated. Nevertheless, the finding is still quite relevant.

It is also quite alarming as almost half of the interviewed workers had low command of English at a time when this nation depends much on foreign investments and external markets to raise the national income.

Further, about 14% of them have low communication skill. These two skills are very important in assisting activities to promote businesses.

How do we nurture a culture of creativity and innovation among our workforce? We may often focus on the ecosystem but forget values and attitude.

Maybe we also need to examine this matter and reflect on the need to equally address values and attitudes to assist in our transformation exercise.

Lest we forget, I am reminded of the book called Revolusi Mental published in the early '70s on the importance of mental change in our quest for modernisation.

Article contributed by UniRazak Adjunct Professor Tan Sri Dr Sulaiman Mahbob.

firms in the country. It was based on a representative, random and stratified sampling survey. Hence the findings may reflect the reality of our workforce then.

I am sure, by now, some changes have been made to our training programmes to reflect these concerns, after all the study was initiated and endorsed by the Government. Public sector training institutions must have been advised to do so accordingly.

For institutions which have yet to make any change to reflect this concern, they are well advised to incorporate immediately the demand for training of these soft skills.

In this context, the National Economic Action Council (NEAC) in 2008, instructed public universities to retain graduates for a few additional months to train them in these soft skills before they venture into the workforce.

I also remember an industrial visit with the International Trade and Industry Minister in 2010 to a Japanese electronics firm in Kota Baru, in Kelantan.

During the discussion, we were told that the graduates it took in were good and had leadership qualities. They were from Universiti Teknologi Petronas.

It is important that we create a highly adaptable workforce.

Our workers must display their readiness to acquire these soft skills which can enable them to work more effectively and hence command a prime salary.

In a way herein lies the issue of mind set or attitude.

Does our school system nurture a right mind set among our children and youths to be always thirsty for knowledge, skills, and readiness to improve oneself at all times?

Are we developing a culture that is lacking in interest for competition and continuous improvements?

At a higher level of manpower, we are supposed to create Malaysians with enquiring minds and a culture that puts high value on knowledge, skills, and intellectual capital.

In this regard, the New Economic Model has called for greater creativity and innovation.