

THE IEM – A DINOSAUR?



From its small beginnings in 1959, IEM has grown into the biggest professional group in the country with some 15,000 members. This is certainly an achievement but this number is only about 23% of the total population of engineers in the country, estimated at 64,000 and yet BEM is able to register about 67% of that number or about three times that of IEM. This apparent success in numbers also belies many problems underneath. The membership increase has overtaken and outgrown its largely classical organisational and administrative structure as well as work culture, resulting in many hiccups in its operations in recent years and a very stressful work environment amongst office bearers and staff members alike. One has only to visit the Secretariat to notice that no one is really smiling anymore. The number of activities has grown out of proportion, resulting in a clear drop in quality of some of the activities organised as well as poor attendance. Even office bearers are not regularly attending the major functions, never mind the many activities. The Institution appears to lack foresight and dynamism with the majority of Council and Excomm members showing more interest in internal controversies than indulging in major policy issues that concerns the membership at large or the nation. When was the last time a good policy paper was presented in the Council? When was the last time that the Council addressed major national or international policy issues?

This introvert stature of the Council and Excomm, while good at ensuring things are done according to the constitution and bylaws of the Institution as some may want to insist, has effectively made IEM irrelevant to the society, the country's leaders as well as to the industry. Our views are no longer sought on major national issues apart from strictly technical viewpoints. While appearing in many national committees or bodies, our representatives are ill-equipped to maneuver themselves in discussions in meetings or forums which are largely policy in nature, for lack of guidance from the Council or Excomm. Even if they try, it is to pretend that IEM has a stand on certain issues and the view expressed can only be as good as the representative appointed. Council and Excomm over the years have relegated policy issues to the backyard of Institutional affairs because of overindulgence in internal controversies.

IEM has to get out of this rut quickly and address its many shortcomings. The profession itself needs reinventing, for what was known as engineering in the

50's has many new partners or siblings today. Engineering can no longer remain aloof or grow in isolation. The growth of many multidisciplinary areas now is a clear testimony of a largely synergistic world. The Institution itself has to be rejuvenated with stronger emphasis on professionalism, membership services, increase in revenue and R&D as laid out clearly in the IEM Strategic Plan. The Institution's organisational and administrative structure has to be reengineered to provide effective leadership and administrative support to the Institution. And we have to reach out and revitalise the membership at large in order to inject new life and dynamism amongst IEM members, who have often expressed deep dissatisfaction with the performance of IEM in the past.

Of late, a number of initiatives have indeed been undertaken towards this end but the inertia against change is still strong in the Council, Excomm as well as the Secretariat. It has been said that there are a few who still believe in maintaining the status quo, positioning themselves as guardians of the classical ways and derailing efforts towards change and surprise, surprise, it has also been expressed that the Secretariat who should be concentrating on implementation only are also party to this resistance to change. Of course there are those who are uninitiated and unwilling to do much despite being elected to Council and Excomm. And there are those who are said to be largely using IEM for their personal interests, sometimes at the expense or to the detriment of the Institution.

To be fair, Rome was not built in a day. As Confucius said, a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. I believe as the President, I can be the catalyst or a champion, if you like, to change the profession, Institution and membership, but it needs to be a concerted effort with the support of the Council and Excomm, working as a team for us to be successful. I look forward to a day when the Council and Excomm are likeminded, with a singular direction and imbued with dynamism and teamwork. Excomm has proposed the setting up of a special committee to review the Institution's organisational and administrative structure and I hope this is the first important step in our journey to change. ■

Ir. Prof Abang Abdullah bin Abang Ali
President
The Institution of Engineers, Malaysia (IEM)