



ELUSIVE ENGINEERING LEADERSHIP – FAILING TO RECOGNISE TALENT

By: Iy. Prof. Abang Abdullah bin Abang Ali, IEM President

At the recent IEM Council meeting in July, a Council Member raised his concern about a few IEM members constantly expressing negative comments and criticizing almost every good suggestion made. Unfortunately this is some members' trademark. For some reason, they just cannot muster enough energy or lower their ego enough to give positive remarks; they cannot congratulate their colleagues for their good work. At best they will say, "good with a but" and they will then continue with their regular criticism.

So much has been said about engineers making inroads as political leaders in China and other countries and that engineers like Leonid Brezhnev, Yasser Arafat and Sukarno have become famous people. And so has Mr Bean. Down in Malaysia, recommendation no. 3 of the Formation of Engineers in Malaysia Study was to institutionalise a system of collective leadership for engineers to enable us to act as a single force to steer us away from the present divergence of directions of the engineering profession. We certainly would like to see more engineers as leaders in politics, the government and the industry, as Secretary Generals in Ministries and as CEOs of GLCs.

However, contrary to this proposed strategy, we find a few engineers more interested in finding faults in others, true to their description as troubleshooters. These engineers can be described by the story of crabs in a container, none willing to allow any to

climb out because everyone will be pulling down those who try. On the contrary in the other professions and as pointed out by the Council Member regarding one local organisation, their members are very positive, helping and encouraging each other. For this reason, in IEM we are rather slow at supporting and encouraging our own members at getting awards, be it federal, state, IEM or other national and international awards. I notice the mood is that of finding faults and weaknesses in the candidates proposed, instead of concentrating on their many strengths and contributions. It is as if these people have only negative glasses, the positive ones are tucked away somewhere.

When the government wanted to give more authority (and hence the implied higher status and recognition) to engineers as professionals on the CFO issue, there are those who concentrated on the negative aspects of signing the CFO instead of grabbing the opportunity to stand up and be recognised as professionals. Obviously there are problems but let us positively discuss ways to overcome the problems. As the saying goes, you cannot have the cake and eat it as well. And there are those who promote the idea of accredited checkers almost oblivious of the fact that the move can result in a lowering of the status of professional engineers at large. It is as if the PEEng is no longer enough for a professional in his own right. It has been said, in all our enthusiasm to create business opportunities for the checkers, we might relegate our

regular professionals to a second degree.

A few years ago, I was appointed PTA President of a local secondary school which was struggling to provide facilities for its students and teachers, never mind to achieve academic excellence. The PTA which was supposed to assist the school was indeed paralyzed by members of the executive committee who dwell on negative discussions as well. Relations between the PTA Exco and teachers was not cordial, at best. In one AGM, I thought of an idea. For many AGMs we had been electing those who spoke and criticize a lot, yet they were not necessarily those who contributed much. A case of empty cans making more noise. I told the AGM, for once we should try to look around us during the AGM and nominate those who are quiet. In my mind, there were indeed quiet parents who could contribute more to the school. That move did wonders. Now the said school is amongst the top schools in Selangor with all the major facilities in place including a hall, a bus, pedestrian crossings and even covered car parks for the teachers, on top of a written vision and strategic plan, all as a result of the new PTA effort.

Yes, where there is a will, there is always a way. The IEM Council must come up with that political will to turn around the institution. I would be more than happy to lead the way, despite the resistance which is normal to any change effort. ■