

Where Gender Does Not Matter

IEM BUSINESS CLUB

reported by



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The market place today is gender-neutral and, rather than projecting yourself as a woman, project yourself as a capable person instead. This piece of advice came from the chairman of Airasia X Bhd., Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz, who was more popularly known as the “Iron Lady” during her term as Minister of International Trade and Industry.

“Nobody asks ‘Is this a woman’s company?’,” she said. In her trademark mixture of wit and candour, she delivered the first of a series of CEO Talks organised by IEM Business Club (a sub-committee of the Standing Committee on Welfare & Services Matters) and Women Engineers Section.

The talk was chaired by Ir. Elias Saidin, IEM Vice President and Chairman of the Standing Committee on Welfare & Services Matters. He also delivered the welcome speech.

Held at Wisma IEM Petaling Jaya, Rafidah’s talk on “Insights Into the Corporate World” drew a packed auditorium of more than 100 engineers, including many IEM council members on 29 April 2017, although it was the start of the long Labour Day weekend.

Since the existence of the first male gynaecologist, the gender barrier has broken down. “Glass ceilings and weaker sex are inane concepts that many women use,” said Rafidah who urged women to get rid of the “buts” as an excuse that women can’t do something and become more than just quota fillers. This drew laughter and applause from the mainly (87%) male audience.

There are many talented and capable women in many areas today and they should be evaluated based on competence, capability and merit. Gender quotas render illegitimate the hard work and talent that make many women successful today. These women are successful for reasons other than the fact that they’re women, and the quota system discounts that.

To succeed today, women must be in a constant state of adaptation, continually unlearning old “rules” and learning new ones. This definitely holds true for Rafidah, who has shown us that life does begin at 73, the age that she became a certified open water scuba diver.



Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz sharing her views on gender barrier

Furthermore, society should also respect women’s personal choices when it comes to family and career. Here’s a thought to ponder over, that one of Malaysia’s most iconic female leaders attracts more men than women in the audience. Is it because engineering still a largely male-dominated field in our nation or is it because women have different priorities?

In the corporate world, the key elements for success in business are potential, tools and support system. It’s very important for leaders to walk the ground and have a horizontal perspective of the value chain as well as walk every step involved in the process. Malaysian companies should strive to be the “best in class” by global standards instead of being overly obsessed with the “jaguh kampung (village hero)” mentality, said Rafidah who quoted from Chubby Checker’s 1962 hit single, Limbo Rock: “How low can you go?”.

On motivation, it can be thought of as the willingness to move things forward, an important factor for innovation. Innovation itself can be either incremental (improving on a daily basis) or radical (inventing completely new products



Audience during the Q & A session

or services that disrupt the market). Rafidah stressed on the importance of engineers in meeting the demands of the agenda for sustainability in current and future development. In the aviation industry, airline and aircraft manufacturers have already taken various steps to leave a much smaller carbon footprint, she added.

The triple bottom line for 21st Century business focuses on "Profit-People-Planet". Workplace insecurity, discrimination, child labour and human trafficking must be eradicated through sustainable solutions. Businesses must operate using environmentally sustainable practices to gain a competitive advantage in the market. Consumers today have different expectations and they are more connected and more empowered than ever before.

Many businesses fail today because of "no risk management" in place. "In the corporate sector, no matter how smart a company is, it must have risk management," said Rafidah.

She explained that integrity is vital for the corporate sector to survive. She talked about the differences between entrepreneur (person) and enterprise (business). To be a successful entrepreneur, integrity is pivotal and it's one of the basic ingredients, along with honesty, a high sense of responsibility and accountability. Integrity is one of the top attributes of a great leader. It is the concept of consistency of actions, values, methods, measures, principles, expectations and outcomes.

Many engineering failures – such as when bridges collapse, ships sink and apartment buildings tumble – stem from a lack of integrity in today's society which is constantly on the quest for more profits and personal gains. Engineers should always hold integrity and honesty to be of the utmost importance.

As for leaders, Rafidah said leadership by example is important. Leaders must have the ability to galvanise their team as it takes a team to realise a vision.

And for the enterprise, a thorough SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis will help businesses reach the next level.

Rafidah is much loved for her forthright opinion and wit. She continued to charm the audience during the Q&A session. Her criticism of feminism and gender quotas are nothing new. She believes women should be considered for their competence and abilities, where meritocracy will ensure inclusiveness, regardless of gender and ethnicity.

In her closing remarks, Ir. Suhana binti Abdul Majid, Vice Chairman of Women Engineers Section, expressed her thanks to Rafidah.

At the end of the talk, IEM Deputy President Ir. David Lai presented Rafidah with a token of appreciation.

The first in the CEO Series of Talks was a huge success and attracted more participants than the IEM auditorium could accommodate. It also set the tone for the next talk. ■