Stepping Up as A Well-Equiped Digital-First Leader in the Pandemic

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When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it forced a societal change throughout the world. A 'new normal' was adopted as governments issued new regulations that limited large gatherings, which prohibited meetings, seminars, and training; reduced business operations; and encouraged non-essential workers to work from home as much as possible. In response, the organisations and their leaders started to think, explore, and adopt ways to safeguard their organisations and employees and revise their critical business functions to remain relevant and become more sustainable.

In some ways, this situation accelerated digital adoption, especially for collaborative platforms and video conferencing. The priority quickly became to embrace and strengthen the company's digital devices to ensure a smooth transition to work remotely. Not only to the private sectors, digital adoption has been equally crucial to the public services.

The launch of the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint 2021 (MyDIGITAL) acknowledges that digital transformation in the public service requires "strong leadership to drive the digital transformation", striving to be agile and proactive, digital by design, data-driven and user-driven. In phase 2 (2023-2025) of the implementation roadmap, the government will identify 'local champions' to drive digital transformation and inclusion. The government is serious in its digital transformation agenda, and certainly, they will become the 'beacon' for others to follow.

Leading an organisation and its employees through this 'new normal' requires a skill set that is crucial to ensuring that the organisation's productivity and output remain high despite the obstacles. Achieving this feat requires a digital-first leader with technological know-how, coupled with the drive and determination to lead change to survive. However, will that be enough for a leader to drive this change?

Future leaders hold a huge responsibility to catch up with technology advancement and challenge employee engagement

The disruptive digital transformation due to the pandemic has somewhat helped and created a landscape that, moving forward, will continue to encourage innovation and technological adoption. According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report, 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025. This is why leaders must embrace technology, as it is no longer an option but a necessity.

Leaders will also be responsible for building and nurturing the right talent and skills, as shifts in client demands and services require evolving employee skill sets. As Amanda Pine, PwC Partner and PwC's Academy Leader, says, "…there is an urgent need for a new type of leader – one who has a digital mindset and has the skills to drive transformation. We need a new wave of digital leaders who not only understand the application of intelligent technologies in the workplace but also know how to enable and empower their teams".

Apart from catching up with technology advancement, a survey released by Microsoft recently also indicated that the new future of work also requires a greater focus on employee engagement. A study by Gallup, an American analytics and advisory company known for its public opinion polls conducted worldwide on the new working culture, indicate that 64% of employees polled as unengaged even before the pandemic, and 15% were actively disengaged—i.e. working against the mission of the organisation. The worst is, just 21% of employees consider themselves to be "very engaged" when they are working remotely.

Furthermore, according to EHSToday, disengaged employees make mistakes 60% more often than engaged employees do, and it will cause loss to the organisation through increased turnover and lack of employee productivity.

Leadership in a pandemic

Apart from digital and data literacy knowledge that leaders must know in this era, it cannot be stressed enough that human-centric skills are still equally important to keep the productivity and output of an organisation at its best.

For the public sector in Malaysia, the leadership competencies highlighted in the Leadership Competency Framework (LCF) developed by the Public Service Department and Razak School of Government (RSOG) must be strengthened and applied. The framework was specifically conceptualised to address the increased demands of a complex and challenging volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment in the public sector. The five main leadership competencies stressed in the framework includes Authentic, Agile & Adaptive, Strategic, Executive Presence and Transformative (AASET). Although the framework is developed for the public sector, the content is also applicable and suitable to be adopted by the private sector.

AASET is not only developed for high-ranked leaders. The concept is divided into three stages by first promoting the lower rank employees to start taking action to lead themselves and become doers. The second stage involves the growth of the employees' leadership competencies to start leading others and balancing the role as a doer and thinker. The third stage then covers the high-ranked leaders and promotes the action of thinker and feeler to be applied, more than a doer. This is important as, at this stage, the focus is already on leading the organisation.

Among the AASET competencies highlighted, being authentic seems to play a vital role to keeps humanity intact in an age of Artificial Intelligence, machines and an increasingly connected world. Humility, resiliency, self-awareness, empathy, communication, and emotional intelligence are part of this authentic leadership package.

Along with the traits mentioned above, the best chance of being an authentic leader is to be 'real'. This can lead to better engagement with the team and increase chances of boosting creativity and motivation. Of course, you can't fake being authentic because the people around you will know, so the best bet is to just be real and as genuine as possible.

Yes, the adoption of digital technology requires investment, and there may be no alternative to it. However, investment in embracing leadership competencies of employees and employee engagement should not be left behind in ensuring the survivability of an organisation in the future. Employees need to be empowered to fully play a part in this challenging world. Strong engagement with employees will improve their commitment and benefit the organisation.