

System going flaming mad

JAMAL KHAN

I was on my way to a public sector workplace which deals with the receipt, storage and clearance of passenger and company cargo. On entering the premises, I saw a bored-looking uniformed operative standing at the entrance and checking entry and exit of people and vehicles. Fairly small, cramped and nondescript for a sizable multifunctional organisation, the car-park was filled with hundreds of frantic people and scores of assorted vehicles. We found a small niche fortuitously and parked the car. The paved area under the parked car betrayed traces of somewhat-fetid wastewater.

People were standing on a raised concrete platform with a series of loading and unloading decks, with trucks/lorries parked in the adjacent area. There was bedlam -- noise, scurrying, shouting, screaming, and confusion. While some appeared to work feverishly, many able-bodied people kept chatting and gazing as though there was no tomorrow. Accompanied by an adroit agent and an official, I entered a large storage area after following a prearranged security clearance procedure, although a young operative glared at me and asked pointedly if I was with the entering group.

The storage area -- which had long ago exceeded its storing and serving capacity -- fails to inspire customer confidence and immediately induces fatalism. It is congested, cramped, untidy, dimly-lit and poorly laid out. Personnel and customers were standing around

here and there with their hands either in pockets or behind their backs, agents and operatives were running around with paperwork, some customers were cringing in a corner and looking baffled and lost, some employees were sitting behind desks and checking and rechecking approval and clearance. Every chore I witnessed seemed to be manually carried out, and there was no visual evidence of streamlining, sequencing, computer, computerisation and standard operating procedures.

A great deal of fast, furious and noisy verbal interactions took place, a laid-out system was not in place, some peripatetic employees away from their work desks were staring at people and their movement, many aimlessly circled around customers and their cargo, and some people were loitering and looking furtive in the supposedly secured area.

Manual paperwork was extensive, sheaves of paper were ubiquitous, a lot of employee and customer traffic took place, itemisations, estimates and assessments were made in an ad hoc manner. Nobody seemed to check any manual or computer software, employees and customers literally ran from one sector of the workplace to the other for verification, concurrence, approval, and endorsement.

Two supervisory personnel that I came across in relation to my business were clearly overwhelmed in their office with waiting supplicants, favour-seekers, agents, customers, contacts and brokers, while cell phones and landline phones kept ringing, papers and files were changing hands, conversations



JEREMY MAYES

With too many holes in the leaky organisational bag and an antiquated toolkit, the public sector agency continues to cheerily sub-optimise, under-perform and atrophy, and stands out like a sore thumb, with the management remaining clueless and its head buried deep in the sand.

floated, impatience and rudeness surfaced, and concerned customers/ agents were blocking the door to the office and unsuccessfully competing for a foothold inside the cubicle.

A lot of estimates and guesstimates were instantaneously made, payables/charges seemed high and did not appear to comply with any

written or documented schedule, and several transactions, interactions and practices looked suspiciously subjective, situational and variable. Even after paying hefty service fee, customers were asked to pay additionally for the operation of forklifts. If one did not have the right contact at the right place in the agency, I felt pretty strongly that

the numerous personnel involved in unloading, routing and dispatching would have asked for more speed money.

The kind of looks and body language customers got around here sent one unmistakable signal. The message seemed direct, straight, unequivocal and telling: "Whether I do or do not do the job I am paid for is not the issue; the issue is how much you will pay me as speed money; you will get your work done and I will help you to get it done; so compensate me for my time and effort; pay me my share."

Some innocent-looking, smiling and apparently-cooperative employees -- while they were quite stern with other agents/customers -- were working out this or that form, frequently making and receiving telephone calls, and appearing restless. One could not be sure what was making them fidgety. Could it be some kind of expectation, something that was much sought after? Also, they looked and behaved in a strikingly uniform manner: brisk, unctuous, street-smart, practical, fast-moving, deal-making, hustling, engaging, humorous, selective, and chatty. Occasionally, their busy-looking, lined and tense faces broke out in faint smiles and impish condescension.

Clearance was obtained, at long last, after moving through the maze-like and outmoded procedures, and we walked out feeling ten feet tall with the much sought-after cargo. Trucking the cargo to our destination was yet another hassle, and no small feat. The fare was neither metered nor standardised. Uninvited, some desperate porters climbed up on top of the

waiting truck, clamoured for their inclusion in the loading-unloading job, and picked up a quarrel when one of them was taken in and another kept out.

On finishing the job, the guys raised a stink over their gratuity over and beyond the payment for loading and unloading. They dropped the cargo in a frenzy and disappeared quickly in the noisy, dusty, and teeming traffic. You are left with your cargo in the hallway, wondering if, when and how to move your stuff into your pad.

When heading back home with the cargo-laden truck ahead of our car, I had some reflections. The workplace, a throwback from the colonial-time 1940s, is bereft of the systems approach, the rationale for and understanding of systematic work, the recognition of interdependence, interaction and synergy, the institutionalisation of work study, sequential proceduralisation, work simplification, the prevention of unnecessary and excessive human and non-human traffic, precedence-succession relationship, customer waiting area, computerisation, transparency, and accountability.

With too many holes in the leaky organisational bag and an antiquated toolkit, the public sector agency continues to cheerily sub-optimise, under-perform and atrophy, and stands out like a sore thumb, with the management remaining clueless and its head buried deep in the sand. The funny thing is, nobody at the workplace seemed even to bother about it.

The writer was Professor of Public Sector Management, University of the West Indies.

Education policy and 21st Century skills

SHAIDUL KAZI

THE world has undergone fundamental shifts in recent decades -- widespread advances in technology and communications, booming economic developments and increased competition, increased dependency between and among nations, and the escalation of global challenges from financial meltdowns to global warming.

All of these shifts have made the world more complex and connected, which demand from our young generation new type of skills to survive and thrive in the future. The breeding ground of these skills is education institutions where education curriculum is the root.

In formulating education curriculum for the 21st century the concerned authority of school, college, and university in Bangladesh should pay due consideration to the skills which today's students require when they enter into the job market. The curriculum should be considered as the source of required skills.

For appropriate skills building a 21st century education includes knowledge of traditional core subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition, it emphasises contemporary themes such as global awareness, cross-cultural competence, financial/economic trend, health, and environmental literacy. The education curriculum should emphasise the use of theory and practice equally in learning process for skills development.

What are those skills which our young generation should possess for entering into the 21st century job market once they complete education? The most important skills which our young generation should possess in future to survive and thrive are learning and innovation skills -- creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration.

Moreover, in a digital era digital literacy skills are indispensable, such as information literacy, media literacy, and ICT literacy.

Furthermore, career and life skills are becoming more essential than ever before. Career and life skills contain flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility.

In order to equip our young generation with required skills for the 21st century job market, we need a unified education policy immediately. Unfortunately, what we have

The most important skills which our young generation should possess in future to survive and thrive are learning and innovation skills -- creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration.

seen since independence is that no government could formulate and implement a unified education policy yet. The current government has adopted an education policy which may bring a radical change to our old fashioned education system if implemented properly.

The skills we needed for success in 20th century are different from the skills we need for success in the 21st century. In the 21st century we have entered into a complex era of dependency where global economic swings affect everyone's job and incomes. Moreover, the world is becoming smaller and connected by technology and transportation. We are becoming next door neighbour to others, though not in reality but virtually -- through internet, e-mail, cell phone, SMS, Twitter, Facebook, Skype to name a few

The success of 21st century education fundamentally depends upon how effectively these commun-

ication tools are used. We do not need to let our kids become addicted to internet or e-mail, but to teach them how to use these tools for knowledge building and creativity.

In the learning process 20th century education mainly used series of lectures followed by exams. However, in addition to lectures and exams, 21st century education needs activity writing, argumentation, demonstrations, study conversation, learning simulation and games, process writing, cooperative learning, assignments, field-work, problem based learning (PBL), research project/thesis, group project, seminar etc.

In order to prepare our kids for dealing with real world problems in the 21st century, educational institutions in Bangladesh should emphasise creativity and innovation alongside honesty, accountability, leadership, self-efficacy, empathy, gender equality, and fairness from the very beginning of the school year.

The role of teachers capable of building 21st century skilled workforce has been changing very fast, from just a teacher who would give some lectures and take an exam for evaluation in the end, to a facilitator, a careful mentor, a kind friend, a communicator between school and the parents, and a role model for the students.

A change is rapidly taking place in educational institutions around the globe, which is partnership between educational institutions and stakeholders such as parents and organisations/companies. At the primary and secondary levels of education schools should cooperate with parents concerning the progress of the students. On the other hand, in higher educational institutions, there should be more and more cooperation with companies where the students will ultimately work. The example of Japan and South Korea, where companies and universities jointly develop education curriculum and research projects, may be considered here.

MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

THE abiding link between the two events was not visible. Nevertheless, the innate significance radiated by both cannot but strike a responsive chord in sensitive hearts. The earlier event happened in Japan in a relief and rehabilitation center. It exemplified an instance of touching sacrifice by a teenager. Details of the moving incident will follow in a later paragraph.

The latest happening took place in Dhaka on the May 18 as representatives of Japan and Bangladesh signed a credit agreement of \$415 million for the construction of the Padma

Multipurpose Bridge. On the same day, Japan also signed two more agreements worth

\$215 million for two other projects -- \$55 million for SMEs development and \$160 million for a water treatment plant in Khulna.

Japan has always been a generous and energetic development partner of Bangladesh. It has contributed a massive total of \$10 billion for development of Bangladesh since the liberation of the country in 1971. In that context the latest chunk of assistance on very soft terms is not an unprecedent happening. What makes it unique is the fact that it came hardly three months after the devastating row of disasters that hit Japan in the first half of March.

The devastating earthquake, 8.9 on the Richter scale, the sweeping tsunami caused by the terrible tremor and the subsequent nuclear plant disaster in Fukushima disrupted life not only in the affected zone of the North East regions but also throughout the island-nation.

These awesome events together signified "a catastrophe of apocalyptic dimensions." Around 10,000 perished and more than 15,000 went missing. Hundreds of thousands were displaced, enhancing manifold the woes of the disaster-riddled people of Japan.

'Thy need is greater than mine'

MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

The other touching event occurred in Japan at a centre for distribution of food to the displaced who had lost their homes and belongings to the ravages of nature. Here a 15-year-old boy stood at the back of a long queue for receiving meager ration. An elderly man at the top of the queue received his share and full of sympathy for the youth in the back offered his parcel to the boy. The young man received the same

Like a true friend Japan, despite her manifold troubles, continued to extend a helping hand to a friend whose needs are greater. Bangladesh can truly appreciate this noble help by putting it to positive use with fool-proof transparency and accountability.

but with undaunted spirit put it back on the table and said that he would wait his turn. His action reflected in full the undying spirit of altruism and abiding sense of honour which through ages have helped Japan to rise like a new Phoenix from all-encompassing disasters.

Only unparalleled empathy can equip human beings with the spirit of incomparable sacrifice. One remembers with great respect the sacrifice of the superior British officer who, despite being gravely wounded in war and suffering from great thirst, handed over his flask of water to a fellow soldier in pain and said: "Thy need is greater than mine." Happenings such as these are rarely experienced in a cruelly selfish world.

It is in this context of humanity caught in the jaws of self-centered

life that the moving altruistic actions of the Japanese teenager and the people of Japan have to be measured. The boy who gave up his much needed ration and waited for his turn, and his great nation that, despite being reduced by disasters, kept its promise to Bangladesh epitomise the same spirit of noble humanity.

Japan's woes are not the creation of the recent disasters alone. Even before these hit Japan, worldwide recession and domestic economic downturn adversely affected the country. Banks and financial institutions faced grave crises, caused by both global downturn and internal problems. The rate of growth of GDP was not encouraging. The burden of the increasing number of elderly people continued to pose challenges to the economy. No wonder that even as the disasters hit Japan it slid down from the position of the second largest to that of the third largest economy in today's world.

The situation was worsened by the devastations of the earthquake, the tsunami and the nuclear plant disasters. It was estimated that the cost of rehabilitation and reconstruction in the affected zones would go beyond \$320 billion. This does not take into full account the cost of the damage caused by the nuclear plant disasters.

All these reverses could not deter a dauntless Japan from redeeming its promise to Bangladesh. Unlike some others it did not refrain from honouring its promise on the plea of changed circumstances. On the contrary, like a true friend Japan, despite her manifold troubles, continued to extend a helping hand to a friend whose needs are greater. Bangladesh can truly appreciate this noble help by putting it to positive use with fool-proof transparency and accountability.

The writer is Chairman, Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh and Editor, quarterly "Asian Affairs."