

The paradox of young leaders

COMMENT
by Muhammad Ammir Haron

GEORGE ORWELL said it true: "Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it." Herein lies the problem.

If the younger generation is always looked down upon as inept, they will be hard-pressed for opportunities to rise into leadership positions.

In this sense, cultivating young leaders can be a paradox. We say we believe in developing young leaders, yet we also say they lack the necessary experience to lead.

Undeniably, how can anyone gain any leadership experience if not given the opportunities to lead?

We know there is a "glass ceiling" for women but is there a "crystal ceiling" for younger generations?

Say there are two candidates for promotion, with the better contender Mr A far younger than Mr B.

In an organisation with fixed retirement age, it is likely for Mr B to get chosen instead, on the grounds of experience.

This judgment may sound ideal at first. It helps preserve the harmony of age seniority in the office while Mr A can take over from Mr B when he retires, so

both stand to win.

However, this argument's fallacy is exposed when Mr A resigns from frustration, and the organisation suffers from underperformance for prioritising seniority over competency.

Immature and inexperienced - the most popular words typically hurled against youth advancement. In these situations, being young is akin to a disability.

In reality, promoting bright young executives into management and board positions, for example, helps increase team diversity.

Diversity is essential as many studies by McKinsey, BCG and Harvard Business Review have found conclusively that the more diverse a team, the better it performs.

One can name many sectors where an injection of youth diversity can be found wanting - agriculture, cooperatives, civil service and definitely politics.

Jacinda Ardern became the world's youngest prime minister when she was sworn in at age 37.

Despite her age, Ardern's political maturity and astuteness have since surprised many.

Her deft handling of the Christchurch mosque mass murders, volcano eruption tragedy and Covid-19 pandemic has won her plaudits worldwide. Her rise did not come by chance, though.

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In 2008, she was elected the youngest member of the New Zealand parliament.

She became an MP for nine years before helming the country, but this was far from a fairytale story.

She lost three consecutive attempts in general elections prior and only made MP via the party list rather than geographical constituency.

She is where she is today because her party provided her with the opportunity time and time again.

In Malaysia, as we turn into an ageing nation come 2030 with 15% of our population aged 60 and above, can we groom sufficient young leaders to lead us in the future?

Granting leadership opportunities to our Gen Y and Gen Z is a generational investment we have to make now if we want to reap dividends later.

Indeed, experienced and mature leaders are the life-long product of practising leadership early on.

In this regard, empowerment not only concerns education and training but includes the provision of opportunities.

Let us offer our youth the opportunities we always wanted when we were young.

The Undi18 movement, for example, is a potential game-changer for Malaysia.

Led by youths, they spearheaded a historic constitutional amendment

lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 years old.

If you're old enough at 18 to marry, raise children, and be held accountable for your actions, you are certainly old enough to partake in elections.

Denying youth of their right to vote is denying them the opportunity to participate in deciding the country's future and curtails our supply of young leaders in politics.

Arden was 17 when she first became active in politics, earning 20 years of valuable experience before leading her party in 2017.

Older generations need not step aside to make room for younger leaders.

As seen by the Obama-Biden and then Biden-Harris partnership, age diversity in a team goes a long way.

We need a good blend of time-honoured wisdom and youthful exuberance to make the impossible possible.

Now and again we hear how the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow. This saying has run its course.

Now or never, the fate of our country on the morrow depends on our young leaders today.

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