



Asian Productivity Organization “The APO in the News”

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Improving productivity: Not possible with a “slow motion” citizenry

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Japan and Singapore are good examples of rapid productivity improvement through people

There is a renewed interest in productivity with the new Government taking office, and many Ministers have pronounced the need for productivity improvement as means of achieving higher economic growth and thereby delivering prosperity and a higher standard of life to the people of the country.



BY SUNIL G
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While economists work out the relevant macro-economic policies, there is much scope for enterprise level productivity improvement. For this to be achieved, Sri Lanka's population must adopt productive behaviour.

Good examples

Japan and Singapore are good examples of rapid productivity improvement through people. Singapore commenced its productivity drive in the 1980s and made every citizen productivity conscious, so they would adopt productive behaviour.

They promoted productivity in schools, and homes in addition to private enterprises and government offices. Japan made every citizen quality conscious and quality became an obsession in Japan.

A Singaporean participant at a productivity seminar in Colombo held a few years ago commented that in Sri Lanka everything is in slow motion. He said people look very lethargic. His observations were particularly about pedestrians, traffic police, vehicle drivers and cookery demonstrations on TV. He had arrived one day in advance and walked around the city and watched local TV programmes to get a feel of city. He had no difficulty in falling asleep while watching the local cookery programme. Some may remember the cookery programme on TV by the Chinese Chef Yan. I believe it was titled "Yan Can Cook". How active he was during the demonstration. He said, in Singapore people walk fast, talk fast, and are generally smarter in whatever they do.

Well thought out economic policies

Sri Lanka will certainly benefit from well thought out economic policies. We also need initiatives at enterprise level, but for this to be effective we need a sea change in attitudes and behaviour.

I travel often on the Colombo Matara expressway, and if one travels during a long weekend the highway exit is a disaster. Travel time from Kottawa to the Matara Godagama exit is one hour and twenty minutes. On a long weekend soon after fuel prices were reduced I was in a queue at Godagama for twenty minutes. One hour and twenty minutes to travel 126 km and then 20 minutes for the final one twentieth of a km.

The reason is the lack of preparedness of motorists and also their indifferent attitude. Of course they are on holiday and perhaps time is of no essence. Observing the behaviour of most motorists I found the typical behaviour at the exit was as follows:

- Motorist stops at the barrier which is closed, then winds the shutter down and gives a quizzical look at the toll gate operator
- The operator asks for the ticket (which he would have received at the entrance to the expressway)
- Motorist searches in his pockets, the dashboard area, the cubbyhole, the carpetsetc and after much leisurely effort, Eureka, he finds it and hands it over
- Tollgate operator scans the ticket and informs the fee
- Thereafter motorist attempts to pull out his wallet, and unable to do so with the seat belt on, releases the seat belt and finally pulls out his wallet. He then searches for the cash which is not an easy task because he has his laundry bills, grocery lists, credit card receipts, business cards etcin the same compartment. Finally he finds the cash and hands over
- Motorist then receives the balance and the receipt from the toll gate operator,and although the barrier is now open will not proceed until he inserts the balance cash in the wallet, inserts the wallet in his pocket, places the receipt in his pocket and wears the seat belt.
- All this time he ignores the blaring horn from the motorist behind him and wonders why Sri Lankans are so impatient.

Having visited Japan many times, and even before the ETCs were installed, I noticed that every vehicle had a coin holder on the dashboard. The motorist will wind the shutter down while approaching the toll gate, then quickly have the interaction exchanging tickets and money and will drive on. They usually prepare in advance and have the required coins ready and placed in the conveniently placed coin holder.

I usually give the exact amount to my driver and have taught him the importance of having a very short stop at the toll gate and he has responded well, having the cash and the ticket in an easily locatable place, winds the shutter down while approaching the gate, and takes off while inserting the receipt into his pocket.

We desperately need a productive mind-set inculcated in our population. If not,all our efforts at improving productivity will not bear fruit. Singapore made productivity an obsession in the 1980s, Japan made Quality an obsession in the 1960s, and both programmes proved to be successful, and contributed to the economic growth of those countries.

Re-activating NPS

Both countries had a massive media campaign. Sri Lanka's National Productivity Secretariat (NPS) was established in 1996 and the National Productivity Year and the Decade were declared thereafter. A programme similar to that of Singapore was launched by the NPS and was successful to a great extent, but unfortunately fizzled out with a change of Ministers. Suddenly thereafter a Ministry of Productivity Promotion was created, but there was no impact. Unfortunately once again the NPS has lost its significance with no separate Ministry and no ownership. The NPS should ideally be under the Prime Minister. It is of National importance.

Of all member countries of the Asian inter-governmental organisation, the Asian Productivity Organisation (APO), only Sri Lanka is represented by a unit which is not a properly established organisation. All other countries have statutory bodies with sufficient budgets and sufficient authority handling the country's productivity promotion programme.

If we are genuinely interested in improving productivity the Government needs to re-activate the NPS and embark on effective programmes, one of which should be to make every citizen behave productively. We need a smarter and a more productivity conscious population in this country.

(Sunil Wijesinha is a proponent of enterprise level productivity and an expert in many Japanese Management Techniques. He has been in the forefront of the productivity drive in Sri Lanka and was the first Sri Lankan to be awarded the Asian Productivity Organisation's National Award in 2000 for his efforts at promoting productivity in Sri Lanka , and the only Sri Lankan to be awarded the APO Regional Award 2005 for his contribution to promoting productivity in the Asia Pacific Region)