

Business coaching: Hope rising from the ashes

The Covid-19 pandemic is impacting lives and has had severe repercussions worldwide. Almost nothing has been untouched by the current crisis; from the economy to education, everything has been severely disrupted, affecting individuals, communities, corporations and small businesses alike.

As a thinking and caring nation, we Malaysians should be well-equipped to find ways to build the road to economic recovery and facilitate the revitalisation of the nation. As a matter of priority, we need to listen to and engage with those severely affected by the crisis and support them in their search for solutions.

The micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) segment is one sector that requires attention. Almost 98.5% of registered businesses in Malaysia are MSMEs, but concerns about their short-to long-term survival are being raised as their daily operations have been disrupted by the ongoing movement restrictions.

SMEs have been the lifeblood of the Malaysian economy. However, in 2020, their presence in the market took a tumble due to sluggish demand as a result of the pandemic.

The figures provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia make for grim reading. The growth of SMEs' gross domestic product registered at -7.3% in 2020, which was lower than Malaysia's GDP for the first time in more than 17 years.

The issues facing MSMEs during the Movement Control Order period are manifold, the most concerning being a decline in sales, especially for retail outlets, as the lockdown has seen more consumers shopping online. Overall, the problem for smaller companies has been compounded by the lack of funds needed to upskill and reskill their workers to meet the market demands for technological skills.

IT illiteracy is still a big issue among small-time traders and digital adoption is not moving as fast as it should in this sector, despite the wide-ranging outreach IT programmes, government incentives and advances in digital infrastructure.

Coaching for solutions

Apart from official assistance, which will eventually dry up, what else can be offered to help struggling entrepreneurs reconfigure their moves so as to secure a promising future despite the uncertainties? What channels of support should be made available to help businesses gain clarity amid the muddied commercial landscape? How can small businesses gain the confidence and mindset to re-strategise and find innovative opportunities in the crisis?

These were questions posed by a group of highly experienced coaches from Teamcoach International (TCI), who felt very strongly that there was an important role that coaching could play in bridging the gaps, providing support to MSMEs that goes beyond the provision of material assistance. Given their vast experience in coaching corporate and individual clients, the group believes that coaching would enable business owners to explore options to rebuild in innovative ways.

The result was a four-month corporate social responsibility project providing complimentary coaching sessions to MSME owners in Malaysia. TCI, an International Association of Coaching's (IAC) authorised licensee school, spearheaded this move in conjunction with the recent appointment of its Centre for Entrepreneurial Excellence as a knowledge hub in Malaysia by the International Council for Small Business.

It was, as TCI's founder and CEO Dr Shan Moorthi says, "one way of giving back to those who have for so long oiled our economy and served our essential needs, from bringing us food to supplying stationery". In his book, *Coaching with R.E.S.P.E.C.T.*, he talks about the enabling and empowering power of coaching, which helps individuals to unleash their talents and create pathways for solutions through the process of self-reflection and discovery.

What this means is that coaches are the main conduits and goal facilitators that can help effect self-directed changes in behaviour and work practices. At a time when entrepreneurs find themselves at their wits' end, when it seems to be all doom and gloom, this is an outcome that could potentially change mindsets, enrich thinking and lead to some unprecedented positive actions, says Shan.

The idea was to coach entrepreneurs at the crossroads not because coaching can hand them the answers on a silver platter but because it can engage individuals mindfully, spiritually and at a practical level so they can overcome their own sense of despair and panic, begin to reprogramme internally and kick-start innovative ways of operating.

Coaching, in a sense, is a journey to enable the purposeful rewiring of perspectives and visions, so that losses and failures can be leveraged as opportunities to learn and grow from.

Positive impact

So, to what extent can jittery MSME owners benefit from coaching during the crisis? How can conversations with a coach, a professional who may not necessarily be a business expert himself, serve them?

To answer these questions, the group of coaches — which included Dr Zainal Ariffin Ahmad, a Fellow of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia; Bravo Looi Chin Hui and Shan himself — conducted an online survey at the end of TCI's virtual

coaching sessions and presented the findings in a paper entitled “The Impacts of Coaching on MSME Owners via Virtual Coaching: Some Observations during the Pandemic”.

The paper focused on identifying the impact of coaching via facilitative learning to solve practical MSME problems during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study highlights coaching implications for business owners as well as policymakers and researchers, demonstrating how the process can impact the personal and business performance of MSME owners. Can virtual coaching work wonders for those struggling to make sense of their losses?

The IAC defines coaching as “a transformative process for personal and professional awareness, discovery and growth”. Shan, who is currently its president, maintains that when a coach acts as a facilitator by creating an inclusive space, the coachees can start finding their voice.

“They can free themselves from constricting and negative thoughts and explore new ideas. It is normal for anyone to feel demoralised during a crisis, but coaching conversations can enable business owners to look beyond the problems and bring up some solutions themselves — sometimes even surprising solutions. Coaches need not be subject experts, but they are experts at asking the right questions!”

A total of 14 respondents (coachees) were matched with 14 Certified Professional Coaches and they participated in six coaching sessions. The coaching project commenced in January 2021 and the coaches were TCI Certified Professional Coaches. The participants were from a range of sectors, including food, fitness and health, education, communication, the arts, cleaning services and R&D.

The paper’s summary of the coaching experience of the MSMEs and their reported individual outcomes bring to mind Steve Jobs’ view that “Innovation is the ability to see change as an opportunity, not a threat”. Very significantly, the findings of the survey indicate this motivational aspect of coaching, demonstrating how participants were encouraged to move from “loss” to “reassessing”, “reinventing” and “innovating”.

During the coaching project, the respondents worked on various issues that were grouped under personal, business and skills. These enabled them to discuss such issues as vulnerability and courage, right up to having a practical discourse on implementing better decision-making, digitalisation and e-commerce.

Overall, the qualitative and quantitative evidence point to a productive coach-coachee engagement that saw entrepreneurs adopting a “wider vision to take on a larger perspective to enhance their business performance” as a result of their coaching engagement. It was the gradual change in mindsets that was most noticeable and appreciated widely.

A change of mindset

Significantly, the paper points out shifts in the MSMEs' approach to the current challenges. Quite a number of respondents reported being able to move their focus from problem talk to drawing out solution-seeking ideas.

Although the sessions started with people discussing financial and personal woes, it was the ground-breaking exchanges and thought-provoking questions on how to move forward that mattered in the end. The engagement gave the MSMEs an understanding of how, as a powerful transformative tool, coaching could transport them on to a new platform, away from the limitations of the present to the possibilities of the future.

Indicatively, the survey reported many positive comments demonstrating far-reaching impacts on business performance. These ranged from developing growth mindsets to taking bolder actions.

Indeed, for some business owners, the coaching conversations provided an impetus to act swiftly, giving them the courage to experiment with new strategies and helping them to dive into uncharted territories with renewed confidence. It certainly helped to have found an outlet to think aloud.

Within a few months of the coaching exercise, quantifiable outcomes were reported, including an increase in sales figures, unexpected high sign-ups for a masterclass, installing new systems and a successful website launch after long periods of procrastination.

Other results were also seen in terms of key performance indicators, improvements in team performance, achievements in meeting targets, and more use of social media, websites, advertisements, with better market presence, client feedback and improved engagement roles in organisations.

Evidently, there was a general feeling that the coaching helped revive confidence and trust. Says one participant, "I attained clarity in my thought processes and goal-achieving methods. Various [complex and tangled up] worries/challenges that were in my head were successfully compartmentalised into workable, achievable and attainable mini goals leading to the main goal that I envisioned."

Encouragingly too, with the advent of technology, the availability of the internet and virtual meeting apps, coaching as facilitative learning is now no longer limited to costly face-to-face engagement, inaccessible during the pandemic.

Virtual coaching will also be working in tandem with the government's push for greater technology adoption in the country. The virtual coaching sessions worked well despite the physical distance.

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