

Asking the Right Questions

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The right answer can help a business get the most value out of its products or services. But first, one must know how to ask the right questions.

WHY do you always feel sick after eating certain foods? Why is your electricity bill higher even during the cooler months? Why does traffic come to a standstill when it rains?

Asking questions is an important part of learning and living. Without it, we end up stuck in a rut and continue to do things in ways that are old-fashioned, inefficient, or even unnecessary.

This is the essence of the Value Management (VM) method: by asking the right questions, you are able to use the answer to alter a product, service, system or facility (or even your own life) to give it more value.

VM encourages people to be curious and proactive in the workplace and in their lives. This, however, may be difficult in places where there is an ingrained attitude to not rock the boat or ask questions.

With VM, however, one has no opportunity to be complacent. The methodology demands constant questioning and investigating. With VM, one requires and soon enough, acquires a significant degree of insight.

Many businesses in developed countries consider VM to be a prominent and beneficial analysis tool used to get the most value out their products or services. In Malaysia, it is also drawing interest, even with the Prime Minister.

In my work as a quantity surveyor, I have been able to apply the principles of VM. Being one of a handful of VM specialists in Malaysia, I have been able to pioneer this technique. Seeing how VM has impacted my projects, I have no doubts about its benefits over all areas of a business.

Value management is the methodology used to create better value in anything. It creates more value for money by eliminating unnecessary costs or redundant features of a product or service to make it more streamlined.

Most people fail to understand the overall importance of function for their products, services, systems or facilities, and the impact it would have on the eventual improved value of a project or product.

What makes VM so unusual and effective is the fact that it uses both sides of the brain in the problem-solving process. The right side of the brain is involved with imagination and creativity, while the left side of the brain is more analytical - by using both, a more comprehensive understanding of the product or service is developed.

It also prevents people within the same organisation from working in silos or separate compartments, and keeps everyone more involved with each other.

When we become complacent in our attitudes towards work or even our surroundings, a 'value mismatch' arises. This leads to decisions being made out of ignorance, hidden agendas, or something that I call 'honest but wrong beliefs', which are rooted in a reluctance to change.

I believe that VM should be a part of every business process from the beginning: If you are building a house, VM is needed in the planning and engineering process. The VM specialist sits with the design team (which should include the architects, quantity surveyors and engineers), the clients and other relevant stakeholders. Together, they decide on the scope of work, the space-function analysis and how best to meet the needs and wants of the client.

Of course, this is all ultimately dependent on the client's budget. At this stage, the VM specialist is expected to harmonise and integrate all the different facets needed in the construction of the house or managing a factory.

One project I am most proud of, and is an excellent example of VM at work, was when I was asked to assist in the renovations of the public washrooms in the KL International Airport in 2008. The aim was to upgrade them completely, and to address the main complaint that they always had a bad smell.

After inspecting the bathrooms, it appeared that uneven floors in the toilets led to water being collected and becoming stagnant. I suggested that the tiles be replaced and laid properly, recommended that the cleaning roster be modified to include more visits from the cleaning staff, and installed maintenance gadgets to assist with the cleaning.

With these suggestions, the projected budget of RM100,000 per toilet block eventually became RM30,000 per toilet block, an incredible saving of 70%.

VM can also be applied to services. In addition to my consultancy work, I am able to train organisations to streamline processes that will reduce costs in the long run. In this field, I have assisted some government-linked companies and I have also been approached by the Economic Planning Unit to brief the Prime Minister on the value of VM.

I believe it is essential for VM to be introduced more consistently across all local businesses. Firstly, we are taking more aggressive steps into the world and across the

globe - VM will give us a competitive advantage, so in terms of quality, function, performance, reliability, and maintainability, we could do better than others.

Secondly, now that funding is an issue, VM trains us to work within our means and to be innovative. Lastly, the current government is bringing significant changes to the economy, which means VM tools and techniques will be needed to handle new situations.

VM is undoubtedly the way forward in the management of a modern business, making it as successful as it can be. For Malaysia, this means that if this technique is recognised and implemented with care, it will, in the short and long term, bring much good to the economy and the country as a whole.

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