**How to create a confident nation**

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Even though young Pakistanis who enter the international market are quite bright and motivated, they lack the most important attributes of a skilled professional. Some skills that they lack include critical thinking, independence of thought, sense of curiosity, self-analysis, being comfortable in asking questions and expressing their views and opinions, taking initiatives and learning things independently, and taking risks.

In the cutthroat competition of developed economies, these young professionals get overlooked for challenging assignments and client-facing roles early in their careers because of these deficiencies. This leads to missed opportunities for accelerated career progression – the opportunities are then readily taken up by their peers from developed economies.

One needs to understand what competition in a competitive economy looks like to realise the importance of these attributes and their impact on a career in the developed world. With a score of 110 out of 140 in the 2019 Global Competitiveness Report, Pakistan’s economy is not even close to what a cutthroat economic contest looks like.

Developed countries have a high level of ease of doing business, allowing individuals to set up their businesses easily. There are thousands of small- and large-scale businesses that provide similar services and goods to consumers and clients. In competitive economies, both clients and consumers can switch to another supplier or vendor with just a click. Employees in an organisation often resign from their posts to set up their firms. There is an army of young people – in and out of universities – who are starting their startups in their garages, developing products aimed at disrupting entire industries.

In such a competitive environment, maintaining a culture of innovation is a strategic imperative for companies and businesses to survive. Companies try to come up with innovative ways to provide better services and products at lower prices to keep their businesses alive; they recruit innovative people and even offer equity to them. Such people – who manage to get equity offers – are those who possess the traits mentioned above: critical thinkers who are always curious and take risks confidently.

Graduates from developed countries are way ahead of their Pakistani counterparts. The academic and pedagogical systems that mould them were developed in societies that have always been at the forefront of technological innovation in all branches of science and arts. Their preschool, school and university programmes work in lockstep, producing innovators who develop futuristic technologies. Risk-taking is an integral element of the mainstream curriculum in the developed world. It is based on the ‘willing to be wrong in order to learn something new’ principle and is taught to students as early as age four.

When these graduates enter the workplace, they think like business leaders from the very first day. They see themselves as their supervisors’ equals and are unafraid of expressing their views, asking questions and making mistakes. Pakistani graduates, on the other hand, are often timid, shy and fearful, expect to be yelled at if they get anything wrong, and just prefer being told what to do. And since they are never treated as equals by parents and teachers, always experience punishments for making mistakes, and are laughed at whenever they ask questions, they spend a good part of their early careers in finding their voice.

By this time, their colleagues from the developed world have already proven their mettle and achieved early opportunities for accelerated career advancement. There are small steps that Pakistani parents and teachers can take towards providing their children the best possible platform to compete with their counterparts from the developed world. They must encourage children to ask questions and challenge things around them, voice their opinions and not be afraid of making mistakes. They should reward them for trying and strictly avoid words, tone and actions that harm their confidence, self-image and self-esteem. These steps are mostly related to changing our mindset and conduct around ‘learning’. No matter how good the curriculum is on paper, traits such as critical thinking, independence of thought, curiosity, and risk-taking are inculcated in children through the conduct of their parents and teachers.

Parents and teachers need to realise that no matter how poorly children do in school, they will eventually go on to compete in the same globalised economy as everyone else. ‘Average/below-average’ students exist all around the world and make up a majority of the workforce. Parents’ mission should be to ensure that regardless of their academic grades, ‘average/below-average’ children are equipped with some level of curiosity, inquiry, confidence, empowerment and self-esteem so that they can deal with workplace-related problems.

For parents, there are great resources available on the internet on how to deal with children of different ages without having to resort to disciplinary violence. Hitting and shouting at children can have long-term effects on their confidence and self-esteem, which negatively impacts their future ability to solve problems in their personal and professional relationships.

Teachers should also refrain from shouting at students in front of their classmates. This behaviour destroys the confidence of an individual student and sends a message to everyone else in a classroom – that making mistakes deserves being punished. Such students carry this flawed attitude with them to their workplaces and end up limiting their careers in competitive economies where such an attitude stands directly against nurturing an environment of creativity and innovation.

Students should not be allowed to perform uniform checks and dispense punishments based on archaic rules inherited from our colonisers. In most Pakistani schools, latecomers run rounds of the school ground under the gaze of student prefects. In developed countries, if school-going children are late, they are not punished. Their parents, however, get a call from the school. Students in the developed world are taught to work with each other and recognise and bring out the best in each other. This is done through a robust extracurricular programme and a plethora of sports opportunities in and out of schools.

Such activities are essentially an early simulation of different aspects of contest and teamwork that students will experience in their work lives. Students realise that no matter how bright they are, they can’t work alone to achieve real-life objectives. They have to learn to work with others and be able to take people with different personalities and ideas along with them on the journey. Others get the opportunity to discover talents that are not recognised by grades but are equally important for bringing success to teams.

It is imperative that parents in Pakistan put pressure on their children’s schools, demanding them to organise extracurricular clubs and societies and regular sporting contests. Children, especially those who are not doing well with their grades, need these outlets to discover their other invaluable talents that are going to make up for any perceived academic deficiencies, giving them an equal chance of being successful in their careers. Parents also need to get involved as parent volunteers to ensure the continuity and success of such programmes.

Students, too, must realise that their formal academic experience may last anywhere between 10 and 20 years but their career is likely to go on for more than 40 years. They won’t have their parents and teachers around in their workplaces. Some concepts that they have learned in their textbooks would be outdated after a few years. Their strength should be their learning habits, curiosity, motivation to find answers, self-belief, integrity, self-confidence and self-esteem.

Students who are not enjoying their school experience should seek support. They should consult with their parents and teachers and try to bring changes to the things that are in their control. For example, after school, instead of going to tuitions, they should watch instructional videos on YouTube to understand concepts they are having trouble with at school. They can also try exploring other subjects, courses or hobbies, or connecting with like-minded peers to start an extracurricular club. They can find a problem in society and then come up with ways to solve them. Doing something they genuinely enjoy will instil the confidence they need to be good at anything they set their mind to in them.

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