

# BREAK UP OR MAKE UP?

**S**UDDEN break-ups can result in trauma and mental distress, namely self-doubt and the feeling of loss, especially when the reasons are unknown.

The impact can lead to depression due to being unprepared emotionally. Overwhelmed by the emotions of being dumped, a suicide may ensue. Neuroscientists have discovered that the brain finds it difficult to adapt to the "pain". Brain scans of rejected individuals show several specific areas are involved, especially those associated with the experience of "pain".

For organisations, unexpected break-ups may also have similar impact, not so much on the institutions per se, but more so on the employees whose lives and careers can be abruptly changed for the worse. Similar "pain" can be felt if the break-ups are not well-handled, especially in large organisations where the hierarchy is too steep to really care.

Organisation-wise, the more immediate issue is the emergence of "new" (usually unnecessary) silos made up of different personnel extending across the organisations which have split up, leading to a duplication of assets such as accounting staff or human resources, even chief executive officers.

This can be wasteful if the overlapping and redundant silos are not finely-tailored. Silos also cause displacements and poorly organised workflow resulting in physical/geographical dislocations. It is time-consuming if subordinates are situated in different buildings from their bosses. What follows will be work culture disruptions, breeding inefficiency and disorientation. Eventually, overall performance can be affected due to

the unintended discontinuity of face-to-face sharing of information — and, therefore, decision-making and processing — affecting effective communication and delivery.

All these may culminate in disruption in cases where the continuum of events and activities is vital. Such is the case for healthcare services and education, science and technology as well as the environment.

Take healthcare as an example. There has been only one Ministry of Health despite the distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare services, very much akin to the education sector — primary, secondary and tertiary education. Indeed, for a long time, there is a single and integrated Education Ministry until the early 2000s. Then the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) was created for

the first time. It was initially thought that universities would benefit from such a move but there were several unintended consequences that acted as counterweights, some considered educationally "unsound". It was not surprising that as soon as a new administration came into power, the two entities were merged again, breaking the silos. This took us back to where we were, though not quite, because almost everything existed in "duplicates". Incidentally, at almost the same time, the Thai counterpart decided on the opposite. In the United Kingdom, the Department of Education changed to Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills in 2007. Now it is called the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. It is quite obvious that each country has its own experiences to make the respective decisions. But under the current intense transformation processes, such flip-flopping causes concern as the education ecosystem is intricately linked to deliver the desired change by 2025.

Some of the concerns include: whether the reasons that caused the ministry to abandon the last break-up have been thoroughly considered and resolved so that whatever caused the previous split-up does not recur — notably that the continuity of education delivery is not misaligned, especially when the two Education Blueprints have been closely integrated to achieve the same student and system aspirations. A very close collaboration (nothing can be

closer than being in one ministry) is imperative. "Loyalty" to a particular ministry is bound to spark a "tuft war" as experienced previously. More so, when ministers have different Key Performance Indexes (KPIs), with practically no shared KPIs that will motivate seamless partnerships down the line.

When all is said and done, the trade-off between mergers and silos in terms of generalisation and specialisation, or total and sectoral, impinges on the fine continuum and balance as depicted in Shift 1 of the MOHE Blueprint which is key to overall transformation of education as an ecosystem. We have not even talked about the cost involved, knowing too well universities are experiencing budget cuts.

When it comes to education, we can only wish the song, *Breaking Up is Hard to Do*, by crooner Neil Sedaka in 1975 is held dear, especially when he insists that "instead of breaking up, I wish that we were making up again". It is no wonder that Japan has a ministry dubbed "MEXT" covering Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology consolidated under one ministry rather than being siloed. This is more instructive, considering the many Japanese successes in each entity relative to our own.

The writer is honorary professor at the University of Nottingham and Chair of Leadership at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Email him at [education@nst.com.my](mailto:education@nst.com.my)



DZULKIFLI  
ABDUL RAZAK