

New Etiquette for Business

By ARSamson

One of the pioneers in the then young science of economics is John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who started as a philosopher and civil servant. By the title of his seminal book, “The Principles of Political Economy”, it is clear that he saw the two disciplines of human endeavor as inextricably linked, perhaps as inseparable as Siamese twins.

Sometimes, this relationship between politics and economics can be unhealthy when it is too cozily joined. But always, it seems inevitable. Even in a clean society like Singapore, what the government does with regulations, laws and its supervision has an effect on the way business is conducted. The influence of one over the other is not always malignant.

Will the new politics of hope also usher in a new economics? With the promised platform of honesty in government, is there going to be a new way of doing business? Clearly business manners that previously treated government or personalities within it as silent (but nonetheless demanding) partners will need to follow a new paradigm.

This corner proposes the new etiquette of doing business in the new administration. Here is our guide to proper behavior.

- 1) Do not drop names. You can no longer say “FG” (as in FG knows about this deal) and expect fear and trembling from the person you are talking with and force him to deal with you in an obsequious manner. The two letters no longer stand for a portly man with a raspy voice. They now refer to a re-elected councilor in Bulacan who has a sweeter voice but whom you are not likely to bump into in any golf course. Name dropping, even when one legitimately knows or is even a friend of a now powerful person, is likely to embarrass the latter without opening any doors for the former.
- 2) Fall in line. If you need something from government, be it a driver’s license or a business permit, just follow the rules and fill up the form. This is one way to ensure delivery of the promise of honest (and efficient) government which always starts with a law-abiding citizenry. Corruption is a two-player game. Citizens too have to be honest, even when this is inconvenient, as it often is. Try practicing this new mode of behavior starting July 1, 2010.
- 3) You don’t have to check with anybody in the palace if you can to do a gigantic deal. The private sector will stay private. There is no need to “clear” with the palace if you are merging with another private firm. It’s only the regulatory agencies involved, if any, that will need to be informed for requisite approvals. If the enterprise involves foreign investment, a courtesy call may still be welcome for the photo op on the new climate of investment.

- 4) You can work on the premise of non-interference. The business sector especially liked this particular administration to take over because it promises to be not a competitor but a referee. The leader or his inner circle is not likely to want in on a deal or block the way so toll can be paid for continued progress. Omission is not always a sin. Non-action can be a virtue that allows business to run without needing to look over its shoulders for gate crashers in the party.
- 5) Take out the yellow ribbon sticker from your car. The elections are over. If you want a fitting symbol, get a flag. You must understand that your voting pattern (even if indeed you went yellow, and it is no longer necessary to have done so—green or orange is fine) is not a ticket of entitlement. Neither are the donations you made, the ideas you contributed, or the switching you executed going to get you transactional privileges, except perhaps for arranging meetings like courtesy calls. You have to get used to falling in line—see number 1 above.
- 6) You can postpone doing business with midnight appointees. Unless it is inevitable, and you have a pending case in the Supreme Court, you can wait for the dust to settle and the challenge tested before dealing with any one of the 300 seat warmers who got to the movie just when the screen credits started rolling. The manicurist has thankfully gone back to doing nails. She does show some polish.
- 7) Do not claim connections. Anecdotes about childhood links with the newly elected leader should only be mentioned over beer, and among close friends. Knowing the leader when he was in short pants and hitching a ride to school with you will not likely score any points with anyone. It will only cast you in a pathetic light. It's better to wait for any acknowledgement from him, if that is at all in the works.
- 8) Do not forward lists of appointments. There are many lists going around on who will take over what GOCC, even after the major appointments have been made. It is not clear how these lists get to circulate and who really benefits from their wide distribution. But if you get one of these, just read them and then delete, even if your name appears in one of them.
- 9) Concentrate on running your business. The economy will improve if the CEOs and major stockholders need not be bothered with paying homage to the government leaders and remembering birthdays and what appropriate gifts to give. This alone reduces the cost of doing business and should spur efficiency and improve returns on sales.
- 10) Compete on economic terms. If political connections (see number 7) no longer apply, then competition will have to be on better products, cheaper costs, more efficient delivery systems, better marketing, and inventory control—and all those old-fashioned ways of making money for the stockholders...without using or needing political clout.

I'm sure there are enough pessimists out there who will say that nothing will change and it will just be new faces with new appetites taking charge. These same cynics are also the ones who predicted that somebody else would win and the one who ended up with the landslide victory had no chance. How can you sell hope? This was their battle cry.

Well, we better all start believing in our country again and change the way we do business. It takes our cooperation too not to waste this historic opportunity.

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