



# Time and Tide Waits for No Man



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I read with interest and tinged with amusement a recent media article that mentioned how a bride's family in India got the bride married off to a guest as the bridegroom was late to the wedding by ten hours. I long to see something like this happening (perhaps one newly wedded partner scooting off from the dinner!) in Malaysia during wedding dinners when the calling of our stomach is not attended to due to the delay in commencement of the function.

In Malaysia, 'I am so sorry I am late, I was stuck in a traffic jam' is a common excuse that we use. If the 'traffic was bad' is your excuse every morning, people will wonder why the heck you can't just plan for it. I personally experienced differences in understanding the term "soon" or "I am on the way"! These terminologies may entail a long frustrating wait for me.

A concern for me has been the lack of appreciation regarding punctuality. I do sometimes wonder whether punctuality is the art of guessing how late the other person is going to be. As one climbs up the ladder in many organisations, the punctuality trait seems to be inversely proportional. This explains quite often the delay in waiting for the chairman to start the meeting. 'Well, I am the head and you are bound to wait for me' culture! Has our culture written off the habit of being on time as insignificant and inconsequential? Can we not muster up the confidence to politely ask that you do me the courtesy to simply be on time?

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It is seemingly culturally acceptable for us to be late for meetings, appointments, weddings so forth. An interesting facet among the Japanese is their obsession for time. What Malaysians consider being 'fashionably late', the Japanese consider rebellious and egocentric. I had an experience in Japan when I was a speaker at a conference few years back. Clear instructions were given to the foreign speakers about time management and other nitty-gritty details. Three bulbs replicating the traffic lights system; red, amber and green were placed on the rostrum. Green light gives a cue to the speaker of a balance of five minutes to complete the presentation, amber one minute left and once the red light flashes, the microphone is switched off. It was ironical to note two of my Malaysian colleagues ran afoul of time management. As we see, Malaysians being Malaysians, we carry our trait of speaking till you are politely requested to shut up! Robert Levine and Ellen Wolff in their article, *Social Time: The Heartbeat of Culture* ranked Japan as the country with the best 'punctuality concept'. A survey in Tokyo reported that only 5% of women and 4% of men have wrist-watches that are set inaccurately. The Japanese put on wrist-watches to exercise punctuality. But we seem to put on wrist-watches only as ornaments for show or to flaunt our brand.

An exposure for me at a German multinational organisation enlightened me of the true definition of punctuality. The first cue I had when I stepped into the company located in the east coast of Malaysia was the physical presence of wall clocks; two clocks depicting Malaysian and German time synchronised accurately at all their meeting rooms and places of importance. It was worthy to note for me that all their meetings commenced precisely on time immaterial whether it was chaired by the supervisor, manager or managing director. Punctuality at work, lunch and other assignments were of utmost

importance. A late presence was chagrin to bosses and the maxim "Better late, than Never" does not hold water with the organisation. A learning curve for me at this German organisation was punctuality is preached and practiced by all the people from the pedestal to the bottom. An organisation that imbibed Charles Darwin's belief, "A man who wastes one hour of time has not discovered the meaning of life.!"

Punctuality in the service sector is another area of concern. Trains, buses and other public transport systems have to be mindful that punctuality is the key to a successful service. A few months back, when I booked for an airport taxi by telephone, the driver arrived late. When I commented to him of his late coming, he remarked rather calmly that he was late by only 20 minutes! The driver failed to understand that airlines have their definition of time and punctuality; at least most of them try to. It is noted in Europe, US and in some Asian countries like Japan, Korea and in Singapore, buses and local trains maintain a sense of punctuality even in the remotest of areas.

In line with our nation's quest to be a first world nation, it is imperative that we have the first world mentality and working habit. Lack of punctuality is a theft of someone else's time, showing disrespect and may be considered insulting. Lack of punctuality is a violation of our own expectation of people's treatment towards us; we are to treat others as we would want to be treated. Lack of punctuality translates to loss of productivity. Hence, it percolates to an economic loss to oneself, an organisation and the country in general. We need to avoid procrastination and tardiness by changing our habits and tweaking our routines. Punctuality helps us in our progress.

"Will you walk a little faster?" said a whiting to a snail. "There is a porpoise close behind us, and he is treading on my tail." So goes the rhyme in *Alice in Wonderland* which also gave us that famous symbol of haste, The White Rabbit. A little haste and proper time management may go well to maintain punctuality. However, it has to be the top to bottom approach in any organisation. We not only have to be punctual, we also need to be seen to be punctual. **M**

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