



bespoke homes jamaica

RECONNECTING YOU WITH YOUR ISLAND

*Dear Reader,*

## Letter from Jamaica No. 14

# Do “it can do” attitudes hold back Jamaica?

Do you listen to Power 106FM? Talk radio from the Gleaner. “And remember, tomorrow is another opportunity to do better than today” is how Dervan Malcolm ends his afternoon show. It always lifts my spirits. Yet, far too often as I move around the island, I hear or see: “It can do”. A saying that permeates our attitudes in so many different ways. A saying that affects how we behave as neighbours, citizens, road users and witnesses of crime, to name just a few. A saying that affects our attitudes to each other. A saying that affects our customer service levels. A saying that affects the productivity of many of us and of the country. A saying that affects all our incomes now and in the future. If true, what can be done?

Well, first things first! We must recognise that increasing numbers of us are actually saying “it won’t do”. And “I will do better”. Helped by the likes of Dervan Malcolm and our own values and perceptions of personal responsibility. Examples of more of us practising “a better tomorrow” grow day-by-day. Like when I recently broke down at the toll booth near May Pen. A driver pulled up immediately and asked how he might help. He spent 20 minutes just waiting to see what might be needed, seeking nothing in return. Another example comes from Kingston’s MegaMart where, in response to a till breaking down “mid-line”, the supervisor helped four customers move their goods to a newly opened till close by.



The police have also shown me the potential for a better tomorrow. First, they were excellent at handling traffic in and out of the Trelawny Stadium for the 2014 Jazz and Blues Festival, both in planning and delivery. Pity that Toni Braxton wasn't any bit like! Similarly, the police seem to be getting better when stopping persons on the road. In four months I have been stopped just three times – and on each occasion with no attempt to rid me of spare cash!

So, what's he on about with all this "It can do" thing? Well, quite a few workers – at least construction workers – give that impression. Not the highly-skilled ones we normally use at Bespoke Homes Jamaica. No, we recently tried out some new workers on a project in Manchester, to increase our pool of labour. Here is what we found...

One quite promising mason made a concrete sink which looked good; but on closer inspection sloped by an inch from one side to the other, with plenty of scope for "pooling". Good, but not good enough. "It can do." The tiler was worse, with poorly cut edges and undulating surfaces. Similarly with another much older mason, who splashed so much mortar beyond the small section of wall he was fixing that the ceiling and floor looked like the Cockpit Country! And he had no intention of cleaning up the mess. "It can do"!

Quite annoying was the plumber, employed to fit new toilets. On checking his first installation, I found re-fill happening at a rate of about "half a cistern per hour". The same for the next toilet. He blamed the factory settings. But would you not check whether something you'd fitted actually worked properly? Worked in a manner useful to the customer? A twist of the screwdriver and all was well. But: "It can do"!

Too many workers just don't seem to think (or care?) about the quality of their work. Checking is vital, both for the worker and the manager. "It can do" just can't do. A worker who checked their own work would improve their reputation as well as their productivity and that of the country's. How much we make or achieve per hour is productivity and it's fallen on average by 1.3 per cent per year in Jamaica for the last thirty years. Linked to this, the economy has grown by only 0.8% per annum in the forty years from 1972. Virtually the slowest growth of anywhere in the world, affecting most persons' incomes.



### **Perfecting the concrete sink**

Okay, some will say how persons work all comes down to how you pay workers and how you treat them. Yet we at Bespoke Homes Jamaica do pay fairly. And we treat our workers with much respect. We recognise that many have very similar priorities to management. As Kenneth Carter found in his study of workers' and managers' attitudes to work, both groups tend to prioritise the same aspects of work. Both groups put appreciation for work done as their top priority and well ahead of extra wages. Even so, Carter found that many managers misperceived workers as prioritising wages above all else. Understanding your workers' priorities and concerns is vital for all of us.

Are workers in services any better than those in construction? Well, in many all-inclusive hotels the tourist often gains top class service from Jamaican staff. As good if not better than customer service found in most British and American hotels. But beyond such hotels and with some other notable exceptions, the answer is "no". For example, in a supposedly quality hotel but not all-inclusive, I order ackee and saltfish with banana, yam and callaloo – twice. What arrives with the ackee and saltfish is banana and festival on one plate; and banana and callaloo on the other. No yam at all.

And yet re-ordering delivered the precise request within five minutes. Was it the chef or the waitress who thought “it can do”? Certainly the waitress correctly repeated the order when she first took it!

Another restaurant, atop a large hill, overlooking the town. Great views, elegant building. I ask for my fish to be lightly cooked, not fried bone dry and hard to prise from the bone. The waitress understands, having repeated the order. So, what do I get? Certainly not lightly cooked fish!

Another hotel. Another example of customer service. A quality set of hotel rooms in an idyllic setting, close to the sea. No kettle; hot drinks must be ordered from the kitchen – and added to the bill. So after a long day, I return and place an order. Forty-five minutes later, it arrives; but the beverage is barely lukewarm. Surely, “It can do”? I ask for a hot version and another forty-five minutes elapse before my request is finally met.



### **...Coffee delivery at pace**

And it's not just catering and some hotels. I once walked around a hardware store, adding lots of valuable items to the trolley. Reaching the till at 4.59pm, the assistant says “De till close. Close at 5 o'clock. Come back tomorrow”. No prior warning. No chance of paying, even at 5pm. Think of the warnings given in British, American and European stores! Think how long the tills remain open after closing time!

Attitudes to time – and the use of time – also often have an element of “It can do” about them. Recall the plumber. Fling the toilet in place and move on to the next one as soon as possible. Save your own time today. But waste the manager's time and get less work tomorrow. Hardly a recipe for prosperity.

Saving personal time is one thing. The plumber cost me wasted time - and time is money or productivity. But there's also saving personal time that can cost many

strangers lots of time. Costing the community lots of time. Many motorists in Jamaica are big time-offenders. Someone forcing their way out of a side road instead of waiting for the one vehicle to pass. Okay, that happens in Britain and elsewhere, but probably more often and with more vigour in Jamaica. Then there's the opposite sort of driver, who drives very slowly in the outside lane of a dual-carriageway like Mandela Highway and delays tens or hundreds of other motorists. A driver on a cell phone can cause bigger problems, especially at high speed. Overtaking on blind bends can cost lots of time and, all too often, life. "It can do"!

Bad also are "red plates", or route taxis. They will pull over with no signal if they sniff a pedestrian who just might possibly be a passenger. They will reverse down the wrong side of the road to save a would-be passenger from having to walk an extra twenty yards. Just in case she should be snatched by a competitor. Certainly cut-throat competition, if not predatory competition! And never seeming to care that reversing down the wrong side of the road might cause considerable congestion to both flows of traffic. Let alone the added danger to pedestrians. "It can do"!



Cars of any sort waiting on the outer or inner side of a roundabout is another "tief" of other persons' time. Some pedestrians are almost equally culpable, as they alight from the pavement as though motorised or horse-drawn traffic had never existed! "It can do"!

"Tiefing" of time probably affects more persons than crime and corruption do. At least in frequency. "Tiefing" of peace and quiet especially in the middle of the night is another major social problem. Sadly, hardly anyone is prepared to report much of this activity. "It will have to do". And when a person does complain about noise, the



authorities often seem unwilling to act. We shall have to see how well the new environmental noise laws are operated. Let's hope it's not just "It can do"!

With theft of goods or works' equipment, workers usually know who has stolen what. But they often have blind eyes. Similarly with local persons who witness street crime. And office workers, professionals and others who know about corruption. Perhaps most persons think most persons know about "tiefing". "It can do". "Stuff happens". "Dat's how it tan".

### **A thoroughly modern wine bar in Kingston**



There we have some aspects of modern Jamaica. "It can do" still appears too often for our own good. Too little concern by some persons for quality of work. Too little concern for customer service. Too little concern for others' time. Sometimes little concern for persons' rights to a peaceful night's sleep. Little willingness to report crime. Nor corruption. Will we be able to see further progress in the future? So that many more persons can benefit from a more modern economy, with better pay and job prospects for the many?

Modern Jamaica. It can do. Too little concern for quality of work. Too little concern for customer service. Little if any concern for others' time. Little concern for persons' rights to a peaceful night's sleep. Little willingness to report crime. Nor corruption. Will we be able to see further progress in the future? So that many more persons can benefit from a more modern economy, with better pay and job prospects for the many?

Well, thankfully, the Government has started upon some important steps, some as part of the IMF deal of 2013. Taxation of business is being reformed. New legislation will enable more flexible working hours – arguably one of the key factors enabling Britain's economy to improve so much in the last thirty years. The Criminal Justice (Suppression

of Criminal Organisations) Bill was passed in March 2014. The reporting of crime and corruption is being encouraged. INDECOM has just secured the conviction of eight police officers for not answering questions about deaths from police shootings. Persons involved in car parking extortion in west Kingston have just been convicted. Some demonstrations are happening, not least downtown, calling for an end to the carnage.

We can all do more to help Jamaica develop faster and better. We all need to become more responsible for our own actions. Attaching more pride to our quality of work. To our use of time. To the time and other penalties that we may impose on others. Several groups are helping to take forward a focus on values, real respect for others, justice, how to achieve more, less corruption etc. We could all support their work via Twitter and Facebook. Some that you may like to consider on Twitter are: @HelpJACchildren (advocacy and information); @ThinkJamaica (hard-hitting insight); @EBJamaica (Education for Better Jamaica); @OneLoveRepublic (Re-ImagineJamaica); @ibija (Governor General's I Believe Initiative); @Petchary (Emma Lewis' blog on values, justice and much else); @rateURjamaica (for you to rate customer service); @NIAjamaica (NIAL Jamaica, aimed at combating corruption). All are also on Facebook or have their own website.

Training at work and better management will help. Serious management of quality, time and methods along with much more project management will help. For many adults, better literacy and numeracy are a useful starting point – as witnessed by the lack of understanding that lies behind some of my building site examples. Much of Ronald Thwaites' work with schools will help children. The increasing focus on customer service levels and training can help a lot.

**The future can be a great view, as from Jack's Hill...**



Most of all, however, we need more persons to change their values. It all comes down to each and every one of us taking greater personal responsibility – for self and family, and for society. For society so that each person doesn't cause costs to other persons. So we begin to think about how our actions may affect others. And, equally, our inactions. Pride in quality work and quality behaviour. Quality child-rearing. Reporting of criminal and corrupt practices that we happen to witness. Not paying backhanders to police officers and to other officials. The twitter links mentioned two paragraphs above may help focus minds and hearts.

Not even going as far as our fabulous National Pledge – which I apologise for quoting yet again! But keeping it in mind would help, given its wonderful vision:

*“Before God and all mankind, I pledge the love and loyalty of my heart, the wisdom and courage of my mind, the strength and vigour of my body in the service of my fellow citizens; I promise to stand up for Justice, Brotherhood and Peace, to work diligently and creatively, to think generously and honestly, so that Jamaica may, under God, increase in beauty, fellowship and prosperity, and play her part in advancing the welfare of the whole human race.”*

Just not damaging others would be a great start. And more of us seeking to improve our own efforts would be a major help. “It can do” just cannot do any longer. If Jamaica is to prosper more in line with its potential. Doing better tomorrow than we do today.

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PS. If you enjoyed this Letter from Jamaica, please forward to friends - and encourage them to register by emailing me. Thanks, Stuart

Please also send me your comments, of whatever sort.

## **Reference**

Kenneth L Carter: *Why workers won't work: the worker in a developing economy; a case study of Jamaica*; Macmillan Education – Caribbean, 1997