Strengthening human capital quality

According to Philippe Haspeslagh of the Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School in Belgium, corporate governance is the system of rules, regulations, and practices by which we hold managers and owners accountable and responsible for whatever performance society expects. This definition is also applicable to social governance, in which case it is the system for holding members of society accountable and responsible for performing according to expectations.

Governance is closely related to the issue of human capital output. Many of our people today have problems of attitude, responsibility, and are risk averse. So, we need to look at how we can rebuild and strengthen our supply of quality human capital. How can we ensure that in 20 years time the younger generation today will have a positive attitude, will be proactive, believe in the responsibilities given to them and are accountable for it, and are willing to take risks?

The macro framework will have an influence on the behaviour of the people in this country. For example, many people are not clear on the role of education. Why do we send our children to school? Is it because so they can say I have a school certificate and I passed with excellent colours? Or do we send our children to school because we want them to know how to learn, behave with others and interact with society?

The learning aspect, I believe, needs to be further enhanced. Because when the learning curve is low, you cannot talk about creativity and innovation. For example, in a mathematics lesson today, students are given a problem like the following: if one apple costs RM1, how many apples can you buy with RM10?

This is very linear thinking. In the West, you are likely to get a more challenging problem like: if an apple costs 80 cents and you only have RM 9.50, how many apples can you get? Why aren’t we teaching our children like that? It’s not so much in the calculation; it is in the thinking process. We cannot talk about wanting to have people in high-specialities if we don’t address this.

Another thing we should address is how to inculcate our younger generation with values like having a good work ethic and being accountable for their responsibilities. I’ve heard from many people that today’s generation have no self-motivation, and sense of organisational responsibility and professional commitment when it comes to their work. Many of them suffer from dependency syndrome; symptoms include lack of independence, unwilling to take risks, and inability to make decisions.

I think indifference is one of the causes of this syndrome. People are not accountable and responsible when it comes to work because they think there are no consequences. Here’s a good example of indifference: people parking illegally all over the place. This is not a common occurrence in other countries. Here, people do it because they know they can get away with it.

Another cause of dependency syndrome is immaturity. Maturity comes with experience. Unfortunately, our graduates today are not even willing to acquire experience. Instead, they wait to be told what to do, how to solve a problem, and expect to have their hand held every step of the way. Some of them don’t even want to work. They say, ‘I am tired after all that learning so I want to relax first’. And they remain unemployed for three months to a year.

I think soft skills are an important component of quality human capital. It has to be embedded in the person and we cannot achieve this by offering more courses. If you want to teach a person about decision-making, you don’t enrol him in a course on decision-making; you give him the process of making a decision. When he is confronted with a problem and has to make the decision, then he will learn.

It’s time to focus less on theory and more on experiential learning. This is how we inculcate our people with soft skills so that they can become wholesome professionals who are capable and motivated to scale the heights of achievement and contribute to the nation’s development.

□ Professor Datuk Dr Md Zahid Abdul Rashid is the president and vice chancellor of Universiti Tun Abdul Razak.