Nurturing leaders in a complex society

WHAT is more important when it comes to getting things done — process or outcomes? We ask because people often say the private sector is more efficient than the government when it comes to getting things done. However, the private sector may not always adhere to procedures when carrying out their decisions. For example, after a meeting the private sector would immediately implement the decision made during the meeting without waiting for the minutes to be approved. They will only create a resolution to approve after the fact.

Let’s say they want to purchase something and they make an order. After they have placed the order, then they will prepare a resolution for the board of directors to approve. In the government, when a matter is decided, a decision cannot be implemented until the minutes are approved. It will take weeks or even months for the minutes to be approved.

The question now is: is it illegal to implement decisions without minutes? What is more important: getting things done or getting things done the proper way?

If you don’t do it the proper way, the issue of integrity and good governance arises. Someone who does something by jumping the gun is considered to have no integrity. On the other hand, red tape can slow things down, and you will appear to be inefficient.

When we talk about performing our daily prayers in Islam, for example, we also have procedures to follow. There are specific time periods throughout the day to perform our prayers, before praying, there is a ritual to taking ablution, and our method of praying is also very specific. However, there are exceptions to the rule under special circumstances.

If you are travelling over long distances, you can combine and accumulate your prayers. If you are on a plane, you can pray in a sitting position. And even if you are bed-ridden, but your mind is still alert, you can pray with your eyes by moving them up and down as you would your entire body.

I take this to mean that God wants us to pray as long as we are capable, and he has made it easy for us by giving us many ways to fulfill our religious obligation. If God can provide us with flexibility and options, why should we have such hard and fast rules for ourselves?

The problem with integrity and governance is there is only one way. Take audits for example, the approach to them — whether government or corporate — can be very shortsighted. When you go from KL to PJ, you can only use the LDP highway as this has been the only route available for a long time. However, now there is also the Duke highway, but if you take it, then the auditors will ask you, why did you take the Duke highway? But why must we just use the LDP highway when there are other options?

Process or outcome

In trying to manage a complex society, there are times when we should be more concerned with process, and there are times when we must be outcome oriented. For example, when you teach mathematics and you mark a maths paper, do you look at the outcome or do you look at the process?

If you look at the process, people will get marks even if the answer is wrong. Focussing on process means there is an emphasis on learning. When you focus on the outcome, what’s more important is results. For some people, you will not get the outcome unless you’ve fulfilled your criteria in the process.

As we continue to progress as a nation, we need to ask ourselves: what is important? Some people will say it is important that we become rich. How we become rich does not matter — we may rob, steal, or cheat. But others may feel, what’s the point of becoming rich if that is how you do it?

And what if you don’t know how a person amassed his material wealth? Suppose you’ve been living next to a Good Samaritan for more than 25 years. One day you discovered that he had robbed a bank 30 years ago, and was never caught. Since then, he has repented and contributed immensely to society. What would you do? Can 25 years of good deeds make up for the crime he committed more than three decades ago?

The media is very fond of dredging up a person’s past especially when they are making their way up or have already gained prominence. You are a leader today but you may have made mistakes in the past, does that give people the right to expose your mistakes?

Exposing public officials for their current corrupt practises is one thing, but finding fault with them for something they did in the past is another thing altogether. What gives society the right to question someone’s past actions? After all, everybody makes mistakes. To err is human, to forgive is divine!

Wrong or right

It is a very complicated world and things are never black or white. There are always shades of grey which can veer more towards either black or white. The question now is: how do we teach the younger generation what is wrong or right? Because without this demarcation, in the future what we consider inappropriate could very well become acceptable.

For example, we can tell the young that gambling is wrong. Yet it is legal when licenses are issued for the sake of some interest groups. How can the
younger generation not get confused? This will also make it harder for us to explain between right and wrong.

I’ll give you another example. A person has got to do his work because it is his responsibility to get it done. However, some may feel that in order to get a person to do his work, it is necessary to give him an inducement. So, which is correct? Where is the demarcation between inducement that is right and wrong?

If it is not clear, people may assume that the inducement is something they are entitled to, instead of seeing it as a reward for good work. As a result, things don’t get done when there is no inducement. If this happens, the whole society will collapse.

So, we have to teach our young the black and white; let them learn the shades of grey as they go through life. The problem now is black is also white, or white becomes black, and there are no shades of grey.

Managing millennials

I brought this up because grooming our next generation of leaders is going to be a hefty challenge. In 10 to 20 years’ time, generation Y — also known as the millennials — are going to be the leaders. This generation has been brought up in an environment where technology like the Internet has made things easy and convenient for them. As a result, they have a hard time coping with what our generation, the baby boomers, are used to.

According to the book ‘Managing the Millennials’ by Espinoza, Ukleja and Rusch (2010, Publisher Wiley), baby boomers have the willingness to learn and adapt to new ways of doing things. They can modify their behaviour to suit the workplace. Millennials, however, express a desire to do what they want, when they want, according to the schedule they want and not worry about someone micro-managing them. They don’t feel they should conform to the office processes as long as they complete their work.

So, for the millennials, if there is a good movie this afternoon, they would go watch the movie first and then get their work done. Work can wait for them.

Another good example from the book: A lecturer may say, if you do good work, turn in your assignments on time, and attend class regularly, you should get an A. The millennial understands this as, if I turn in all my assignments and I attend class, I will get an A.

They figure as long as they get it done, they should be rewarded. They do not take into account deadlines and quality of work.

Everybody is saying this young generation cannot do work. The problem is they have entered an era where they are seemingly not supposed to do work with all the conveniences available — their environment is different.

So, we have to do something to train and nurture our next generation of leaders knowing their attitudes and values differ from us. The millennials are already working today. They make up 30 to 40 per cent of the workforce. If we do not address these concerns about them, our entire economic infrastructure may be in jeopardy.

We need to prepare them to face the challenges of making the transition into a developed nation, and this means changing their socio-psychological perspective of ethics and values in our society.

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