Ethical leadership crucial, says Razak School deputy dean

RAZAK School of Government deputy dean Prof Dr Syed Omar Syed Agil expressed his concern on the rising issue of unethical leaders nationwide and globally.

“We need to issue an alert. Nationwide and globally we are seeing a dearth of ethical leaders. Almost every day we see and hear ethical lapses among political, business and non-governmental organisation leaders which are signs of moral bankruptcy.”

“Our concern for the lack of ethical leadership is supported by facts.”

He added that, in Malaysia, economic crime remains one of the most problematic issues.

Forty-eight per cent of Malaysian companies have been subject to economic crime during the past two years.

History has attested that unethical leaders resulted in the dissolution of dynasties and nations. In fact recent business history has shown that unethical leaders caused the demise of their organisations.

The most successful organisations — whether they are business, government, community or military — are successful because of great leaders.

In the highly competitive and highly volatile world we live in, those with great leaders will do great things. Those with ineffective leaders will founder.

“Our society and nation crave ethical leaders whom we can trust and want to follow. Where have our leaders gone? Why do we need ethical leadership?"

“I define ethical leaders as leaders who prefer to choose a life which requires them to act and decide consistent with ethical and moral values, inspire others and make sacrifices for the benefit of those they lead and govern,” he added.

Ethical political leaders should be guided by the concern for public interest while ethical business leaders make decisions and provide goods and services for the good of their stakeholders.

“We have seen how subordinates become moral followers when they see moral leaders leading them. Most of the time they behave unethically when they see their leaders are immoral.”

Leaders should be exemplary examples of ethics and integrity. One of the best ways to move toward being the most honest and ethical leader is to surround himself or herself with those who possess an even higher level of integrity and ethics.

Political and public sector leaders should apply the politics of common good in their decisions and actions to ensure that public interest and not self-interest is served at all times.

Ethics training should be conducted in political or business organisations in order to instil good values and habits such as transparency, accountability and integrity, or TAI among leaders.

It is inadequate that government, political and business organisations depend entirely on a system of reward and punishment and controls to prevent unethical conduct among leaders.

As one manager expressed it, “you motivate for greed and set up a system of controls to ensure that if someone steps over the boundaries, they’ll get caught and be penalised”.

Since the root of the problem partly comes from greed, the control must come from within the leaders themselves. They have to be instilled with the values of altruism and benevolence and the concern for the welfare of others.

“We must introduce an effective system of control which is primarily based on the ‘control’ from within the individuals which make them high performers and deter them from doing unethical activities.”

Career development of leaders and politicians should be based not merely on their job performance but also their high ethical standards. An explicit code of conduct and business ethics should be adopted that managers and executives are required to read, sign and follow.

Apart from this, companies must develop a corporate climate that places ethical values above others. There is indeed an absolute and urgent need for moral leadership in business, political, public sector and non-profit organisations if we truly want to achieve a high income status in 2020.

The dearth of ethical leaders in our society is a fact and if nothing is done urgently we will soon see the death of ethical leadership.
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