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Inculcate ethics among professionals

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ON Sept 22, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad lamented that Malaysian companies implicated in large-scale land clearing and open burning in Indonesia were not giving any form of aid or assistance to combat the haze problem.

The Prime Minister was dismayed over the attitude of corporate citizens in Malaysia who were once full of his praise. Although it is unfair to label all corporate citizens as having an indifferent attitude, the question is are we breeding responsible professionals?

Here, I mean professionals who will shoulder the nation's goals and visions? Thus, I feel the Government ought to seriously look into inculcating some ethics among professionals, if not by introducing more stringent regulations.

In an unprecedented move, the Government has taken steps by asking the courts to impose heavier penalties on culprits to show that they mean business.

Corporate citizens are largely professionals. Thus, bearing this incident in mind and other incidents like tax evasion, currency manipulation, unlawful dismissal and breach of the law, the number of professionals who lack ethics are on the rise.

Professional ethics or commonly referred to as professionalism is often taken for granted. A professional is generally defined as a person who is trained, educated, able, skilled and competent in his or her field of work. However, more than just that, professionals are expected to have qualities and virtues that distinguish them from the "ordinary".

What I mean is that they must embody some key attributes such as values and social ethics befitting that of professionals.

If Man has been placed on the highest pedestal among all other living beings and is considered to be the best of creation, it is because of their power of judgment and certain values which distinguish them from other species.

Man has or is expected to have certain attributes which entitle them to be called "the noblest of creations" whereas these qualities are missing in the beast or the brutes. We know of many white-collar crimes which have taken place in our own backyard. Hence, how can we expect others to inculcate virtues when professionals themselves don't exhibit these qualities?

Sadly, in the world around us there are cases of professionals who admit greatness of character but do not themselves follow the rules of good conduct. When questioned, one says: "What's the use of me becoming exalted in character? I am prepared to reform myself but others too should follow the rules of good conduct."

It is clear that the issues concerning professionals are about values. Talking about values, a distinction is sometimes made between human values, moral values and spiritual values. Looking a little closely, those values that distinguish a man from animals which are the minimum which a man should imbibe in his personality are considered as the human values. Moral values are for a man who wishes to be a higher, elevated or nobler human being. Spiritual values can be defined as those necessary for the spiritual growth of a human being or which are essential for self-realisation and God-realisation. So what values should professionals imbibe? Of the three values the first two are of utmost importance.

One such moral value is thinking about the welfare of others. Malaysian firms implicated in the forest fires in Indonesia might not have realised that open burning could have such a devastating impact on their own country. No one could have imagined the magnitude of the problem but the consequences were quite grave! Their attitude is a blatant example of disregard of professionalism. If they took heed of the welfare of others, and their outlook is philanthropic, they would have ensured their own well-being as well as that of others.

On the other hand, we do have corporate citizens who tentatively abide by the law but are always on the look-out for loopholes in existing laws so that it can be manipulated to their advantage. One may argue that if, as long as one is not breaking the law, it is fine. However, more often than not, activities of this kind are done at the expense of others.

So what's the purpose of ethics? Can we do without them? The reason is obvious and for all to see. Firstly, ethics serve as a "binding religion" where the people and professionals from different backgrounds work cohesively in a platform that is mutually beneficial and conducive for all. Secondly, ethics will focus public attention on the characteristics of an ethical relationship between people, thus paving the way for many social and economic advances. Thirdly, ethics will spur societal evolution in many ways, hence making Vision 2020 a reality. And finally, ethics will provide all of us with new sources of hope as opportunities for heightened creativity become increasingly available.

All the goals towards nurturing an ethical society along the lines of professionalism will remain elusive if the public as a whole don't treat it as top priority. It takes two hands to clap and so all of us and professionals in particular must play an active role to improve our lot.

Since ethics is about inculcating values and virtues, we should start imbibing them. If these changes begin to take place, we will have achieved another important outcome as well.