

11/03/1998

## Strong ethics and good values - ingredients for accountability

Ahmad A. Talib

BLENDING ethics and morality with technology and business practices is not necessarily difficult. But the possibility of misusing technology and mixing it with unethical business practices seems far easier. And perhaps, even widely practised.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was alluding to this last week. He said that those who possess technological power can use it for negative purposes if it is not tempered with a strong sense of ethics and good values.

His fear is that rapid technological development would give power to those who possess them to misuse this tool and this would have negative results and could bring much harm to society. That is, if they choose to take an unethical twist in their dealings and transactions.

This then led him to suggest that institutions of higher learning should conduct classes on ethics so that a good balance between technology and good values could be developed. Apparently, this is not the first time that the Prime Minister has highlighted the issue, having done it several years ago.

His latest comments were made when he visited the Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology in Petaling Jaya and they could not have come at a better time. With the state of the economy as it is, a reminder on ethics is more than necessary.

A brief check with several local institutions of higher learning showed that courses on business ethics are already available. At the Universiti Utara Malaysia, a Basic Business Ethics course has been a compulsory item for third year students, which means they must take and pass it in order to get their degrees.

The paper is offered two hours per week, giving undergraduates two credits. UUM claimed that the university was the first local one to offer such a paper after an earlier suggestion by the Prime Minister.

At the Universiti Sains Malaysia, a course of ethics is offered, also as a compulsory paper, for all its final year students in the Business Management Programme. The subject was first offered four years ago and gives students taking them three credits.

The other universities - Universiti Kebangsaan, International Islamic University and Universiti Sarawak - do not offer such a course. Perhaps, they should now plan to have one in view of Dr Mahathir's repeated plea.

In some foreign universities, graduates in business schools are made to sit for the paper and they actually rely on actual case studies. In fact, brown bag luncheons and seminars are regularly held where business students are exposed to contemporary issues, and business ethics is one of them.

Prominent speakers from industries and regulatory bodies are brought in to give the undergraduates real-time experiences on the matter. More universities have designed masters programme for those who pursue second degrees in business courses. The availability of such courses reflect the growing importance of business ethics in today's world of sophisticated commerce and enterprise.

Business students may become full-fledge businessmen in grey suits in the future, wheeling and dealing their way to the bank. Unless they are guided through the straight and narrow, and constantly reminded of their responsibilities, they may take the easy way to become wealthy,

disregarding totally any ethical principles.

In a free market economy, businesses are allowed to be conducted in almost a free-for-all situation. Of course there are laws governing businesses, but as long as they are not broken, private enterprises are free to grow.

This laissez-faire environment has been the mainstay of a free-market economy system which now dominates the world. It is also within this environment that led the Prime Minister to voice out his concern against unfettered business dealings which, if unethically pursued, can and do undermine a nation's economy and the livelihood of millions.

The need for good business ethics and strong moral values is just as important and essential now as when the economy is booming. When times are good, it is easy to take ethics for granted because no one appears to be paying much attention. But when times are bad, every decision or deal is scrutinised.

Adhering to ethical practices would give its practitioners a greater sense of accountability. Shareholders, workers, the public and taxpayers stand to benefit from such ethical values which will snowball into enhanced credibility for the country as a whole.

The Prime Minister's words should serve to remind everyone that they - not just businessmen - must maintain a strong ethical outlook in whatever undertakings they are in. For those who wish to stick to ethical practices, there are temptations everywhere. Succumbing to such temptations would merely negate everything that the country is striving for, that is, a believer in free enterprise, one that is based on good ethics and strong sense of moral grounds.

(END)