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Invoking the divine for guidance to good business practices

Felix Abisheganaden

THE recently launched Rukuniaga Malaysia (or Malaysian Business Code of Ethics) is a soft cover 20-page booklet containing the condensed wisdom of major religions' teachings on proper business dealings.

The Code appears to be seeking divine assistance to influence unscrupulous, hard-core, wheeler-dealers to stay on the "straight and narrow".

The universal religious teachings appeal to one's higher instincts on matters such as transparency, accountability, high ethical and moral standards and quality of service.

They lend credence to the belief that only through self-realisation - an awareness created by religion, philosophy, culture and moral education - can a person or society transact business responsibly and honestly and avoid profiteering.

Domestic Trade and Commerce Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, who launched the Code, says it seeks to complement existing regulations because "not all human behaviour can be regulated by law".

A pragmatic document, the Code begins with an Islamic teaching that says: "It is wrong for a person to sell any goods without explaining to the buyer details of the goods.

"It is also wrong for anyone who is aware that an item is not free of encumbrances to sell it to an unsuspecting buyer."

The six principles that underscore the Malaysian Business Code of Ethics exhort businessmen to be:

- * Fair, honest and not corner the market with the intention of profiteering by creating artificial demand.

- * Responsible towards customers, community and the environment. This is crucial in all business transactions and decisions. Also, when selling or providing a service the community and environment are not to be sacrificed.

- * Respectful and polite in all their actions. If a customer makes a mistake and wishes to exchange an item or asks for a refund, they must oblige.

- * Humble; not boastful. Moderate, not extreme. Contented; not greedy, and responsible to customers. "They have made your business a success."

- * Treat customers, be they friends or dignitaries, equally.

- * Be committed and hardworking. Practice patience, persistence and competitiveness. Take calculated risks. Don't be afraid of competition.

Now, here's where the divine intervention comes in. The little booklet devotes 12 of its 20 pages to religious exhortations and philosophical sayings to drive home the essence of ethical behaviour. Examples:

The Holy Quran: "Oh you who believe! Be careful of (your duty) to Allah. Speak the right word. Businessmen who are honest and polite will be among the prophets and the righteous (in the hereafter)."

The Bible: "Truly, religion makes one rich, if he is contented with what he has. We come into this world with nothing; so be contented if we only have nothing but clothes and food." (Timothy 6:6-8)

Hindu teachings: "It is forbidden for a businessman to mix one item of his goods with another and pass it off as untainted.

"It is also forbidden for a businessman to claim an imitation item as original or temper his scale to cheat his customer or hoard goods. If he does any of these, then surely he has sinned." (Bhagavad Gita)

Buddha's teachings: "Whoever restrains from corrupting his soul with greed and immoral acts has truly found peace; everlasting peace."
(Dhammapada)

Sikhism: "Oh you business people, conduct your trade in the right way and you will enter the Palace of God." (Sri Guru Granth Sahib)

Chinese proverb: "Wealth should be gained justly and through ethical means." (Confucius)

For the authorities to have to remind the Malaysian business community of religious teachings, which many of us consider to be basic, is a sad reflection indeed of the depths to which the Malaysian corporate world has sunk.

Actually, codes of conduct for businessmen are a recent phenomenon around the world. Normally, companies are governed by their own operational procedures dealing with specific roles and responsibilities of directors, and at times, specifying certain legal obligations.

The internationally recognised, Washington-based Ethics Resource Center has published a special report "10 Things Your Company Can Do To Avoid Being the Next Enron."

It calls on businessmen to examine their ethical climate and put safeguards in it. It recommends conducting a formal assessment of the corporate cultures of companies from a perspective of attitudes, perceptions, values, standards of conduct, risks and vulnerabilities.

Codes, it says, should be made actual living documents, encouraged and valued at the highest levels. Merely printing and posting them is not good enough.

Only the other day, Datuk Megat Najmuddin Megat Khas, president of the Malaysian Institute of Corporate Governance, called on the Government to "make examples of corporate crooks who get away with billions of ringgit".

Earlier this year, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir announced that all ministers, deputy ministers and parliamentary secretaries would be bound by a good conduct pledge required of government servants.

It may be an idea to extend this ruling to board members of both public listed corporations, and private limited companies.

Put a rogue in the limelight and he will act like an honest man -