

## BE ETHICAL IN CRITICAL TIMES: AN OPTION OR AN OBLIGATION?

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused chaos around the globe. This extraordinary pandemic is considered a major disaster, where millions of lives have been lost and many more have suffered because of the pandemic's chain effect. To control the spread of the virus, various measures are taken and imposed; for some countries, movement restrictions or lockdowns have been enforced. The implementation of movement restrictions has contributed various implications to all layers of society. Nonetheless, movement restriction, along with self-quarantine, is the best and most effective method of curbing the transmission of Covid-19. In 2020, Malaysia implemented the Movement Control Order and managed to reduce the number of daily cases to a single digit, which even recorded 0 cases at certain points.

However, the sky is not always clear, as daily cases of infection have been increasing since the end of 2020. The gradual increase in the number of daily cases has pushed the local health care to the maximum capacity, as cases climbed from hundreds to thousands. As a result, the government has been compelled to announce Movement Control Order 3.0 to control and reduce the number of infections. Nevertheless, this article does not intend to point fingers or find the root cause to the sharp increase in the number of cases; instead, this article will discuss the ethical elements that need to be demonstrated by all parties when facing a critical situation like the present. According to the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, ethics is defined as the knowledge related to morally accepted principles that are held by an individual or a group. Ethics comprises the standards of behaviour to which we adhere, be it in our personal lives or professional settings. It is a norm for behavior that differentiates between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and plays an important role in our living (Mikesell et al., 2013). Honesty, empathy, trustworthiness, and other virtues are part of the elements in ethics, in which we identify our expected personal behaviour and desired public reputation.

Covid-19 has given us a variety of implications that we would have never expected and certainly not something we would have wanted. Countless individuals have lost their loved ones to the disease; some have lost their jobs or means of income, and many have been burdened by debts. In fact, to our dismay, some members of society have been facing hunger and starvation due to having no money or insufficient funds to purchase the necessities. People out there are starving and losing their shelters. From a macro perspective, this pandemic has caused negative economic impacts on some industries such as tourism, hospitality, transportation, F&B, and education. The tourism industry has suffered the highest loss, which has forced many hotels and resort operators to cease operations or forfeit business. Many are affected by this critical situation. Findings obtained from (Kuman & Nayar, 2021; Cullen et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020) indicate that symptoms of

depression, anxiety, and stress tend to increase during periods of movement control. Thus, what role should be played by individuals, leaders, and even employers? Every individual has a significant role and is entitled to enjoy a quality life. Therefore, each party from various levels must uphold an ethical standard that exhibits a sense of sensitivity, empathy, understanding, and mindfulness of the surrounding environment. The increased awareness of ethical issues, demand for accountability, justice, and fairness, and contending communities/cultures about ethical actions standards are the reasons for us to be more ethical. Thus, this study attempts to elaborate the importance of ethical values that should possess and demonstrate by stakeholders namely, community members, leaders, and business owner in critical times of the Covid19 pandemic. The study presents a conceptual justification of a subject matter which is the importance of ethics in a critical time through the lens of the author and the elaborations were supported by previous studies.

## **2. ETHICS AMONG STAKEHOLDERS**

### **2.1 Ethics among Community Members**

Kruckeberg and Starck (2004) because of innovations in transportation and communication, mass society is bringing people closer together and binding them in new ways. Individuals become increasingly dependant as a result of the division of work while becoming more alienated from one another. Primary group bonds of family and local community deteriorate, parochial beliefs are called into question, and few uniting ideals replace them. Critical elite norms no longer affect attitudes and taste, leading to confusion regarding mores and morality. Individual relationships become tangential or segmented rather than organic. Meanwhile, increased mobility—both geographically and socially—intensifies anxiety about one's social standing. People take on many roles and must continuously prove themselves in a slew of new scenarios. As a result, the individual loses his or her sense of self. Anxiety, coupled with a search for "new faiths," rises. This idea of mass society is significant because it connects to the lamented loss of a feeling of community. When society is bogged down with various difficulties, everyone is expected to exercise sensitivity, empathy, understanding, and mindfulness of the situations being experienced by others (Komenská, 2017). Society should be made clear on the concept of ethics in daily life. Upon encountering other individuals who are facing difficulty, the simplest and most popular ethical attitude is to extend help and at least show a bit of sympathy.

However, the ills of our society today can be seen through judgmental comments and punitive statements toward individuals, without investigation or knowledge of the actual situation. Everyone has different circumstances, so a sense of concern needs to exist to create a more considerate and balanced society. According to Schweitzer and Gibson (2008), the content of past behaviour explanations influences the cognitive and emotional calculus of participating in an unethical action. Persons who hear explanations that violate community righteousness norms are considerably more likely to engage in unethical behaviour than individuals who receive explanations that are compatible with community integrity standards. Ethical intentions were influenced by judgments of justifiability. Unfair explanations reduce the psychological cost of immoral action. Perceived injustice gives justification for participating in unethical behaviour. The current situation is not the best time for individuals to flaunt personal luxuries and mindless pleasures, despite the best intentions of appreciating sustenance and sharing joy on their respective social media. Many individuals out there are unimpressed and find it difficult to get by on their own, so the displaying of wealth, luxury, and other advantages is not a wise move, let alone a necessary one. An ethical individual will

find that existing social media channels are better used as a medium for helping those in need, or for spreading useful information, or for sharing positivity with one's community.

## 2.2 Ethics and Leadership

Leaders are important individuals who steer the direction and maintain the stability of the economy, social order, and politics. They have been given mandates and responsibilities to govern the country based on the trust and confidence of the community. People do not only expect competent and professional leaders, but also want ethical leaders with moral leadership characteristics. Ethical leadership, then, stems from a transformational leadership paradigm in which the aim is to achieve moral good and the key principles are honesty, trust, and moral rectitude. Ethical leaders motivate people in the organisation to act ethically, and they are persuasive in their communities to influence change in the direction of positive moral ideals (Sama & Shoaf, 2008). Mayer et al. (2012) leaders establish the ethical tone of a company and play an important role in fostering ethical conduct and decreasing inter-personal conflict among subordinates. However, the study suggests that leaders must not just be moral persons, but must also actively model ethical actions and employ reward and punishment systems to influence followers' behaviour.

A leader free of corruption is capable of executing leadership with trust and integrity; thus, fulfilling people's aspirations. However, in the current situation of a critical pandemic, people also expect leaders to act more empathically and to understand the difficulties and hardships experienced by those affected (Haar et al., 2019). The moral and ethical attitude of the leader will always be the concern of the people and becomes an indicator of a continued level of support. This is because ethics emphasises the inter-relatedness of human beings and focuses on the importance of attentiveness, empathy, responsiveness, and responsibility for others. To be cared for is a fundamental aspect of every human's early life experience in terms of dependency on others for survival and well-being. Olivier (2011) stated that justice, the problem of power, and sustainability are the challenges of leadership ethics. Leadership requires ethics and leader have a responsibility to sustain their ethical values.

We look to our leaders to set an example, demonstrate moral bravery, and embody and communicate principles that go beyond efficiency. We want leaders to communicate with us, respond to our concerns, and listen to us. Technocrats who are adamant about sticking to their job as technocrats are not leaders. We want our leaders to see clearly, and to have a certain conviction and determination embodied by the overused and abused term "vision." Managers may be ethically ambiguous, but they cannot be considered as being visionless. We also want our leaders to have moral courage, or the willingness to stand up for their beliefs in the face of criticism and contempt. We want our leaders to care - not simply impersonally 'about' a project or 'about the bottom line, but 'for the company and its people, and every one of their follower's (Gabriel, 2015). We want leaders to take care of these issues as individuals, rather than as professionals. The increase in positive cases and deaths as a result of Covid-19 has left people in a state of anger, worry, and anxiety. The people regularly wait for news from political leaders to announce the best measures that will be implemented in the effort to reduce infection cases. Finally, after the people's insistence, the government has announced a comprehensive implementation of MCO 3.0 to the entire nation, whereas MCO had only been focused on certain states by the end of last year.

The implementation of a comprehensive MCO does affect many parties, so at present, the people are expecting and waiting for government leaders to ease their burden. The ethical attitude of government leaders must be demonstrated through the provision of initiatives to affected groups and parties. Careful planning and attention must be done to avoid mistakes that could affect the image and reputation of the leaders. In addition to the implementation of initiatives that can help ease the burden of the people, leaders need to act fairly and prudently in adhering to the rules that have been outlined following SOPs and so on. What had transpired from the Sabah state election should serve as a lesson; until now, people have been raising this issue to blame on the failure of political party leaders. Leaders need to walk the talk and act in line with what has been proposed to the community. There are incremental increases in a leader's effectiveness for each of these leadership characteristics, and transformational leadership moderates the influence of the leader's genuine and ethical leadership on the leader's outcomes. Authentic, ethical, and transformative leadership traits all contribute independently to explaining leader performance (Copeland, 2016).

### **2.3 Embedded Ethics on Business Owner**

We are well aware that corporations and SMEs play a major role in contributing to the country's economic income. However, they are also not spared from fulfilling their responsibilities as an ethical party; they must meet the needs and understand society's sensitivity within the business operations. This is because ethical practices by a business entity can guarantee the continuity of the company's operations for the long term and creating value for the companies (Saha et al., 2020). In addition, stakeholders such as the community will support and trust the company, which in turn will boost its good image and reputation. However, during MCO 3.0, complaints and grievances are heard from the community against companies that do not follow the SOPs by violating MCO 3.0 rules such as continuing operations for non-essential sectors, which has resulted in the emergence of new clusters from the workplace. This situation has been linked to the weakness of political leaders who have not addressed this issue firmly and prudently. For some, this is a trivial issue and should not be exaggerated, but in fact, it is very much related to the ethical attitude and credibility of companies in dealing with problems.

What are the causes behind this abysmal performance? We do not believe that the causes stem from insufficient business ethics; rather, we believe that the community should continue to refine its business ethics, principles, analytical tools, and organisational solutions. The reasons for failure are believed to be inherent in certain deeply ingrained aspects of today's corporation-dominated economic environment. Enterprise ethics is said to have missed its mark if it fails to recognise the systemic aspects of modern business. Business ethics is intended to hold companies accountable as the primary actors in the global economy. This endeavour would fail if companies, or in general, the mainstream business sector controlled by multinational corporations, are incapable of exercising ethical practices in any meaningful sense. As a result, the social, ethical, and environmental issues that businesses generate necessitate a distinct approach based on law, politics, and social institutions. The ineffectiveness of ethics in companies is caused by shareholders and companies' low sense of responsibility; a complex financial system causes ownership and accountability to become unclear and impersonal. Corporations also face the consequences of globalisation that separates corporate decisions and stakeholders, owners and workers, consumers, and the places of production. Typically, at the corporate or industrial level, ethical behaviour is translated through the implementation of CSR initiatives. The business owner must consider and embed

ethical leadership where Mozumder (2016) found in his study that there are positive relationships between ethical leadership and employees' trust in leaders at multiple levels. This trust is a condition that influence employees' attitudes, behaviours, and cognitions. As a result, the institutional framework of today's mainstream industry diminishes accountability, resulting in an exacerbation of the common global tragedy. It is a system in which profit maximisation becomes the ultimate objective of corporate ethics, whereby cost externalisation to the society, the future generations, and the environment is not an exception, but the rule.

Daily, business owners are trapped in the system's logic, which utilises moral disengagement mechanisms to deal with the contradiction between the expectation of ordinary morality and the logic of the market. However, ethical market forces are too weak to be persuasive for companies; thus, investors and rivals are not driven primarily by ethical concerns. The same may be true about customers. True, there have been some encouraging developments in recent years, such as the rapid growth of Fair Trade or organic agriculture. However, in general, customers send only weak signals to companies. The impact of neglect on ethics by business owners may hinder the achievements of civil society movements. In these critical times, the public is very much aware of a company's misconduct, which could lead to severe criticism towards the company and eventually could tarnish its reputation.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, each party needs to better understand the ethical role that must be implemented in ensuring harmony and balance at all levels of society. The presence of Covid-19 has not only threatened our lives, but has also taught us a lesson that consideration, empathy, cooperation, and tolerance are very important things to face in a bitter situation. This situation requires us to apply ethical values in ourselves in facing this situation with more optimism and positivity (Markey et al., 2020). Society needs to be sensitive to the surrounding situation because those who experience problems need assistance. Leaders need to think of the appropriate steps and initiatives to be taken, which will demonstrate their concerns to a society that has been experiencing difficulties in life. Company owners or the corporate sector should understand that they are a significant party, and the competitive performance of their companies is influenced by the confidence and support from one of the key stakeholders, i.e., the community. Therefore, their responsiveness must be in line with the ethical behaviour demanded by society. Currently, due to increasing cases, people have been disputing the issue of permission given for the industry and companies to operate, because industry clusters have contributed to the spike in daily cases. For some, ethical practices and attitudes have become an option. However, in the current situation, ethical practices should no longer be an option; it should be a mandate and an obligation for each party to undertake in a challenging situation. Ethics is a set of rules comprising positive elements such as sensitivity, empathy, and understanding of the surrounding situation; these elements are extremely crucial in situations where many parties face difficulties. The application of ethical attitudes will lead to cooperation and harmony, which will make it easier for the community to face difficult situations at this time.

Therefore, although the role of ethics might seem small, it is highly significant in shaping the stability of life at present. Ethical practices can cultivate the spirit of facing challenges in these difficult situations and its elements can shape positive perceptions and acceptances to individuals and organisations. Each party needs to understand one's responsibility and play an ethical role to the best of one's ability so that the objective of reducing Covid-19 cases can be

realised and accepted with an open heart by all parties. May we all be united, remain steadfast and resilient in enduring this unpleasant situation, and be able to return to the normal life that we long for; a life before Covid-19. Let's strive for success in this fight so that social activities can be carried out as usual just like before the Covid-19 outbreak.

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