Ethics and Productivity

By the Civil Service Commission of Philippines

The 21st century is the era of the global village. Political and ideological differences, notwithstanding, relations within national jurisdictions and among nations are defined by borderless economic and social imperatives that have breached the old notions of protectionism and closed societies.

Openness has become the norm of relationships within national borders and among states while competitiveness, the ultimate standard for defining success out of those relationships. The advent of globalization, however, has also given rise to the contrasting approaches of market-based macro-economic framework being the foundation of good governance on the one hand, and sustainable human development, on the other hand. The latter puts the premium first on enhancing human capabilities and spreading the benefits of economic growth without compromising the needs of future generations. Consequently, the paradox posed by those, individually, desirable approaches have been at the center of a balancing act in most development frameworks today. The need to balance the advantages of globalization and the security and stability of the domestic environment influences most developing countries to develop their respective framework that provides for sustainable growth and human development.

But if there is one constant that could be said to encompass even contrasting approaches to national development, it is the productivity goal of individuals, groups and the nation in general. This brings to fore ethics, values and principles that ought to be espoused and practiced in the domains of governance — government, the private sector and the civil society organizations — that will drive productivity, as a measure of growth, to the fullest extent.

The public sector creates a conducive and enabling political and legal environment, mediates competing interests for public good and provides effective and accountable public service. On the other hand, the private sector — private enterprises in the areas of manufacturing, trade, banking, etc. and the informal sector in the marketplace — generate jobs and income. Meanwhile, civil society organizations facilitate political and social interaction, provide checks and balances on government powers and monitor social abuses. Given these roles, the relationship of the public and private sectors and the civil society organizations is mutually reinforcing.

Today, we are given the opportunity to address the interrelated and mutually reinforcing issues of ethics and productivity. We will find that there are no easy answers and that often, conflicts between economic and social perspectives may lead to some ethical dilemma. For example, government has long depended upon the capacity of our migrant workers - the OFWs - to prop the export industry. On that perspective, no one quibbles over dollar earnings that have contributed billions of dollars to our foreign exchange reserves over the past 2 decades. And yet social
scientists have, time and again, warned of deepening social disharmony over disruption of family life brought about by the absence of one or both parents.

The Basics of Ethics

Ethics, as we know it, is simply a moral choice between right and wrong. It involves a moral duty and obligation. In a practical sense, it is doing things that are intrinsically desirable within a given set of circumstances. It is bound by certain universal principles such as truth, justice and fairness. These principles are natural laws and have stood the test of time. And we are confronted every day, perhaps even in the most innocuous situation, of unconscious application of ethical values (or lack of it). For example naubusan ng perang pamasaha sa jeepney. Hihingi ka ba ng dispensa sa driver at aaminin mo na wala kang pamasaha o patay malisya ka lang na bababa at kunwari ay nagbayad ka na?

More important and perhaps, difficult than the definition, is to be placed in an actual situation where you make a choice among ethical alternatives. Of course, this may be a subject that can be explored and expounded in another venue. All I am saying is, to be ethical is to make a conscious and a deliberate effort to choose the right over the wrong.

Inter-relatedness of Ethics and Productivity

In one of the speeches of the late President Manuel L. Quezon, he implored, and I quote:

“Show me a people composed of vigorous, sturdy individuals, of men and women healthy in mind and body,- courteous, brave, industrious, self-reliant, purposeful in thought as well as in action; imbued with sound patriotism and a profound sense of righteousness, with high social ideals and strong moral fiber; and I will show you a great nation that will not be submerged.

This has left an indelible impression in my mind that a nation is built on the character of its people and its institutions. It is rooted in all domains of governance. Verily, the success or failure of a nation greatly depends on the strength of the nation’s moral fiber. Relating this to the nation’s goal, ethics, therefore, has a positive role in stimulating productivity.

For individuals and organizations, ethics motivates us to look inward and to apply our sense of right or wrong in whatever individuals and organizations do whether at home, in the office, in the marketplace, in the streets.

In an environment where cutthroat competition is the norm and where primordial concerns are profits and survival, some may be misled into believing that ethics and productivity are irreconcilable propositions. The government in such cases usually wields its power of intervention by issuing and implementing laws that set the standards of conduct. For example, we have the Consumer Act which prescribes and prohibits specific acts of businesses; the Intellectual Property Law which punishes unfair competition and infringement of rights; and the Corporation Code which specifies what corporations ought to do and ought not to do. Clearly, what our laws prohibit are not only illegal but also unethical.
However, today we are seeing the rise of a school of thought called ethical management, the underlying premise of which is that companies do not have to cheat or circumvent laws in order to win. Social responsibilities are becoming as much a part of corporate vision as the business imperatives. Industry sectors and associations are crafting their own codes of conduct and self-regulating or self-policing mechanisms.

Let me share with you the result of a study published in the book “Built to Last.” The study has confirmed that those that outperform their industries share and exhibit a common set of traits and behaviors. The same study shows that these successful companies are the ones that exhibit ethically correct and socially responsible practices and norms. All these underscore an empirical fact that business does not only mean profits. Now, business ethics means the attainment of a higher goal, that is; a sense of corporate responsibility towards fulfilling the task of nation building.

Also, many professions now set ethical standards for their practitioners. Among the better-known professional ethical codes are those for doctors, lawyers and teachers. The lawyers, for instance, commit to a credo of professional responsibility towards the bench, the bar, their clients and the public in general with the overarching goal of service. To me, providing the best, truthful and honest service is a benchmark of productivity within the legal profession. If a judge dispenses the administration of justice according to the moral and ethical standards, there may be less cases reaching the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court. That would mean savings in resources and devoting more time to developmental aspects of judicial work. After all, making the best use of resources is productivity, no less.

Meanwhile, there is an unkind perception that ethics is not attainable or is an impossible ideal in the public sector. The irony, of course, is that this is the domain where ethics should be strongest.

In 1989, Republic Act No. 6713 or the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees was enacted because of the perceived loose sense of ethics in government.

Essentially, the Code spelled out in fine detail the do’s and don’ts for government officials and employees in and out of the workplace. The eight norms of conduct as enumerated in the Code are broad and encompass not only the aspect of employment but also the personal lives of public officials and employees. These standards are:

- Commitment to public interest;
- Professionalism;
- Justness and sincerity;
- Political neutrality;
- Responsiveness to the public;
- Nationalism and patriotism;
- Commitment to democracy; and,
- Simple living.

To me, all these standards of conduct point, ultimately, to public good or public interest as a better and objective standard of moral and ethical obligation in the public sector. Those standards for individual behavior, however, should connect the
individual to the objectives, goals and targets of the organization, then from the organization to the overarching objectives of our society. We are, in a sense, expanding our circles of influence and moving outward from a parochial concern to reaching a broader and higher goal.

On the other hand, civil society organizations — trade unions; non-governmental organizations; gender, language, cultural and religious groups; charities; business associations; social and sports clubs; cooperatives and community development organizations; environmental groups; professional associations; academy and policy institutions; and media outlets — are powerful groups that influence public policies and channel people’s participation in economic and social activities. Fundamentally, civil society organizations are considered development agents. For these organizations, productivity means being able to pursue their roles to the fullest. That is why, civil society organizations must also adhere to values and principles that reflect societal norms in order for them to faithfully carry out their advocacies.

Consider a political party that constantly fails to ensure transparent and fair ways to reach consensus, and what do you have — a volatile organization that can hardly push for reforms. Consider also a public sector union that fails to ensure cohesion among its members, and what do you have — an insecure organization that can hardly make its fiscalizing presence felt in its agency.

Clearly, we cannot just isolate productivity from ethics. To a large extent, the former is a function of the latter.

Some Prescriptions
I began this discussion by positing the interrelation between ethics and productivity. At this juncture, allow me to give some prescriptions on enhancing productivity through ethics.

First, there must be continuous learning whether for individuals or organizations. Rapid changes in work patterns and work environment are putting pressures toward new competencies and skills, as well as new management processes, in the workplace. If we are to build those new skills and competencies, we need to learn from best practices and experiences and apply the learnings at home or in the workplace or in the marketplace or in the streets.

Second, we must strengthen service orientation. How many transactions have failed because of a lousy service? Your guess is as good as mine. The point is, without adhering to a service ethic, we are bound to lose our clients’ respect and the respect and confidence of investors.

Third, we must be able to create synergy and partnership. We have to galvanize alliances and linkages to lead them to move and act in unison towards a higher goal. Synergy and partnership will also result to a commonality of values in the organization. Individuals in an organization who share the same principles and vision will be better able to move the goals of their organization.

Fourth, we need to leverage our human capital vis-a-vis emerging opportunities of the times, but in a manner that will emphasize integrity as a basic attribute. For example, we are today among the most knowledgeable in Information Technology.
Unfortunately we have also had our moments of notoriety when that skill was used to inflict damage on the Internet. Imagine if we are able to harness that knack for creativity in a positive way and organize our IT skills into business enterprises that could go into joint ventures with the world’s IT providers. (I understand many of the Silicon Valley companies are recruiting Filipino programmers and technicians, but that means we are losing our knowledge workers to foreign companies.)

And lastly, we have to put our stakes in capacity building. Simply stated, we will be able to surely get the best from people and organizations if we unlock their potentials. For example, we can provide government agencies a certain amount of flexibility in how they spend their money or allow them to make decisions that can be done at their level. This is in a sense empowerment. Another initiative is to provide them with HRD programs where skills, knowledge and attitudes will be enhanced.

**A Final Note**

As a final note, there is a sense of hope and opportunity for us and the future generations. There is a growing sense of returning to the basics, to those time-honored values of quality and integrity and harnessing a community-based sense of ethics. There is a growing convergence of thought towards social responsibilities and commitment, of reaching beyond purely corporate and corporeal objectives. This awakening consciousness is nestled among more and more individuals, groups, and governments and there are exemplars in our midst to bear this out. This is a comforting thought, indeed and to me, forecasts hope for all of us.

To achieve this however requires the courage to lend and the courage to change for good, to be better and to be the best. Only then can we claim “Angat Pinoy: Quality and Productivity at its Best.”