

The Management Challenge in a Thieving Nation

For the sake of our country and companies, let us regain, live by and defend our moral values



By Mwangi Wanjumbi

"Are you from Nigeria or Nairobi?" asked an inquisitive attendant in a supermarket in Sharja, a city neighbouring Dubai. "From Nairobi but why the two," I answered and asked at the same time. "Yes, I know Nairobi. There are many reports of thievery and corruption. I have not been there but we receive many visitors in our supermarket. We have to be careful with the people from the two," insinuated this attendant of Indian origin. This happened about 10 years ago, during one of my visits to the UAE.

On April 26, 2007, I attended a Kenya Institute of Management (KIM) public lecture on investments in stocks and shares. The main speaker, James Murigu, from Suntra Stocks, eloquently made the case for investment in shares. Indeed, it looks like it can be a strategy of creating wealth and at the same time removing business management from the hands of shaky entrepreneurs. This is even more appropriate given the thieving and corruption culture adopted by the majority of Kenyans today, a worrying situation indeed, as the speaker explained. Honestly, should we not castigate the KANU regime for entrenching the culture of get-rich-quick and making nonsense of work ethics as a value?

Friday (I hear it is called Furahi Day – Swahili for happiness) was again another day of being reminded of my sad memories of the Sharja visit. I attended the wedding of a friend's son in Karen. Unbelievably, the master of ceremonies kept on reminding guests to be mindful of their mobile phones, handbags and other personal belongings right from the church service to the reception. "It does

not matter who your neighbour is," he kept saying. These Friday announcements again reminded me of having personally lost a Bible right inside our own church, never to be recovered despite efforts by the church office.

What has become of our country whose 80 per cent of the population professes Christianity? Should we bury our heads in the sand as the country and its nationals continue to glide to top positions in the world's most corrupt nations? What of being treated suspiciously or labelled as thieves whenever we venture abroad? Interestingly, the more we excel negatively, the more society sees the situation as normal. I feel there are some societal values that have been ignored or conveniently discarded as Kenya becomes more and more urbanised, or is it as unemployment continues being entrenched?

In the past, our communities had ways and means of controlling and upholding their members' uprightness. There used to be governments (remember Njuri Ncheke – the Meru council of elders?) which would institute corrective or disciplinary measures on wayward society members. Habitual thieves in the Kikuyu community, for example, used to be put in beehives and rolled down a ridge to die.

But what is happening today? It seems nobody cares about values anymore. Even going to church has become a ritual where the majority come out with nothing other than having socialised and showed off new outfits and latest vehicle models. Corruption and theft have become the norm. It does not matter the type of property. Owners of intellectual property are even at more risk from thieves. They will stop at nothing as they try to steal not only written ideas but also those in people's heads. I have encountered this many times while in the course of duty. It is no wonder that those who choose to follow the straight path are seen as psychologically wanting by the larger society.

Perhaps, experts in values and ethics could

attest to my views on the way forward. We must redefine our values as individuals and as a society for a start. But, first we must understand the factors that contribute to decay of our moral standards giving rise to unethical behaviours. Some people have no personal values to live by at all. Issues of trust, fairness, honesty and respect for other people's property are non-existent to them. Others succumb to pressure of performance and seek to acquire wealth at whatever cost. This pressure may be from family, workmates or even peers. Still, others engage in unethical behaviour for luck or because of small threat of punishment. Availability of opportunities or loose controls further encourage would-be upright people to change course.

I find a lack of personal values as a major contribution to societal decay. A society without values reflects badly for any nation. Personal values are modelled by our upbringing. They are about what we perceive to be right or wrong based on teachings by our parents, school systems, churches and even the social environment. The modern urbanised child, for example, has been exposed to substantial knowledge about such national vices as corruption and theft of property through the media.

Then, no attempts by successful administrations have been directed towards punishing perpetual economic thieves. At some stage these thieves have been treated as heroes and given more and more opportunities of continually enjoying public office. The law of the land on the other hand protects criminals who are presumed innocent until proved guilty. It has particularly been difficult to prove the guilt of people who have immense wealth, capable of buying their freedom even from those who supposedly uphold the rule of the law. Mind you, the law keepers are part and parcel of the same society whose norms and values have now gone to the dogs.

The country has been treated to a political circus where people lacking moral values continue seeking high office probably to regain opportunities which facilitate continuity with corruption and greed. Or is it in order to protect their ill-gotten wealth? How does this reflect to Kenyans who have been exposed by the media to all this during their growth process? It is no wonder that management has become a major challenge in a country that has evolved into a thieving nation.

What should be the way forward? I think we need to start all over again. As Murigu said, "We must accept that we are a thieving nation." There is an urgency to redefine the moral code of conduct; reinforce all existing laws meant to control unethical behaviour. Put behind bars all those involved in Goldenberg, Anglo Leasing, and other ills afflicting our society. The least that should happen is to recover all assets acquired through theft. If nothing is done to national or is it international crooks, our society's moral values will continue to decay even further.

Egypt went through periods of decadence many centuries ago. The Church in Rome openly experienced

similar phenomena. Shouldn't we find out how they overcame this and resumed normalcy? We must reclaim our social order by all means. Management has become a challenged profession under the prevailing circumstances.

Dr Alfred Mutua, are you there? I am a Kenyan who never dreams of ever migrating. I am however not proud of the situation the country has drifted into. I expected things to change when an office of Ethics and Governance was created. But, alas it became another audit office, which appears to have been discarded.

Is it not time that this office is revived, but with the main aim of cleansing the country and re-inventing our social order? Certainly, Kenya has been going through admirable renovations in the recent past. But, for effective management of the renovations, the social order must be renovated too. The alternative is wasted efforts as we bury our heads in the sand.■

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