



Talk on Professional Ethics in Project Management: Can We Learn from the 311 Tragedy

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The Project Management Technical Division (PMTD) of IEM organised a talk titled “Professional Ethics in Project Management; Can We Learn from The 311 Tragedy?” on the 2 July 2011 at Wisma IEM, Petaling Jaya in conjunction with its annual general meeting. The talk was delivered by Professor Dr Hamzah Abdul Raman, who is currently the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Innovation at the University of Malaya (UM). The session was chaired by Ir. Lee Boon Chong, PMTD Chairman. A total of ninety four (94) participants attended the talk.

Professional Ethics: What We Can Learn From Japan Earthquake

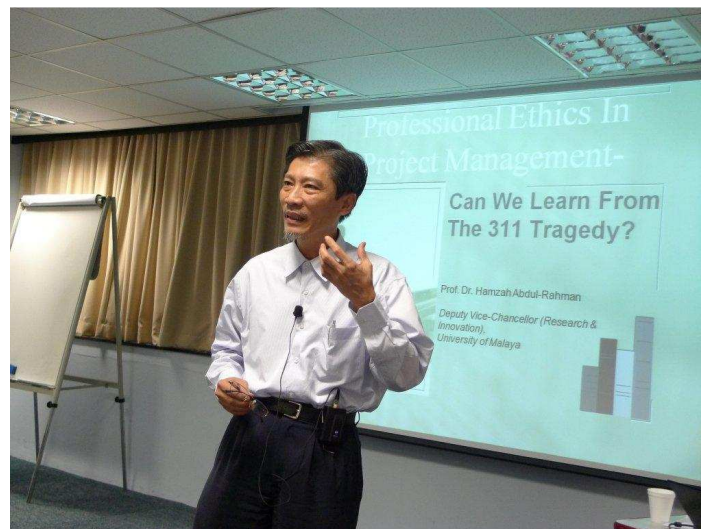
Professor Dr Hamzah first explored the issue of ethics from the perspective of how the Japanese faced the 9.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Japan on 11th March 2011. In contrast to those normally seen in other calamity-stricken countries, he observed the following behavioral patterns:

- The calm –no public display of chest-beating or wild grief.
- The dignity -- disciplined queues for provisions, no rough word nor crude gesture.
- The grace –buying only what they needed, so everybody could get something.
- The conscience -- putting things back and left quietly when power went off in a store.
- The order -- no looting in shops; no honking and overtaking on roads.
- The tenderness -- restaurants cut prices; the strong cared for the weak.
- The sacrifice -- workers stayed back to pump sea water in the nuclear reactors.
- The ability - incredible architect and construction, buildings swayed but didn't fall.
- The training -- everyone knew exactly what to do and they did just that.
- The media -- no silly reporters, only calm reportage, showing magnificent restraint.

These attributes exhibit good moral and ethical values that we can learn from the 311 Japan earthquake. They are relevant to the discourse on professional ethics in project management, prompting a question of whether we have the basic ethical fabrics in managing construction project in Malaysia.

Professional Ethics and Construction Industry

The speaker then quoted relevant survey findings, which show the general feeling that the construction sector is tainted by unethical conducts. This is supported by the findings of a local research that have identified instances of unethical misconduct in Malaysia construction sector, such as under bidding, bribery, negligence, front loading, claims game, fraud, collusion, conflict of interest, change order game, etc. Most of these unethical conducts are observed in the project procurement process. Malaysia has launched the National Integrity Plan (NIP) and the Integrity Institute of Malaysia (IIM) as a way to resolve integrity issues in Malaysia. To help tackle the ethical issues in construction industry, Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) and IIM have collaborated to develop a code of ethics for the contractors in Malaysia.



Towards a Quality Construction Industry

A study conducted by the University of Malaya shows that in general, the ethical standard in the Malaysian construction industry is considered to be low. More than 90% of the respondents agreed that unethical conducts contribute to quality-related problem. Professor Dr Hamzah emphasized that ethical behavior is critical in our endeavor to achieve the desired quality in construction industry. The common premise is to do the right things right, but people often do not see its importance. Poor ethical standard can negatively affect the quality of construction projects; cause a company to lose its reputation, and whole industry to lose public's trust. There is thus a need to enforce the code of professional ethics in construction industry such that various players and stakeholders can resolve the inevitable conflicts amongst their interests. As a matter of fact, there is no lack of code of professional ethics in Malaysia but there seems to be lacking in the implementation.

This leads to the question of whether code of ethics has made any difference to the construction eco-system.

Our Agenda and Practice

While indicating the need to conduct a thorough study on the health of professional ethics in Malaysia, and their root causes for a holistic approach to addressing the issue, the speaker illustrated some examples of how each of us can start to reverse the situation by doing some simple but effective routines in our daily life. We can first build a protective system against poor ethics by imposing a high level of self-leadership, self-discipline and self-respect. We can then influence our family members to build similar protective system. By being a role model, we can also inculcate in our workers the self-restraint. Likewise, we can influence our vendors, consultants and contractors by imposing strict and firm policies that would ensure that the eco-system within the project is clean and ethical.



Ethical actions can be evaluated using a variety of self-tests such as harm test, reversibility test, legality test, publicity test, common practice test, etc. However, all these tests promote decisions based on how we feel about what we do. The best test is to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. The speaker emphasized the importance of ethical leadership, which represents the core of engineering projects. An effective ethical leader has to create an environment where the employees feel safe in bringing up and resolving ethical issues. To do this effectively, the ethical leader should develop a clear understanding of professional ethics, possess the ability and willingness to recognize and communicate ethical issues, and finally know and do what is right.

A System Viewpoint of the Problem

The speaker proceeded to graphically present a system view of the ethical issues in construction industry. The system is represented by a series of interrelated events starting from the input, through the process, to the output with the cyclical cause and effect.

The severe competitiveness in the construction industry often induces unethical behaviors in the initial stage. This leads to a slew of unethically-tainted decisions in the procurement process stage. This in turn affects the output in terms of project scope, time, cost, quality and safety as well as the reputation of the company and industry itself. It is thus essential to inculcate ethical behaviors that will harvest a project with the right scope, at the right cost, within the right time, and of the right quality.

Concluding Remarks

In wrapping up the talk, Professor Dr Hamzah highlighted the following key points:

- A lot of time, effort, money and trust are lost due to poor professional ethics.
- International competitiveness will be lost if this ingrained problem continues to exist.
- Benchmarking our ethics against others may make us see the gaps and bridge them.
- Strategising for professional ethics in construction industry is crucial but not easy.
- Need to involve all parties in construction industry, both individuals and organizations.
- Government must inculcate good ethical values in its staff and industry players.
- Professional institutions should instill the highest ethical values among their members.
- Everyone must learn and practice self-leadership, self-discipline and self-respect.
- Ask whether we are trying to progress too fast that we have unintentionally left out some fundamentals.



The talk was followed by Q&A. Before ending the session, PMTD Chairman, Ir. Lee Boon Chong presented a token of appreciation to Professor Dr Hamzah and thanked him for presenting a very informative and enlightening talk.