

WITHOUT EFFICIENCY AND ETHICS, WE UNRAVEL

By Jeanette De Klerk-Luttig, Board member of the FW de Klerk Foundation

When one regularly follows the events at the Zondo Commission, the extent and depth of corruption and inefficiency in the government is almost unreal, and you have to remind yourself that what is unfolding before your eyes is reality and not fiction. Many reasons for the tragedy can be cited: a feeling of untouchability, power without accountability, excessive claims and greed, inflated egos, and the Dunning Kruger effect, where people overestimate their own abilities to do a task successfully. The root cause of the national tragedy can be traced to the blatant absence of both performance and moral character at all levels. Our President is well aware of the lack of competence (performance character) and ethics (moral character) in the civil service, because in March this year he wrote: "Dear Fellow South Africans: Only a capable, efficient, ethical and development-oriented state can deliver on the commitment to improve the lives of the people of this country." He also wants to institute a reconstruction and recovery plan that seeks to create an effective and ethical civil service. However, he will have to start with the value system and character of the people employed in the civil service and government, otherwise the initiative will not be accomplished, like numerous previous plans, programs and projects.

Performance character enables people to achieve personal goals. David Brooks describes performance character as a person's "resume" character traits, those character traits that enables you to get and keep a job. These include values such as self-discipline, hard work, resilience, initiative and endurance.

Moral character enables people to get along well with others. It involves values such as respect, humility, empathy, and caring. Brooks refers to these values as "eulogy" values, it includes the character traits that are often used in memorial services when talking about the deceased. Responsibility can fall under both performance character and moral character.

Performance character and moral character form the warp and weft of healthy individuals and societies. Without it, communities will fall apart and trust will be lost. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, which measures trust as a function of competence and ethics, trust depends directly on the presence of both performance character and moral character. Confidence in our government stood at 20% in 2020, the lowest of all participating countries, with Spain outperforming us by 10%, in second last place. The reason for the mistrust is the lack of both performance character and moral character at all levels. South Africa is characterized and plagued by a lack of both efficiency and ethics.

We have largely lost our integrity, because even though we have a value-based constitution, there are too few value-driven individuals, institutions, and communities in our country. Our constitution has become a moral fig leaf behind which we try to hide our moral flaws. We still have the vocabulary of character and values and it is often used by politicians in speeches. But when moral language is abused as window dressing by politicians and other leaders who do not themselves live core values, it makes people angry and cynical.

The constitutional values on which our democracy rests remain beautiful, abstract ideals and we have not yet succeeded in establishing a tradition of performance character and moral character in our country on which future generations can build. In a country where there is real respect for all people, there will not be nearly 4,000 pit toilets at schools that are both dangerous and degrading to learners. Where equality is lived as a constitutional value, there will not be many schools where learners receive inferior quality education. Equality between people is not achieved through the distribution of grants, but through economic growth and quality education to all learners through which they can optimally develop their potential. According to a report by the World Economic

Forum less than 30% of our workforce completed high school. In a country where human dignity is taken seriously, old people will not have to fetch buckets of water in rivers and blood will not harden on hospital floors. If non-sexism is really a core value, we will not have the highest rape rate in the world and if non-racism as a constitutional value really becomes practice, no one in our country will be favoured or harmed based on their race.

There are legions of examples that demonstrate the indispensability of both competence and ethics in our country. Parents trust that the teachers who stand in front of their children have the necessary subject and didactic knowledge to successfully convey learning contents, as well as the necessary work ethic and discipline to work through the curriculum successfully, i.e., that they are competent to do their job. But parents also trust that teachers will act with justice and empathy and do the right thing, thus also possessing moral character. Residents hope that the municipal manager and municipal officials of their town have the necessary knowledge, competence and diligence to be able to do their job well, but also that they will have the necessary integrity and respect so that sewage does not run down streets and water is not undrinkable. The performance and moral character of every member of the police is indispensable for the efficient functioning of our police service and the security of our country. An incompetent and unethical, corruptible police service makes us vulnerable to crime. The large-scale corruption and deterioration at State owned enterprises such as Eskom could have taken place due to the total absence of expertise and competence, as well as the total lack of integrity and accountability.

Both corruption and cadre deployment are symptoms of and thrive in the absence of competence and ethics. Cadres without performance and moral character are easily corruptible pawns in the chess game around power and state resources. There can be no economic growth, prosperity and stability if corruption and bribery are considered normal business practice. Responsibility and accountability will have to be added as constitutional values so that the current culture of no consequences for incompetence and unethical conduct can be reversed.

Suspending Ace Magashule from the ANC is a symbolic gesture that should show that the ANC is serious about getting rid of corruption, but hopefully this is only the beginning of the great clean up. Everywhere, from Parliament to schools, competent people with the necessary expertise, skills and work ethic as well as a strong ethical backbone will have to be appointed to positions. We will also have to purposefully, in our homes and schools, take seriously the character development of our children and our learners, so that one day they will be able to do their job well and will also be able to do the right thing.

But clumsy incompetence and unethical actions are such a part of the ANC's DNA that one wonders whether the ANC would be able to survive if President Ramaphosa really succeeded in realizing the transformation to an effective and ethical government at all levels. The question is: Does our President have the necessary character for this comprehensive and crucial challenge?

Source: Brooks David, The Road to Character 2015.

** This article first appeared in Die Burger and is republished with the kind permission of Media24.*