WHAT MATTERS: SKILL OR VALUE?

Opinion

DR. JANICE NGA
PROFESSIONAL FELLOW

Dr. Nga is an Associate Professor of Planning and Development Economics, Universiti Malaysia Sabah(UMS). She is the first to complete the integrated PhD or PhD Plus from the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds, UK.

In an era where leadership development often focuses on competencies, certifications, communication techniques, and strategic thinking, an important question deserves reflection: What matters more in leadership – skill or value?

At the recently concluded 39th WAGGGS World Conference held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, from 15th to 19th June 2026, a powerful reminder that "everyone can be a leader" was the main message. What is good leadership? Over the past months, there have been many incidents and impactful programmes held at various levels where remarks were insightful, and at times, rather alarming.

No doubt, skills are important in leadership. However, they may be overemphasised to some extent in defining what that leadership is or the quality of a leader. For instance, a leader may have been denied a training opportunity for not possessing the right set of skills: leadership skills have been given disproportionate attention in many instances, often at the expense of something equally important, if not more important, that is called values.

When weighing the competency of one's leadership, someone with soft skills and other talents, could lack strong values that may not benefit an organisation. Conversely, it may be a risk to the organisation. Skills need to be accompanied by values; otherwise, it may be harmful. For example, a skilled speaker who manipulates facts and creates division, while a leader with modest skills but strong integrity may develop others and earn trust.

From the historical Jade Camp 2026 that made headlines in the Asia Records and ASEAN Records, to the nomination process for positions and awards, the campaigning for positions and motions at various levels, such as state AGM, national AGM, and World Conference internationally, these experiences share important insights and facts.

Personal values, societal and moral values play critical roles in determining the future of an organisation. Values are fundamental principles, beliefs or standards that guide one's behaviour and choices, including honesty, empathy, independence, or ambition. In a nutshell, skills determine capability, but values determine direction and trust.

While everyone can be trained to be a leader, skills are generally easier to acquire, while values are more challenging to instill or change, especially in adulthood, when one is already experienced.

Values are the core and ethical compass to make appropriate decisions, not for one's own interest but for the benefit of the organisation or the community involved. Without values, one may still serve effectively and efficiently but may be subject to the risk of self-interest, compromised by circumstances and other challenges that may sway the direction of the leader and/or the organisations s/he leads.

While there is no intention of suggesting that skills are unimportant in leadership, it is a reminder to reflect on the contemporary trend that may overemphasise skills and competency levels in comparison with values, character, and trust. In a situation where the nation observes a trust deficit among our political leaders, this clearly reflects ongoing discourse on the importance of values over skills. Our political leaders may have excellent oratory skills that can convince voters and other skills useful for the planning and development of the country, but skills do not automatically translate into trust.

Trust is built on character, not competence. With that, it is important to evaluate and reassess leadership not merely based on skills, but also on values, which are relatively more important traits in a leader. Leadership is not merely about what a person can do. It is equally, if not more importantly, about who that person chooses to be.

References

Demir, Ahmet & Budur, Taylan. (2019). Roles of Leadership Styles in Corporate Social Responsibility to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies 6(1):142-154. DOI:10.23918/ijsses.v6i1p142

Hood, J. N. (2003). The relationship of leadership style and CEO values to ethical practices in organizations. Journal of Business Ethics, 43(4), 263-273.

Kalshoven, K., & Den Hartog, D. N. (2009). Ethical leader behavior and leader effectiveness: The role of prototypicality and trust. International Journal of Leadership Studies, 5(2), 102-120.

Nichols, A. L. (2016). What do people desire in their leaders? The effect of leadership experience on desired leadership traits. Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 37(5), 658-671.

Postuła A (2025), "Leadership, values and authority: what shapes a manager's work ethos and plays a key role in authority creation?". Central European Management Journal, Vol. 33 No. 1 pp. 72–86, doi: https://doi.org/10.1108/CEMJ-02-2024-0044