

Uneven power distribution is inherently bad for society

By [Dzulkifli Abdul Razak](#) - August 8, 2022 @ 2:08pm



While power distance has its place culturally speaking, it must not be open to abuse if the leadership itself is morally corrupt and devoid of human dignity towards the co-workers (not subordinates). - File pic, for illustration purposes.

FOR the last two years or so, the debate has been around the understanding of the concepts of physical versus social distancing.

This is thanks to the pandemic that makes "distancing" an important element to be adopted, among other practices, in the attempt to break the chain of viral transmission.

Although social distancing was "popularised" in the early stages of the scourge, physical distancing was later acknowledged to be the more accurate description to be used in the battle against Covid-19!

Going by the mood of the day, there is another form of "distancing" that we need to be concerned with. It has somewhat gone viral of late and could be just as contagious if not properly understood and handled.

Although it may not be as lethal, it can cause an upsurge of mental health that is now already on the rise.

The havoc it can cause nationwide cannot be underestimated given the volatility it is now undergoing. In other words, the better the concept is dealt with openly, the better is the practice and thus better is the control on the outcomes.

Coming from the words "power distance", it refers to the "strength of a society's social hierarchy". It provides for an indication the extent to which those at the bottom of the pyramidal hierarchy accept the fact that social stance or power is not distributed equally in society. It can also refer to an organisation instead.

High power distancing describes an uneven power distribution tending more towards the top rather than the bottom. Unlike the converse, as in an egalitarian society, for example, it is regarded as more unequal and less democratic as well as less transparent, too.

In some cultures, this may be seen as more acceptable as compared with others as a form of power relationships between the superior and subordinates in general.

Generally, in Asia, the power distance is high whereby the superior maintains a considerable distance and vice versa. This makes the superior less approachable or accommodating as a sign of "respect".

It is said that Malaysia "has the highest power distance of any country in the world". Followed closely by the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore.

Meaning that the hierarchy is indeed extremely steep and the gaps in relationships between the superiors and their subordinates are too wide to be regarded as conducive. The latter are generally compliant to the extent that feedbacks are rare, especially the ones that are bound to upset their superiors in one way or another.

And thus, at the risk of losing respect for not being able to handle criticism generally. Locally, this is akin to what is known as "bodoh sombong", a combination of stupidity and arrogance.

Despite that the reverse, however, is not true, whereby the superiors can "boss around" the subordinates in all manners deemed fit.

The "Apa malu Bossku?" tagline, created by the 1MDB scandal, is illustrative of the unhealthy culture of high power distance!

This is even in universities which are supposed to have a much lower power distance and hierarchy based on the tradition of academic collegiality and collaborative practices which are too steep and compliant in ways that are detrimental to the progress of the academia.

Eventually a "toxic" culture of fear, intimidation, sycophancy, nepotism and ultimately corruption become the unwritten rules for the sake of "Bossku".

A fish rots from the head down - as in the famous adage by philosopher-poet Rumi centuries ago - is still the best reminder of the final outcome of such a toxic culture that kowtows to the superiors (or so-called VIPs), whether right or wrong!

While power distance has its place culturally speaking, it must not be open to abuse if the leadership itself is morally corrupt and devoid of human dignity towards the co-workers (not subordinates).

As is often said, ikut rasmi padi, lagi berisi lagi tunduk!

The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector