A Proposed Framework Of Organizational Commitment As A Mediator On Ethical Decision Making In Malaysian Local Authorities

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Abstract: *Ethical decision making is a requirement and is a must for leaders in the local authorities to ensure that actions will be taken in a proper way.Decision making is the starting point of an outcome; it could be good or otherwise.Decision making by officers in a local authority is imperative; any wrong or unethical decision would cause issues for example, corruption which has become a threat to the world nowadays. Ethical decision making is particularly important in the context of local authorities (LA) as they interact directly with the community. Commitment from every leader and individuals in the LA is important and past studies also show evidence that organizational climate has significant effect on the decision making of these leaders. Thus this study proposes that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between organizational climate and ethical decision making. A sample of Head of Department (HOD) of local authorities will be selected as research respondents and answer a set of questionnaire. This research is significant as an indicator and guideline to local authorities with regards to how HODs make decisions and how they deal with the issues of integrity, accountability and ethics. Having this information, various actions including training and awareness programmes could be developed to ensure that these HODs are making decisions aligned with the aspirations of their stakeholders.*

Key words*: Local authority, organizational commitment, organizational climate, ethical decision making*

I.   Introduction

Very often, making decisions are not an easy task especially when ethics is involved. Another reason is when there is no clear right or wrong decisions as there is no guideline and one has to base on its own principles and values.Local authority or local government officers are required to make numerous decisions every day in order to properly discharge their powers and responsibilities. In practice, in order to enable local authority to focus on strategic issues and reduce the amount of meeting time required, they are able to delegate many of those decisions to respond more effectively to the community and provide for timely, consistent decisions to be made. Decisions made by these officers involve both external parties, which consists mainly of community and internal parties, basically the employees. Their decisions will have both short and long term impact and therefore it is very important for them to make decision which is not only right, but ethical. Awareness on ethics and integrity has increased among Malaysian. At the same time, stakeholders of local authority want deal with officers or people with integrity and associated with ethical organization (Valentine, Hollingworth and Schultz, 2018).

Decisions made by local governments must be made in a way that is consistent with the local government principles (Hewadi, 2017). These principles are firstly, transparent and effective processes, and secondly decision-making in the public interest. These are very important as local authority deal directly by providing services to the community and they want to see actions are translated into meaningful output which benefit the community. Thirdly is sustainable development and management of assets and infrastructure, and delivery of effective services. This principle should be embraced by every individual in the local authority in ensuring efficiency and effectiveness. Fourthly is democratic representation, social inclusion and meaningful community engagement. Fifth, decisions made can be right when there is good governance and lastly, and very importantly ethical and legal behaviour of councillors and local government employees (Hewadi, 2017).

Nevertheless, government including the local authorities are still struggling with the issues on ethics and integrity. Transparency International-Malaysia (TI-M) has released the findings of the 2017 Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) on Asia Pacific Region, which surveyed the public's perceptions of corruption and the government's effectiveness in tackling corruption. Respondents still feel that the management of the economy is

the most important problem that the Government should address. More than half of Malaysians felt that the Government is ineffective in handling the fight against corruption and among institutions that they perceived to be involved in corruption include Local Government and Councillors which was rated the second highest. Among issue and scandal involving local authority is a case of Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), The Project Management Executive Director was charged with corruption involving DBKL assets valued at RM4.4 millions.

Due to this, it is timely to investigate how these people from the local authorities make decision. Past studies show that work climate and organizational commitment may influence how decisions are made. Nevertheless, previous studies concentrated more on work attitudes rather than work ethics (Valentine, Golkin, Fleischman & Kidwell, 2011), while limited studies have been conducted on organizational commitment, which has an important influence on organizational development (Cullen, Parboteeah, & Victor, 2003; Kurpis, Begiri & Helgeson, 2008; Valentine et al., 2011). Elci, Sener and Alpkan (2011) recommend that organizational commitment should be included in research involving climate and decision making. Limited studies can be found on organizational climate, organizational climate and ethical decision making particularly in the context of local government. Given these considerations, the objective of this study is to examine the effect of organizational climate and organizational commitment on ethical decision making in local authorities. It further investigates whether organizational commitment mediates the relationship between organizational climate and ethical decision making.

This research is significant as a guideline to HOD in dealing with the issues of integrity, accountability and ethics. HOD determines the situation, the need, and the personality of the employees and the climate of the organization as the leadership is important, and their job is to create the desired future for a company or organization (Toubiana & Yair, 2012). Leaders need to develop intimate involvement with the strategic directions of their company (Toubiana & Yair, 2012). Leaders examine the role of organizational learning capabilities in an effort to examine the links between the gaps that exist in terms of exploring factors that involve the future of the company (Deshpande, 2012; Li & Robertson, 2011).The result of this study are important to the HOD could provide information of choosing the best solution that meet objective or goals in the ethical decision making. The theory presented by Drucker addresses the satisfaction of lower level needs such as incorporating group processes in decision making, the satisfaction of supporting employee needs, and encouraging employees to take responsibility for their work and decision (Aydin, 2012). When employees take responsibility for their work and decisions, they satisfy high-level needs and often increase productivity (Aydin, 2012).

II.   Literature Review

Background of local authority

Local government is the grass-root in the government hierarchy of Malaysia. There are three branches of government in Malaysia, namely Federal, State and Local. The position of local government in Malaysia is stated in Federal Constitution. In Malaysia, local governments are endowed with the power given by the Local Government Act 1976 to provide goods and services to local people. Local governments serve both obligatory and discretionary functions to local people, where the latter function is more towards local development issues. Obligatory functions can be generally categorised into five main sections: public amenities, enforcement and license grant, public health and hygiene (cleaning and waste management), social service and development, and environmental issues. Administration-Local Government can appoint and terminate their staff.

Today, ethical decision making in local authority's organization is a necessary requirement in the delivery of excellent service to customers. To achieve confidence and trust from the public, one must strive in implementing ethical organizational climate and implement work transparency. According Akhbar (2016), weaknesses and work climate such as absenteeism, low performance climate and wasting time with unproductive work will affect the performance and image of the department. Bureaucracy, lack of friendly service, and symptoms corruption can lead to public services considered low. People will become cynical about anything public service efforts, and assume the public services cannot be trusted. Entrepreneur and investors will not be interested in developing state if it is too difficult and inconvenient.

The issues of lack accountability in local authorities had been raised, despite all the government agencies effort to do many indicatives to enhance the accountability (Zaherawati Zakaria, 2011). Performance in the public service context, and how can it best be measured always arise due to lack of services and human resources and often times, due to poor management and incompetence and not to mention sheer arrogance, fraught with

problems (Kloot & Goodwin, 1995).The local authorities are facing the perception of poor management, slow action in enforcement, building approval, licensing application etc. Rapid development in local authorities nowadays faced with several challenges in demands. Over the years, issues and problems due to poor management, malpractice, red tape and poor finance makes local authorities in dilemmas.

Ethical decision making

Good decisions must be both ethical and effective. Effective decisions are effective if they accomplish what we want accomplished and if they advance our purposes. A choice that produces unintended and undesirable results is ineffective. The key to making effective decisions is to think about choices in terms of their ability to accomplish our most important goals. This means we have to understand the difference between immediate and short-term goals and longer-range goals.

For honest and right in decision-making refers to the process of figuring out the worth, amount, or quality of and choosing from other choices in a manner agreeing with or matching up with working regularly with honest and right ways of thinking, basic truths and rules. In making ethical decisions, it is necessary to perceive and eliminate unethical options and select the best ethical alternative. Ethical decisions generate and sustain trust; demonstrate respect, responsibility, fairness and caring; and are consistent with good citizenship. These behaviours provide a foundation for making better decisions by setting the ground rules for our behaviour. In addition, good decision-making requires that, decisions must be those which the local government can lawfully make decisions must be consistent with and in accordance with legislation and council policies councillors should have all the relevant information before them in order to make a considered and an 'informed decision' councillors should be impartial, objective, free from bias and act in the public interest of their local government area decisions should be made on a reasonable basis. Decisions made at meetings are recorded in the form of resolutions which are binding on the local government until they are formally amended or repealed. Resolutions, once recorded, take effect immediately.

It is important to note that councillors are subject to the laws of defamation during council meetings and at other times. They as a presenter and spokesman for the local authorities of their involvement are to represent the interests of the public and local communities. They are considered as a means to convey the will of the people or get feedback from the public on the services provided by local authorities and are not based services. They also acted as spokesman and information machinery to local authorities.

The process of making ethical decisions requires:
(i)   Commitment: The desire to do the right thing regardless of the cost
(ii)   Consciousness: The awareness to act consistently and apply moral convictions to daily behaviour
(iii) Competency: The ability to collect and evaluate information, develop alternatives, and foresee potential consequences and risks.

Some decisions will require you to prioritize and to choose between competing ethical values and principles when it is clearly necessary to do so because the only viable options require the sacrifice of one ethical value over another ethical value. When this is the case, the decision-maker should act in a way that will create the greatest amount of good and the least amount of harm to the greatest number of people.

Organizational Climate

Victor and Cullen defined the ethical climate of an organization as "the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content constitute the ethical work climate" (Victor and Cullen, 1988: 101-125). According to Despande, an organization's ethical climate is "shared perception of personnel about how ethical issues should be addressed and what ethically correct behavior is" (Deshpande, 1996: 655-660). Ethical climate refers to "the prevailing attitudes about the firm's standards concerning appropriate conduct" in the organization (Kelley and Dorsch, 1991).

An organization's ethical climate contributes employees at all level to makes ethical decisions. This is not only related with the content of decision-"what should I do?" but also process of decision "how should I do?" (Cullen et al.,1989). Each organization may have a set of ethical rules that may be unique to the organization (Gareth, 2007). Employees in an organization first perceive ethics (code of ethic) before their behaviours are likely to become more ethical. If an organization is committed to being ethical, this can have a direct impact on employees' behaviors (Vitell and Hidalgo, 2006). So organization can design an ethical structure and create an

ethical climate that supports and encourages people to act ethically in the organization by both implementing and enforcing rules and policies on ethical behaviours, rewarding ethical behaviors and punishing unethical behaviors (Schwepker, 2001; Schwepker et al., 1997; Gareth, 2007). Briefly, codes, corporate policy and reward and punishment on ethical behaviors are dimensions of ethical climate (Schwepker et al., 1997).

In the context of a work environment, an ethicalclimate refers to the stable, psychologically meaningful,shared perceptions employees hold concerningethical procedures and policies existing in theirorganizations (Wimbush and Shepard, 1995).They categorised climate into dimensions, namely caring, rules, law and code, independence and instrumental. A caring climate of organization illustrates a working environment that honestly cares after employees well-being or employees-oriented. Rules, on the other hand, demonstrates an organization that emphasises its member to adhere to rules and policies for the sake of justice and harmony. Meanwhile, an ethical climate suffused with the law and code" dimension would require that employeesadhere to the codes and regulations of theirprofession or government. According to Wimbush and Shepard (1995), in an independence working climate, employees are given the freedom to act based on their ethical principles and what they belief will be in the best interest for everyone. Lastly, in an instrumental climate, organizational members look out for their own self-interest, first and foremost,to the exclusion of the interest of others whomay be affected (even adversely) by their decisions.Every organization develops and maintains a unique climate, which provides guidelines and boundaries for the behaviour of the members of the organization (Gorsira et al 2018).

Wimbush and Shepard (1995) proposed that ethical climate plays a major role in ethical decision making. Studies have significantly reported that organization climate does have an effect on organization commitment and ethical behaviour. In an example of study conducted by Gorsira et al (2018), they examined how organizational and individual factors, in concert, shape corruption. They further examined whether the ethical climate of organizations is related to corruption, and if so, whether it affects corruption throughindividual motives for corruption. A total of 234 public official who were in a position to make corrupt decision responded to the questionnaire. The findings suggest that public sector employees who perceive their organizational climate as more egoistic and less ethical are more prone to corruption. This relationship was fully mediated by individual motives, specifically by personal and social norms on corruption. These results indicate that employees who perceive their organization's ethical climate as more egoistic and less ethical experience weaker personal and social norms to refrain from corruption, making them more corruption-prone.

Researches indicate that there is a positive relationship between organization's ethical climate and organizational commitment. Organizations that exhibit strong ethical values may benefit from having more committed employees to the organization (Vitell and Hidalgo, 2006). Schwepker (2001) found a positive relationship between salespeople's perception of organization's ethical climate and their organizational commitment. A research on 1246 marketing professionals indicates that perceptions of organizational ethical values are significant and substantive predictors of organizational climate (Hunt et al., 1989). Kelley and Dorsch's study of 159 purchasing executives examined the relationship between ethical climate and organizational commitment.Findings suggest that the caring and rules dimensions of ethical climate are positively related to their organizational commitment. The instrumental dimension of ethical climate (egoistic thinking at the individual) has a strong inverse relationship with organizational commitment (Kelley and Dorsch, 1991).Valentine et al. assessed the relationship among the ethical context, organizational climate. and person-organization fit using 304 young working adult in four institution of higher education located in the southern and south-western United States. The results show that ethical values are positively related to organizational climate (Valentine et al., 2002). A study of 352 nurses in Taiwan shows that job satisfaction and organizational commitment can be improved by influencing organization's ethical climate (Tsui and Huang, 2008). Shafer's study in Chinese certified public accounting indicates that the organizational climate has highly significant direct effects on organizational commitment.

The benevolent/cosmopolitan and principle/cosmopolitan climates both have highly significant positive effects on climate. The egoistic/individual climate has a highly significant negative effect on organizational commitment (Shafer, 2009).

Organizational commitment

Porter (1974) conceptualized organizational commitment (OC) as "strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in an organization" (Mowday, 1998). Porter stated that a highly committed individual strongly believes in and accept the organization's goals and values, willingly exerts considerable effort on behalf of the organization and strongly desire to remain a member of the organization (Dubin at al.,

1975).Allen and Mayer defined OC as a "psychological state that binds the employees to organization" and proposed a model that is consisting of three components; affective, continuance and normative. As defined by these authors, affective commitment refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, enjoying membership in and involvement in the organization. Continuance commitment refers to employees' perception of costs that employees have when they leave the organization. Normative commitment refers to employees' feelings of obligation to remain with the organization. These are distinguishable psychological states that employees can experience to varying degrees (Allen and Mayer, 1990). These dimensions will be used in the proposed study in order to measure organizational commitment.

Mayer et al. argued that affective commitment and continuance commitment are quite different construct although both dimensions reflect a link between the employee and the organization. Employees with strong affective commitment remain with the organization because they want to, but those with strong continuance commitment remain with the organization because they need to (Mayer et al., 1990). Normative commitment is determined by employees' cultural, social and familial background and experiences, attitudes and values generally before joining the organizations (Newman et al., 2011). These traits are important as, in the context of this study, and will be examined closely.A study by Yousef (2017) investigates the direct and indirect relationships among job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and attitudes toward organizational change and their dimensions. Results indicated that employees in the investigated departments are highly satisfied with supervision and co-workers, whereas they are slightly satisfied with work conditions and job security, but they have low satisfaction with pay and promotion facets of the job. Results further demonstrated that employees in the investigated departments have good commitment and remain with their current departments either because they want or have to do so, but not because they feel they ought to do so.

There are also proposal on the role of organizational commitment as a mediator. A number of studies have shown the role of organizational commitment as a organizational commitment organizational commitment mediator. Nevertheless, these studies did not examine on ethical decision making. In a study by Li, Zhang, Zhang and Zhou (2017), organizational commitment was found to be associated with knowledge-sharing and organizational justice; which is considered as good behaviour. The researcher concluded that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between these two variables in the context of Chinese enterprises. Meanwhile, in a Canadian context, Lapointe and Vandenberghe (2018) have examined the relationships of servant leadership to organizational commitment, voice behaviours, and antisocial behaviours. Using data from a sample of 181 Canadian customer service employees and their managers, results show that affective commitment mediated a positive relationship between servant leadership and voice behaviours. Yet, while servant leadership was positively related to normative commitment and the latter was negatively related to antisocial behaviours, the indirect effect of servant leadership on these behaviours through normative commitment was nonsignificant. organizational commitment mediated the relationship between job insecurity and turnover intention (Lee and Jeong, 2017).Like any other organizations, local authorities have its climate and seek for commitment from employees in order to create a harmonise workplace. Having these two conditions are hoped to lead to ethical decision making. With these findings, the current study proposes that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between organizational climate and ethical decision making and this can be illustrated in the following Figure 1.
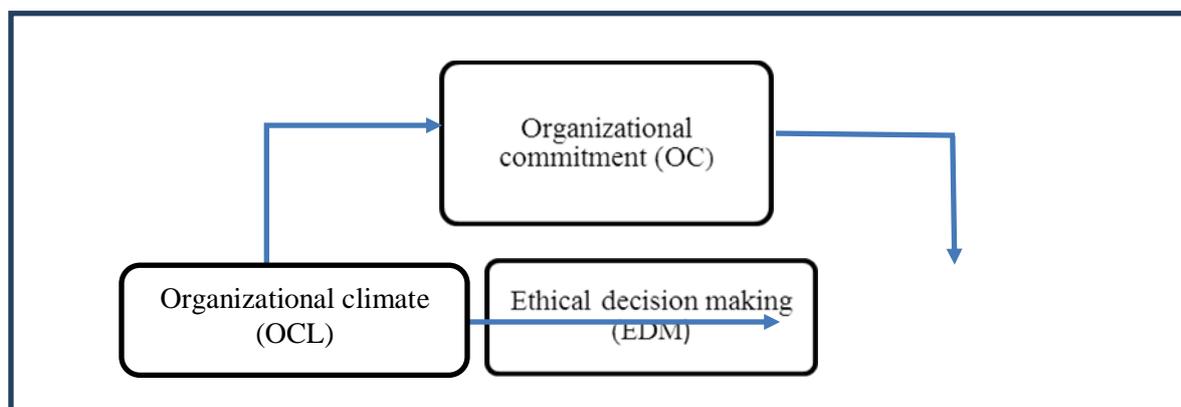

Figure 1: Proposed framework

III.   Methodology

The population of this study is Malaysian local authorities. Stratified sampling will be employed in selecting the sample of study. Thus unit of analysis will be the Head of Department (HOD) in the city halls throughout Malaysia. HODs are selected as they are the group that make decisions in their daily work activities. Each respondent will be contacted and briefed on the questionnaire. A set of questionnaire has been developed by the researcher which consists of items adopted and adapted from past studies. In measuring ethical decision making, six scenarios related to local authority issues are self-developed by the researcher which will be a significant contribution to the literature. These scenarios involve various issues related to local authorities' day-to-day activities such as issues in human resource management, finance, legal, engineering etc. Items to measure organizational climate are adopted from Victor and Cullen (1987, 1988) with 26-item questionnairewhile items to measure organizational commitment are adopted from Allen Mayer (1990) with 19 item. Data collected will be analysed using AMOS(Analysis of Moment Structure).

IV.   Summary

Based on the discussion above, it is clear that to effectively withhold employees from engaging in corruption and other unethical behaviour, organizations could deploy measures that strengthen an organizations' ethical climate and encourage ethical decision-making based on concern for the wellbeing of others, as well as measures increasing the strength of personal and social norms to refrain from corruption (Gorsira et al. 2018). The findings of this study will benefit both HODs and the local authorities in their training as well as programmes in team building or motivational talks.

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