

## **Desperately seeking consumer leadership**

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Last month, we were shocked by the discovery that formalin found in more than 39 foods imported from china. Some of these were candies that had been around for years.

Later, the Jakarta Consumer Organization also found that Pepsodent and Formula toothpastes also contained. Regardless of the fact that it was acceptable, since the content was under the limit set by the Food and Drug Agency (BPOM), the information was never disclosed to consumers. This violated consumer rights to access information about the content of a purchased product.

We have a consumer protection law that sets out the rights and the responsibilities of both consumers and business practitioners. We have a formal institution that helps to resolve problems between both parties, the Consumer Dispute Resolution Agency. There are also several NGOs across the country that work for consumer rights protection.

The establishment of a consumer law and institutionalizing the BPSK are evidence of our government's commitment. Yet, as we know, law enforcement is very weak, and consumers are still not well-informed or well-educated. Consequently, the bargaining position of consumers before business practitioners is not strong at all.

Several NGOs are very active in advocating for consumer rights. Unfortunately, although they stand for the sake of consumers, they have limited direct support from consumers. To some extent, the lack of consumers support has undermined their advocacy programs, because they do not have the ability to put enough pressure on policy makers. This is the dilemma of NGOs in consumer protection.

Hence, consumer support is very important for consumer NGOs' advocacy work. To sustain the consumer movement in Indonesia, the role of consumers is required. To support the movement, consumers need to have knowledge and skills to deal with consumer problems and also have the ability to influence and energize other consumers. In doing so, regular consumer education and training must become priority programs for consumer NGOs.

But many, if not most, of the consumer education and training is focused on enhancing consumer awareness and understanding about what they are supposed to do when they have a dispute with business practitioners or other parties.

It is rare that these NGOs have systematic programs aiming to empower consumers to be more skillful in overcoming problems faced on a daily basis. There are no programs that educate consumers to have an ability to take a leadership role when consumer problems have occurred within their community.

Limited financial and staff resources might be the main problems that cause consumer NGOs difficulties in implementing such programs.

Regardless of these limitations, consumer empowerment programs through regular training and education are very crucial. These can be mediums for consumers to learn about the leadership skills needed in coping with consumer rights issues. Why leadership skills? In addition to lacking knowledge and skills, consumers have limited opportunities to exercise their own leadership potencies in dealing with consumer issues. Consequently, consumers have not been engaged massively in the consumer movement in Indonesia.

Since the nature of the consumer movement is intended to change the status quo, and to see the emergence of support from consumers through convincing their expectations, aspirations and commitments. These characteristics are very essential.

Based on these characteristics, therefore, consumers are expected to have a leadership style that has the ability to attract and create trust among consumers, to articulate shared missions, visions and goals, and to inspire and support other consumers. It also requires them to have the capability to build inclusive networks and alliances, behave altruistically, and have a sense of social responsibility.

If there is a consumer within the community that has this kind of leadership style, consumers can be more organized in their movement. Consumers will have a leader that becomes a role model in the sector of consumer issues. They will have a leader that always takes a

leadership role whenever consumer issues occur, and they will have a leader that is able to become a mediator in consumer disputes.

They also need a leader who is willing to share his or her leadership role. After all, every consumer within a community will have a chance to employ his or her leadership potency in overcoming his or her own consumer problems or those of other consumers.

Ideally, consumer leadership should be organic, emerging from within a community to represent the views and concerns of the community. Hence, leadership is about listening and articulating what a community has to say. In this regard, the role of consumer NGOs is considered necessary in building consumer leaders within the community.

Consumer NGOs might use consumer training and education programs to transfer their skills and experiences. The skills, such as communication, negotiation and conflict management, teamwork, mass mobilization, advocacy, organizational management, critical thinking, are really vital for consumers.

Furthermore, educational institutions should also take a role in promoting consumer leadership skills. As far as I know, we have no programs related to consumer education in our schools. In developed countries, like the U.S., consumer education is perceived to be very important for students.

It is time to consider consumer education as part of the curriculum. The more consumers with leadership skills live within the community, the more powerful the impact of the consumer movement in Indonesia. Then, the burden of consumer protection no longer belongs exclusively to consumer NGOs, but is inclusively the responsibility of all consumers. Every person is a consumer, so consumer problems are everyone's business. Eventually, consumer leadership might be the most-wanted skill needed in energizing the consumer movement in Indonesia.

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