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### Examining business school leadership

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## **Examining business school leadership**

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Views from EFMD's webinar on business school leadership, by Julie Davies, Ewan Ferlie, Heather McLaughlin and Howard Thomas

Business school leaders are 'squeezed' by a range of internal metrics. These metrics focus on a micro-managed narrow range of key performance indicators (KPIs) to raise revenues, research, and rankings. This style of financial centralised control has, in many cases, distracted deans and their teams from seriously addressing long-standing crises that the current global pandemic has brought to the fore. This article captures discussions from EFMD's webinar on business school leadership which is part of "the future of the business school" seminar series.

### **Crisis leadership**

The terms "crisis management" and "crisis leadership" are used interchangeably. Yet, crisis leaders are expected to establish a sense of purpose, and inspire and motivate individuals to align their efforts to the context and culture of the organisation. In interviews carried out by Julie Davies pre-pandemic with business school deans about critical incidents, crisis leadership behaviours found to be effective included listening, reflexivity, empathy, treating people with dignity, and taking time to make decisions based on evidence, ethics and moral humility.

Many deans, however, have been in denial about the need to tackle deep-rooted crises and changing business school models and systems. The dominant model of positivism has persisted, with faculty incentivised to publish articles in top tier journals that practising managers never read (Peters & Thomas, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has shown that business schools have largely ignored repeated calls for a renewed sense of purpose to attend to social and technological disruptions. This is despite initiatives such as PRME, the Aspen Institute, and the Responsible Research for Business and Management (RRBM) network.

Often, the terms "crisis management" and "crisis leadership" are used interchangeably. Yet, crisis leaders are expected to establish a sense of purpose, and inspire and motivate individuals to align their efforts to the context and culture of the organisation.

The global public health crisis has exposed a lack of investment by business schools in digital education and inattention to the core curriculum, in how to handle financial and social inclusion, climate change, and other environmental challenges. Further, business schools and relevant accreditation bodies have also been remiss in addressing issues of the affordability of, and accessibility to, management education and the importance of meaningful stakeholder engagement and impact.

Hamel (1996: 113) commented that teaching in business schools 'is a little bit like being a manager in an earthquake zone. Never before has the gap between our own tools and the reality of emerging industry been larger'. He argued that in a mature sector, there are opportunities to redraw the map.

This can be achieved by looking at the evolution of business school approaches beyond traditional models in the West and Global North and to re-evaluating the size of business schools and their offerings (Davies & Starkey, 2020). It is important to appreciate that there do exist different forms of management education that genuinely reflect local cultures, contexts, and competitive environments. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to upskill individuals for recovery in acute and chronic crises (Thomas, Lorange & Sheth, 2013).

### **Current debates and responses during the pandemic**

The Global Business Education Jam (Carlile, Davidson, Freeman, Thomas & Venkatraman, 2016) provided the opportunity for many business school leaders to debate issues and challenges in innovating, reducing theory-practice relevance gaps, and re-imagining the distinctive models of business schools. Business schools have innovated incrementally in response to declining MBA enrolments by offering electives in data analytics, STEM modules, and links with other parts of their universities such as engineering and medicine. Schools such as Questrom School of Business, Boston University, and Singapore Management University (SMU) offer employer-relevant active and experiential learning through MSMS and SMU-X programmes respectively.

Other business schools such as Cardiff Business School and Copenhagen Business School provide interesting examples of addressing public and social values in contrast with many examples of business model conformity. There has also been greater interest in generating management impact through research and applied project partnerships that involve multiple stakeholders for knowledge co-creation. Deans indicate that increasingly, students are more socially aware and expect to discuss issues of social justice, diversity, corporate social responsibility, and climate change in relation to management decision-making.

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Deans must act proactively to adapt to a more virtual learning environment where faculty training and technology-enabled skills facilitate the creation of balanced dynamic learning communities for both immediate and lifelong learning. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, there was a flurry of public webinars where business school faculty members discussed the pandemic, with events hosted by, for instance, Lagos Business School (Nigeria), Saïd Business School (UK), and Wellington School of Business and Government (New Zealand). Indeed, some schools provided free courses for businesses, entrepreneurs and new graduates, with programmes from, for instance, Aalto in Finland on change leadership, Fundação Dom Cabral's programme to support (micro)entrepreneurs and workers in the informal economy in Brazil, and Universiti Utara Malaysia School of Management's workshop on personal branding. There were also acts of compassion amongst business schools such as support for students' financial hardship and need to access laptops and reliable Wi-Fi. Business school alumni and students organised their own philanthropy and fundraising efforts. Some business school faculty have also taken a lead in engaging with COVID-related research projects.

During the pandemic there were, however, few examples of business schools rewarding faculty efforts in digital education. Exceptions include the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Szeged, Hungary, and in SMU. There were also limited examples from business school websites of the kind of fun and open-ended support for students as offered at Audencia in France.

## **What “appears” to work in leading through the crisis in a new university in the UK**

In the context of a large modern English university, Heather McLaughlin reflected, in her own words, on her roles as Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Dean of the Faculty of Business and Law at De Montfort University (DMU), Leicester, which she joined in January 2020.

“First, as a member of the University’s executive board with pan-university responsibility for community and civic engagement, I have found that the global pandemic has really helped to develop the University’s senior leadership team, with members supporting common goals. At the outset of the crisis, there were three-hour daily board meetings to lead on macro-level issues of student recruitment and finances. We developed a shared leadership model of mutual respect, sharing tactical and operational decisions, and gained really useful insights into each other’s portfolios. The virtual meetings helped us focus on the business at hand and the chat and side chat functions enabled further discussions. The public health crisis and campus closure demonstrated that we have adapted to working in different ways. In my position as a Pro-Vice-Chancellor on the University’s senior management board, I see my key roles are networking, championing the faculty, and co-innovating across the University in making changes during the crisis.

Second, my role as Dean is to lead the faculty that includes Leicester Castle Business School. In 2019/20, the school had 7,500 students, including 30 percent from overseas, and 350 staff with a growing research culture. The school is rooted in the local community and I see our business school model as one that contributes to the public good. Current students want to see issues of social justice, climate change, and corporate social responsibility in the curriculum. Leicester Castle Business School is a global hub for the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 16 to advance peace, justice and strong institutions.

There have been many internal discussions about providing resources to enable staff and students to work remotely and preparations to re-open the campus gradually. During the crisis, we have reflected on the nature of our operations, e.g. do we need to offer all modules, what efficiencies can we make in options, how can we use space differently, how do we develop asynchronous sessions and a sense of community with reduced face-to-face contact? We are grappling with how we will deal with virtual delivery or a hybrid offering of both personal face-to-face and more remote teaching.

How the dean works with people, the human dimension of the job, is always very important, but particularly during a crisis. Staff have undergone a whole range of emotions – anxiety and stress in relation to media speculation about sector-wide redundancies and the internal need to focus on teaching methods. The rumour mill has been rife and this can cause anxiety contagion. At the same time, however, there has been a tremendous amount of collegiality with people pulling together for the common cause and only limited instances of selfish behaviour. We communicate in different ways – top down and bottom up, using all faculty events, webinars, weekly virtual coffee mornings, drop-in sessions and Yammer to upload good news stories. Listening and two-way communications are key. I see the dean’s roles in relation to leading the Faculty of Business and Law as an enabler, supporter, and community builder.

Third, from an individual perspective in terms of personal well-being, how do I retain my own sanity with the incessant barrage of Zoom meetings? There has been a lot of regular chatter on WhatsApp and Teams, sharing experiences and ideas with fellow deans under the Chatham House rule, often with a gin and tonic involved at the end of the week. I have also re-purposed my garden summerhouse as a beach hut to relax in at the end of the day.”

## **Ideas for a research agenda**

In discussing a research agenda for leading business schools in the next decade, Ewan Ferlie proposed that studying deans' leadership styles and approaches is still an important topic as deans have key roles in influencing the design and delivery of management education. As well as focusing on the individual level of the dean, it is also important to examine the wider leadership constellation in business schools, including the diversity of senior leadership teams and their interactions with university administrators and advisory boards. Variations in leadership styles in business schools nationally and internationally are under-researched. How do the leadership theories we teach in business schools help us understand our own forms of transactional, transformational, and distributed leadership?

There has been growing research on business schools as they represent major and expanding sites of knowledge production and offer some of the most popular degrees globally. In Australia, for example, a third of all students and over half of the international students at Australian universities graduate from the business schools that are members of the Australian Business Deans Council. Pettigrew et al. (2014) analysed the institutional development of business schools, rankings and branding wars and critiqued the intellectual, professional and economic challenges faced by these important academic units. There have also been ongoing debates about the legitimacy of business schools.

Management scholars have discussed alternative models of business schools based on greater civic engagement, or the humanities, as well as arguing for closer interdisciplinary integration within the university (e.g. Harney & Thomas, 2020). Different forms of organising and governance and levels of experimentation have been suggested. Yet despite discussions about new structures and models, there is a common theme of similar models and isomorphism in research on the management education field. These are mediated by Financial Times and other rankings, accreditation bodies, a limited number of management textbooks and top journals (usually based in the USA), and by nationally regulated metrics in some countries.

Although there has been some progress in the UK and USA with more women deans, there are also opportunities for further research on equity, diversity and inclusion in the leadership of business school and to assess differences in leadership behaviours in different contexts and cultures.

There are wider national cultural and political institutional differences that affect the nature of the business school curriculum and the nature of a dean's autonomy and openness to outsiders. Furthermore, a wider discourse of purposeful capitalism has emerged (e.g. Thomas & Hedrick-Wong, 2019) looking beyond shareholder capitalism. Varieties of capitalism influence the formation of business schools in different contexts. These explain different types of leadership styles. For example, there are various clusters of types of business school. These include the North American group, the UK and continental Europe, Northern European and Nordic models, South East Asian and Indian clusters, developmental states, and the Global South as well as schools in Africa and South America that operate in diverse regional economic and social contexts.

As universities and business schools evolve, what are the implications for business school deans and their degrees of freedom to shape the future of management education? In developing a useful research agenda, we need to understand more about who deans are, their careers, motivations and identities. In particular, some business school deans are 'hybrid' professionals who combine multiple roles as active management scholars and university executives, while others are full-time administrators with substantial former careers outside academia. How do deans balance their attention between central and business school demands and their personal and colleagues' scholarship? How do deans relate to their academic colleagues and to the university centre in balancing different points of view and priorities?

We might identify a parallel between business school deans and medical directors in healthcare or lead partners in professional service firms (e.g. consulting) in their roles as boundary spanners. Although there has been some progress in the UK and USA with more women deans, there are also opportunities for further research on equity, diversity and inclusion in the leadership of business school and to assess differences in leadership behaviours in different contexts and cultures.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, Howard Thomas summarises discussions from the EFMD webinar and draws some conclusions.

University-based business school leaders have a difficult job operating in the ‘squeezed middle’ range of institutions and in creating a sense of community during various crises of trust and confidence. Deans need to be more courageous in re-drawing management education fit for the 21st century digital economy and the challenges arising from the immediate jobs crisis. They must recognise the importance of balancing technology enhanced and face-to-face in person learning approaches in order to facilitate individual and group learning. Our colleagues and students are, after all, social animals and for young university students, in particular, universities are places where they grow and mature as individuals.

The basket of KPIs that dominate deans’ lives as universities try to micro-manage the business school ‘cash cow’ to generate income for other parts of the university must change.

The fixation on citations and publications in top journals for the sake of reputation surely also needs to change as international and domestic student flows shift and schools move towards greater support for local, regional, and national well-being and strong economic recovery as well as student employability. The importance of digital education and assessment during the pandemic has triggered an urgent need to redesign business schools to fit the digital environment and changes in social behaviour that have emerged during the COVID-19 public health crisis.

The speed and agility with which business schools shifted to virtual delivery, and their heightened awareness of social injustices and inequality of opportunity are examples of clear crisis leadership during the pandemic. Deans must now follow up and take meaningful action to address concerns about inclusive growth, social justice, and employability. They need to demonstrate clearly the impact of management education and research on wider communities and lead social and economic debates.

There are justifiable concerns that deans’ immediate short-term efforts will be focused on blended learning models and on retaining tuition fee income to compensate for potential losses of income from international students rather than on progressing research and innovation. There are opportunities for business schools to lead in planning lifelong learning and reskilling others and themselves in order to redraw a better map of the business school landscape and evolution. It is essential, therefore, to continue developing a greater focus on localism to support the recovery of SMEs, regional businesses, and national economies, alongside fostering the design of hybrid education models that encompass digital and face-to-face education that will enable university campuses to re-open successfully.

The dominant US model of business schools has been imitated everywhere. However, that is only one form of business school structure for organising teaching and research. Going forward, we should encourage a greater appreciation of different models of business schools and leadership. Western countries can certainly learn from other parts of the world that until now have had more experience of preparing for and dealing with public health, climate, and other crises in contexts that may exemplify more sustainable forms of capitalism and inclusive growth.

The COVID-19 crisis has completely changed attitudes and economies. Every business school professor who previously resisted technology has had to teach online, and many have found it enjoyable. Can a hybrid form of management education be delivered to balance technology with face-to-face socialisation? What is the purpose of a business school in society? It is not just about undergraduate programmes, but also about programmes for lifelong learning. Bite-sized modules for upskilling become incredibly important, especially where there is a digital divide. There is public distrust of some universities, with many questions raised about access, affordability, and value for money.

This implies the need for much better communications about what business schools do, explaining the value of management education for working in uncertain environments. Deans and other management educators must enable all students, irrespective of the students' backgrounds, to gain access to technology and education. Deans must also engage with important research questions about grand societal challenges and develop methodologies and agendas to enhance business schools' strategic directions to achieve significant impact and legitimacy.

Going forward, we should encourage a greater appreciation of different models of business schools and leadership. Western countries can certainly learn from other parts of the world that until now have had more experience of preparing for and dealing with public health, climate, and other crises in contexts that may exemplify more sustainable forms of capitalism and inclusive growth.

As EFMD's seminar series on "the future of the business school" continues, in person and in virtual form, we look forward to further networking and debates from theoretical and practical perspectives to exchange insightful viewpoints on what needs to be done.

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