
Finding Balance In Business Education



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

To create responsible leaders of the future, business schools need to adopt a more holistic approach to education.

Regardless of where they are in the globe, a common theme running through the mission statements of top business educational institutions (and INSEAD is no exception) is the commitment to develop responsible, thoughtful leaders who will create value for their organisations and ultimately their communities. In addition, through their research, business schools claim that they seek to expand the frontiers of knowledge and influence business practice.

Lofty goals. But are they really being achieved? To what degree are business educators helping to transform individuals and improve and influence business practice? Are we, as management professors, really doing research to help these business communities. Or have we created two separate worlds: one for business researchers, while the other is the real world of business? To what extent is knowledge produced for other academics? And shouldn't institutions instead spend more time helping business leaders

realise what it means to be a leader?

Finding the balance

Too many business schools - and I am thinking of the many scandals that can be read in the newspapers - have produced leaders that derailed badly. Obviously, asking our students to take some classes in business ethics is not good enough.

The fault-lines in management education are deep and may be invisible at first sight. Of course, management theory and practice can - in theory - work hand in hand. Unfortunately, all too often, academic studies are “lost before translation” - based on theoretical ideas that may be irrelevant to practice.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough that leader development - and here I refer to the development of *thoughtful, responsible leaders* - is not limited to the simple transfer of a set of skills. On the contrary. Going back to the core issues, business schools need to help students find the right balance between being successful, and living a relatively happy life. And to help students to feel better in their skin, we may need to dwell on such relatively intangible, but very personal matters as how to manage their envy, how to practice forgiveness, and how to express gratitude.

Business schools can learn from faculty like Dominique Héau, a much beloved INSEAD professor, associate dean, programme director, and board member who is no longer with us. Dominique truly empowered the people whom he taught. Many had an “Aha! Experience” when they were in his classes. He cared greatly and he knew how to get the best out of his students and his colleagues.

Through his energy, intelligence, integrity and dedication to education, he was the kind of leader who inspired others to become leaders. He was a person who cared about others and who recognised that to be truly transformational business schools need to support soft skills - helping executives become effective in dealing with the more irrational parts of organisational life - and not merely a production centre of “insecure overachievers.”

A holistic approach to business education

Six hundred years before Christ, the first sage of Greece, Thales of Miletus was asked what was the most difficult thing in the world. The answer was to

“Know Thyself.” It was also the message written above the ancient temple of Apollo in Delphi. Keeping this statement in mind, in my work I sometimes refer to the three Cs in leader development. What I mean is that to create these reflective, thoughtful, responsible leaders we need to develop people with *Confidence*. We need to develop people who have the *Courage* of their opinion. And we need to develop people who are able to engage in *Critical thinking*.

Essentially, for the sake of sustainability, we need to develop leaders who are able to look beyond short-term returns, leaders who are concerned about the common good and who are aware of the societal impact of their actions. Unfortunately, the right side of the brain - the part responsible for more intuitive processes - is too often not stimulated in business schools. As a result, too many students remain deficient as far as their emotional intelligence is concerned.

Perhaps it's time business schools asked themselves, 'Do we have a holistic approach to business education or are we merely training technocrats? And shouldn't these concerns be embedded in each faculty member's educational strategy? Shouldn't they be able to transcend narrow concerns about the transfer of purely technical skills? And to take this concern a step further: Shouldn't we, as faculty, make much more of an effort to develop people of character?'

The most effective leaders are able to both act and reflect. These individuals not only run, they also take the time to ask themselves where they are going and why.

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