



The pandemic is causing schools to reflect on what they stand for and how they should contribute to society.

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RESPONDING RESPONSIBLY

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has hit countries hard and shaken industries to their core. While it remains to be seen what the long-term consequences are for societies and economies, it is clear that the coronavirus is triggering crises that go beyond immediate healthcare and economic concerns. It is putting democracies to the test as parliaments in several countries are sidelined; it may wreak humanitarian havoc when fragile states and poor urban areas are affected on a large scale; and it is pulling attention and resources away from pressing sustainability problems such as climate change. As the “coronacrisis” unfolds in a truly systemic fashion, it is accelerating the convergence of issues related to capitalism, democracy, and sustainability.

Business schools around the world have rushed to respond to the challenges that the coronacrisis presents. Initially, business schools closed down campuses, brought most courses online, and began organizing virtual meetings and conferences. Since the pandemic has coincided with a key period in recruitment activities, some schools have relaxed admission requirements and worked around their standard registration procedures. In addition, business schools have attempted to help outside organizations survive by offering faculty webinars on a range of immediately relevant topics.

Disasters provide exceptionally fertile soil for obtaining new insights into, for instance, the way businesses conduct themselves during societal upheaval and the expectations firms have about post-crisis trends. Business schools already have started to redirect research efforts to examine the impact of the coronacrisis. In our own field of sustainable business and responsible management education (RME), colleagues quickly circulated questionnaires aiming to track how the virus will affect companies' commitment to sustainability. Others have started to investigate the best ways to use the crisis to more rapidly decarbonize polluting industries and redirect economies onto more sustainable paths.

However, we think business schools that have embraced the RME agenda should do far more. The coronacrisis should challenge them to go well beyond their current efforts to make sustainability an integral part of their educational offerings, research activities, and community projects. They should evaluate their contributions to responsible management—and they also should reflect on their interpretation of the RME agenda and the role they take in advancing it.

THREE TASKS

We see the current crisis as an opportunity for schools to champion the uptake and further development of RME in their programs, research, and thought

leadership. In particular, they can undertake three tasks to extend and enrich their RME initiatives in response to the ongoing pandemic:

1 Embark on critical studies.

Critical studies essentially help us understand society in more profound ways as we examine the assumptions that underlie its functioning. More specifically, in critical studies we explore existing power structures, social structures, and cultural assumptions.

COVID-19 represents much more than an immediate health crisis. Its impacts will force us to investigate the assumptions that underpin our socioeconomic systems—including the elements that interconnect us globally and the axioms that guide and legitimize business conduct. Only then can we fully grasp the origins, the unfolding, and the consequences of this and future pandemics. Only then can we start building resilience for future events.

For instance, management educators should realize that many businesses were already imperiled within a few weeks of the virus's outbreak. Even firms that had been making substantial profits just before the pandemic soon queued up for support from the government. Critical scrutiny of this phenomenon could lead scholars to identify the ideology of neoliberal capitalism as the main culprit for many of the social and ecological problems the world is witnessing today. In fact, early research appears to support the contention that our exploitative relationship with nature—driven by a culture of short-termism, deregulation, and free trade—has allowed for the COVID-19 outbreak.

When we engage in critical studies, we also attempt to understand business-society relationships from an integrated perspective as we bring in disciplines such as anthropology, political science, and sociology. When we don't address problems from a multiplicity of viewpoints, we promote disconnectedness rather than inclusiveness.

One of our first steps should be to examine sustainability from cultural perspectives other than a Western-oriented one. If we don't, we will end up with limited or one-sided progress on the agenda represented by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

We also should be more critical about taking instrumental business case approaches to sustainability. These approaches tend to degrade the concept of sustainability as a means to an end, rather than treating environmental quality and social justice as ends in themselves. They also reduce the concept of value to sheer monetary terms through methodologies such as true pricing (which takes into account the social and environmental costs of any policy) and environmental profit-and-loss accounting (which encourages companies to analyze the environmental impacts of their business operations). We may find that these approaches only worsen our relationship with the planet, rather than guiding us toward solutions. From this perspective, the pandemic might even be considered an existential crisis.

2 Encourage moral imagination.

RME encourages students to envision new ways to address moral problems and solve ethical challenges. In his book *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, philosopher Mark Johnson writes that we “must be able to imagine new dimensions for our character, new directions for our relationships with others, and even new forms of social organization.”

We must use what we call “naïve intelligence” to look beyond the traditional institutions and practices that we consider normal so we can experiment with new approaches. We must examine the values that characterize contemporary management education. We must challenge students to apply these values in situations that pose extreme dilemmas—such as this era defined by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has led to a convergence of capitalism, democracy, and sustainability.

We must develop new narratives and vocabularies that will help people develop enthusiasm for finding paths into the future. Moral imagination is stimulated when we combine experimentation with reflexivity.

Hence, management education should be open to play and provocation. These approaches invite students and educators to develop novel ideas for understanding ethical challenges, cultivating business-society relationships, and addressing sustainability issues. Moral imagination also challenges us to build empathy and solidarity with those who might not be considered parts of our community—for instance, precarious workers, future generations, and natural ecosystems.

Management educators should therefore encourage discussion around a number of provocative questions: What if future generations had a voice? What if we would consider nature as our partner as we combat climate change? What if reciprocity was the north star guiding all of our actions? Answering such questions could help us imagine a new social contract among citizens, governments, businesses, and the planet.

3 Engage in systemic activism. This task is perhaps our most controversial suggestion. We should clarify two things here. First, we consider business school activism an indispensable effort in realizing the RME agenda, beyond all other functions that business schools have. We think that management educators should not only embrace the idea that sustainability is a moral and political agenda, but also actively and relentlessly campaign for achieving the goals of that agenda. Indeed, we believe that educators who think

they are taking an amoral stand toward sustainability—who see it as a concurrent perspective to others, meaning that they regard it as optional—actually have taken an immoral position.

Second, we think it is important to explain what we mean by systemic activism. Whereas activism is usually issue-based, systemic activism recognizes the complex and interconnected nature of modern problems and assumes that change is required on many levels. The way the coronacrisis has unfolded, touching virtually all realms of life, is a vivid illustration of this. The same is true for the climate crisis, which has impacts on poverty, which affects gender equality, which affects education, which affects decent work and economic growth.


We need to realize that systemic problems—from the global pandemic to racial tensions in the U.S. and elsewhere—do not have single-issue solutions. Rather, they require a rethinking of economic, political, social, judicial, and cultural systems. To paraphrase American civil rights activist and writer Audre Lorde: “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.” Nor do we live in a single-issue world.

This is particularly relevant for management education because business is the proverbial spider in the web when it comes to both understanding patterns of unsustainability and designing solutions to sustainability problems. Because business interests are omnipresent, and because business influences all realms of our socioeconomic system—including politics and culture—business is an intensely powerful actor and driver of change when it comes to sustainability.

In turn, business schools are well-positioned to influence the intricate architecture of business-society relations—through their research activities, education programs, and community projects. To be systemic activists, business schools should make it their mission to examine root causes of underlying problems. They should work to identify the leverage points and develop strategies for planting the seeds of change. Then, they should nourish these seeds until they grow and ultimately overtake current beliefs about conducting business. To achieve this goal, business schools that engage in systemic activism will need to partner with the institutions they aspire to remake.

CORONATION AMID CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a convergence of capitalism, democracy, and sustainability. At the same time, it has prompted business schools to engage in intense reflection on what they stand for and how they should contribute to the well-being of society. We hope that many will choose to advance the RME agenda—and assume new roles and responsibilities in the coronation of RME as a reigning force.

We realize that business schools that heed our call and adopt RME will have to become much more political in terms of the agendas they aspire to follow and influence. In turn, educators will be compelled to expand and reconceive the key functions of business schools. The three tasks we outline here highlight a rich palette of opportunities for business schools to advance the RME agenda. Schools not only can respond effectively to current and future sustainability crises, but they also can lead us in creating a better world. 

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