

Leadership for a better Future

Are business schools doing enough?

By

Alain Haut



**Are business schools
doing enough to prepare
students, the workforce and
potential business leaders
for a sustainable future?**

What do you mean by a “sustainable future”?

A sustainable future is one where the demands on the business leaders of our highly complex and interlinked world will be reconciled with the demands of “new” citizens (among them the Millennials and their successor generations – many of whom might indeed be business leaders in the future). We see the need to ready students for a highly disruptive future in order to be sustainable.

How is this disruptive future affecting business schools?

In this context, what is the evolving role of information and communication technology? Are we ready to compromise on economic profit (by the way, the very first test of “sustainability”) to absorb the costs related to the concern for people and the care of the planet?

Will business academic research keep its mammoth focus on “social and environmental sustainability?” Or should there be other traditional areas to improve and move forward? Those are just a few questions that should be of concern to business schools.

What do you see as hurdles for business schools to overcome in this context?

Business schools generally have a tendency to organise themselves on specialised fields of business where faculty, separately, does a pretty good job of teaching students to get it done “more, better, faster”. In a way, they excel at transforming possibility into capability and then into legacy.

However, considering that in the next 20 years there will be probably more changes than in the last 2,000 years that implies that a previous lifetime now “changes” every 10 months. And if we do not, at least partially, change our focus, many people’ struggles will get a lot worse.

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Are you mainly considering the struggles of workers to adapt to the new world of work?

Indeed, the working people – aren’t we all? – could be the focus of interest but let’s not forget the leaders of those working people. In a business school we train and develop both.

Of course, there will be new jobs to replace old jobs but let’s not forget that, in the transition, there will be trauma, fear, uncertainty for at least 50% of “Team Future”. How to make sense of things, change hearts and minds, clarify the complex, motivate people to take action, how to support them to transition towards a palatable future of work -- and of life. If we are not careful, personal hardship may erupt into social ills.

Are those struggles real for every job and person?

There is obviously no exact count but we can estimate without being far wrong that one person out of two is at least bothered by the demands of adapting to new ways but at the same time coping with the fact that the (business) world keeps spinning. We all need courage and empathy. That means more love than fear, more pulling together than pushing apart, more determination than resignation, more anticipation than despair to combat and potentially overcome the symptoms of unsustainability, volatility, uncertainty, confusion, disillusion.

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What in your view could be areas for improvement for business schools to consider?

We will not insist on regular or permanent exchange of information with the corporate world through advisory boards, corporate adjunct faculty and the like. It is generally done well and most reputable business schools treat those matters on a continuous improvement basis.

However, there are in my view two other aspects where progress is largely possible. The first one is what we would refer to as "transversality". Very few schools consider programmes where some "specialised fields of business" are mixed together with other fields.

This is a missed opportunity, even more so for business schools integrated in universities that covers scientific, information and engineering departments. Business situations rarely occur and are solved in the isolation of a specialised field. We believe that efforts in this direction would be worth a lot to students, faculty and businesses.

What could be other areas for improvement?

It is important for business schools to create the space among those separated fields of business to educate, motivate and support for students to dream better tomorrows

This is not related to strategy, structure, process, technology, KPI numbers and the like. Business schools could come back to the basics of engagement towards embracing change based on the usual but often neglected or forgotten topics of mindset, passion, purpose, emotions; all elements that are so crucial for the successful achievement of any plan.

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Why have those topics be neglected or forgotten?

The irreplaceable urge to "get-it-done". Those philosophical talking points of passion, purpose, motivation, engagement, creativity, innovation, proactivity, identity, curiosity are immediately forgotten when we all feel the need to shift to action.

The business school world is no different from the business world in this sense: when things do not go our way, we do not blame the technology nor the process but the "people who do not embrace what we want and try to get done". It seems that we are unwilling to invest as much effort in the so-called "human factor" as in the practical business enablers such as technology, process, organisation...

What can be done to better activate the human factor and, at least, level efforts with those enablers?

We need people who are dedicated to keeping the human race moving forward, turning possibility into capability and transforming capability into legacy. We need people who are passionate to protest current approaches and lobby hard to change things. We need some people who can break away from past limiting beliefs, reimagining what is possible, finding new paths for life to expand. And we need many fiery leaders who can reimagine entire systems – large and small, and invent new ways of being and with the vision to create roles for everyone.

We believe that academic leaders (and business leaders) may need to re-boot how they think about the future design of work of the future through understanding, nurturing and integrating the protesters, the innovators and the new systems visionaries.





The title of this interview is "Are business schools doing enough to prepare students, the workforce and potential business leaders for a sustainable future?". What could be a short answer to that question?

First of all, a sustainable future implies that sustainability is not perceived nor acted upon as anti-business; pragmatic and measurable business returns must be part of the sustainable business model. Leadership will. However, remain the key to success.

Yes business schools are doing a lot to prepare students for the business world of the future. They could do more in supporting faculty to consider a broader scope of future work (the general management approach) and create a space for transversality to support better acquisition of leadership skills.

Note:

I have become a strong believer in the work of Bill Jensen. I would strongly encourage business schools and business leaders to explore the potential of his work. His three universal roles (Believers, Breakers and Builders) offer a route to better future leadership.

Also, my thanks to two other sources of inspiration: Didier Marlier (Engaging Leadership: 3 agendas for sustaining achievement) and London School of Economics (The evolving role of ICT in the economy).



About the Author

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Specifically for business schools, what would be some concluding remarks?

Engaged faculty and staff members are critical to student success and should be emotionally and psychologically committed to their work, even if they have to practise some intrusive advising.

Despite their focus on their specialised business fields, they should think and act as a generalist, a general manager leading students through the intricacies of global business management. They should insist on the human factors of beliefs, values and identity as the most crucial.

Education leaders (like business leaders) should invest time and money in learning frameworks, tools and mechanisms that activate what we continue to call the "soft skills". Preaching your business field with excellence is not good enough anymore; leading students towards the acquisition and practice of generalist leadership skills should be the commitment.