by Ekin Ilseven & Filipe Santos

In the Middle of it All: Deans as Cultivators of Community Resilience

Insights from the EFMD 2025 Deans Conference

As the world becomes more volatile and even hostile, the pressure to adapt proactively and reactively can be overwhelming. In the ecosystem of business schools - involving faculty, staff, students, alumni, city, government, and humanity at large, deans can create a safe harbour; just as Lisbon was one for the Phoenicians millennia ago. The Mayor of Lisbon, Carlos Moedas, began his speech by pointing out how Lisbon has been the city that has embraced disruption and capitalised on its diversity to cultivate daring innovation throughout history. During the past three years of his tenure the mayor has gradually but decisively attracted innovators from all over the world to Lisbon's Unicorn Factory, establishing a space for creativity to grow and flourish. *Intimacy* and *impact*, listening to all and achieving results through small initiatives, is what has kept his focus on the three values of *innovation*, *culture*, and *social welfare*. "Ideology stops where reality starts," he asserted, as he acknowledged the challenges posed by conflict, polarisation, and fragmentation against democracy and progress.

At this point, Alice Guilhon, Dean of SKEMA Business School, directed our attention to the crux of all challenges - the multitude of valid realities. A survey of one million young people showed that although the next generation is aware of societal problems, they are not unified in their perspective or their approach to seeking solutions. This is reflected in the vigorous discussions of Catherine Duggan, Director (Dean) of the University of Cape Town GSB, and Steven Braeckeveldt, former CEO of Ageas Portugal Group. One part of the world lives in poverty dependent on carbon-based industries and export. Duggan provocatively asks students: "How can you say no to a father in Liberia, whose child could have a thriving future if the lumber industry were enabled?" She encourages everyone to (re-)think thoroughly the narratives they use when addressing the salient problems within their own geographies. The world is complex; externalities are vast and extensive. Without holistic solution-oriented thinking, the world may spiral downward … At the same time, Braeckeveldt provocatively asked the deans "*When was the last time you have done a product recall?*" as he challenges the attendees to end the conference with a collective decision to make small yet impactful change in the world: "Ban plastic bottles from Executive Education!", "Serve 50% vegetarian food at the cafeteria!", "If each of you invested €100k annually, you'd have €40m per year to regenerate forests!" Could there be a way of addressing the immediate and immense productivity pressures simultaneously with long-term environmental ones?

Just like a mayor, when reality kicks in, a dean has to think carefully before aligning with any particular viewpoint. If every stakeholder is passionate about their school and community, why should anyone be pushed

away for their good intentions? Why should diversity of perspectives and opinions be muted, for the sake of surface-level resolution? During the Building Resilience session on the second day, there was general consensus that unaddressed frustration and perceived unfairness underlie toxic culture in a community. Can you imagine a silent academic council meeting? If you can, you should be alarmed, says Himanshu Rai, Director of the Indian Institute of Management, Indore, as this can only mean detachment and estrangement. Yet, conflict does not pertain solely to the faculty. *A dean is in the middle of it all*. Inequality and conflict arise at every intersection with stakeholders: Among alumni that are pulled towards conflicting sides due to political developments, among faculty and staff, among the international and regional, among the school and its students, among stakeholders of different demographic groups. Deans should listen *attentively* to everyone within their ecosystem, whether student, faculty, staff, alumni, or investor, and become a conduit for conversation and exchange. Francisco Veloso, Dean of INSEAD, asserts you have to not only listen, but also actively ask yourself "How do they feel? Do they feel safe? Secure? What can we do to improve *that*?" Only then can every person and perspective be considered. And when people adamantly say "No!", Nicola Kleyn of Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) urges reflection - there may be hidden wisdom within an apparently negative decision.

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Guilhon continues to state that a revolution is necessary to change the status quo, but it is the youth's revolution, not ours. Business schools should equip them with the methods necessary to achieve that, not tell them what to do. In the post-war democracy of South Africa in 1994, MBA alumni were the ones to develop institutions, revive the economy, and stabilise the country to preserve its hard-fought democracy. It was their revolution indeed. Isabelle Bajeux-Besnainou, Dean of Tepper Business School, acknowledges the importance of conversations among junior and senior faculty to accelerate the adoption of AI and its applications. Is it inconceivable that another generation will step in to address the increasingly complex set of disruptions in the world? In fact, this is not just about dealing with generational differences; this emerges as a mentality for deans throughout the conference: to allow multi-dimensional diversity and become a source of creativity and innovation in the wake of the unexpected.

Although deans will be the focal point of conversation - the ones who guide the institution through their vision, values, and the cultures they establish - they also need to make *impact*. Finding the small yet strong impactful steps and establishing new narratives that align stakeholders is essential. When crisis hits and the institution is in peril, people look to the dean for reassurance and to take action to ensure short-term survival. At that point, the safe harbour - which the deans represent - transitions from one that converts *conflict into innovation* to one that stops *the tsunami of fear and uncertainty* that crises such as the Covid pandemic, financial upheaval and political turmoil can cause. Rachel Ashworth, former Dean (2018-2024), now Professor of Cardiff Business School, asserts that a "time to decide, not to discuss" will come, echoed by the experiences of many deans, including her co-panelists Veloso and Yolande Chan, Dean of McGill. There are values that you have to stand for, that you don't compromise on! This is not about being stubborn, but about providing a necessary anchor and a reference point like a lighthouse that everyone else can be guided by.

This is about what deans can and should give. How realistic is it to expect such selflessness from a dean to be *regenerative*? While we have fictional superheroes, none of us - including deans and business schools - live in a comic book world. Being in the middle of it all, deans are the critical hinges: a platform for stakeholders to stand on, a source of vision and value for the community. As Veloso points out, "The dean is the institution. Nothing is personal and everything is institutional." If they themselves fail, then those who depend on them also fail. Without their resilience, those who depend on them can't be resilient. Resonating with many of the insights from psychological resilience research, several recommendations for deans appeared throughout the conference. Keep a positive outlook! When a crisis hits, don't underestimate the effects that can be achieved with seemingly small actions and nuggets of impact; look for the potential rewards from positive transformation. Also, remind yourself of the previous disruptions and crises you have overcome, as Isabel Gil, Rector of the University of Católica Portuguesa, reminds us. A positive outlook has to be balanced with a realistic assessment of what is achievable - don't be afraid of admitting what you don't know, and at times of uncertainty and ideological pressure, minimum intervention may turn out to be sufficient.

Resilient systems however, are not necessarily those that don't break down, they are those that embrace disruption and failure and are capable of bouncing back. From a psychological resilience perspective, it is an important step to admit to that which is beyond our control, what failure means, and how to grow from it. When the (inevitable) failure happens, for deans to move from the preservation to the regeneration of their community, they need to be ready to *receive* from their communities as well. A student council may surprise you by their collaboration, thanks to the culture you have fostered. Your colleagues may learn from your leadership, have confidence and take the initiative, giving you the space and energy to recover. The staff that you have carefully listened to might be the ones to remind you that you do deserve a good night's sleep, without the interruptions of emails and social media. The community relationships you have established with local businesses, traditional organisations and simply the general public may come to your aid, when political turmoil - such as that seen in the USA, UK, Canada and many other countries mentioned during the conference - threatens your future financial stability, your reputation, and even your relevance. In a virtuous cycle, when deans create resilient communities, communities in turn become safe harbours for them as well.

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Like never before, the EFMD conference was a truly genuine and sincere environment of admitting threats and failures, sharing stories about coping mechanisms, and most importantly listening to each other carefully and respectfully, as Matt Symonds of BlueSky Education firmly encouraged on the first panel of the conference. Across geographies ranging from Far East to West, the threats of political instability, exchange rate risks, nationalistic agendas, and climate change were acknowledged. Best practices on AI integration, conflict management, and ecologically regenerative practices were exchanged. Paralleling the funnel of diversity, creativity and innovation familiar to the former "tri-city" of Lisbon, which harbored Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities, the *conference* transformed itself into a *convergence* of support, raising awareness of what different members of EFMD are going through, what they are doing about it, or what they need to do to make their schools prosper. Over and over again, resilience research underlines the necessity of a strong trusting community to thrive, a community where people focus on the issues and not on each other, a community that redefines narratives from threat to opportunities, and develops novel solutions for the greater good.

We would like to personally thank all members of the EFMD staff and dean's community, as well as the business school faculty, staff, students, alumni, and everyone who keeps us on our global and tacitly coordinated mission to make the world a better place.

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