Commentary

Rethinking Business School Education: A Call for Epistemic Humility Through Reflexivity

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Abstract

"Humble" and "business school" are not two words you might associate together, but we can address grand challenges only if business school education instills epistemic humility through reflexivity. We hope that this call-to-action challenges educators to consider how we develop future business leaders who are sensitized to the communities around them, open to tackling the range of challenges that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) present to all of society.

Keywords

business education, humility, leaders

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDGs are a universal call to action and require rapid change by all members of society—including politicians, NGOs, citizens and businesses.

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Businesses do not hold all of the answers to address the SDGs, but they do have a role to play in applying their resources, ingenuity, and influence to the cause. Inaction poses a risk to business. For example, opportunities to mitigate and adapt to the worst effects of climate change may be missed, raising the likelihood that global value chains will be disrupted or destroyed. Change rarely comes without a cost and confronting the challenges to business as usual requires courage and leadership. We question whether business schools equip their students with the right values, perspectives and mindsets to look beyond their own self-interest and confined worldviews to fully appreciate the urgency of the challenges we collectively need to address. We argue that business schools should purposefully design in opportunities for reflexivity to stimulate epistemic humility and create leaders fit to tackle the SDGs.

A long-stated objective of management education is to transform graduates' value systems and lift them to their better selves. Are we, as management educators, living up to these ambitions? Business schools are commonly viewed as too fixated on teaching profit maximization and not enough on helping students to understand their wider responsibility to society and their opportunity to create "net positive" corporations (Polman & Winston, 2021). We typically encourage students to consider themselves as would-be members of the corporate elite, equipped to manage the world by numbers, to pursue success and their own self-interest (Parker, 2018), rather than part of a wider community. We provide students with the skills and knowledge to run organizations, but do we challenge them sufficiently to understand the impact of their decisions on others, both today and tomorrow? Unless we rethink the mind-set and narrative that we enable, we risk producing yet another generation of unreflective managers primarily interested in their personal, short-term rewards.

Business schools should change and instead seek to create environments that foster epistemic humility (i.e., to be humble about your understanding and knowledge) so that graduates are prepared, and willing, to meet society's grand challenges as part of their core purpose. We can counter the focus on self- and shareholder-centered short-term interests that risk reinforcing an "elitist"/"privileged" narrative only with a practice that recognizes epistemic humility's positive impact on (inter-)organizational effectiveness, leadership, and students themselves (Frostenson, 2016). This requires recognition of our own role in training sensitized leaders who do not look at a company's problem in isolation through the lens of their own experience, but who can see how businesses are implicated in larger societal issues. We can do this by making changes to how we teach, through pedagogy that encourages more openness and perspective-taking, rooted in cultivating epistemic humility.

Epistemic Humility

Epistemic humility is a realistic perspective regarding one's own knowledge, capabilities, and experience limitations. This awareness can counter perceptions that we as individuals hold all the answers or that we do not need others' advice—products of overconfidence that can come from business success or from a perception of superiority instilled through the programs we teach. This is a particular concern within business education where developing students' confidence to pursue career goals may inadvertently exacerbate such self-perceptions.

Epistemic humility can be considered a subset of general humility (GH). GH involves having an accurate view of self and ability to develop other orientedness (Davis et al., 2016). Epistemic humility is distinguished from GH as it relates to an individual's humility concerning their own knowledge and intellectual abilities, how they engage in discussions and exchange ideas, and to their receptivity to new experiences or concepts.

We argue that cultivating epistemic humility through our pedagogical approaches is particularly important in developing future leaders who can demonstrate acceptance of personal strengths and limitations without being overconfident. Such an approach would be beneficial in general, but particularly in nurturing sensitized leaders who recognize the value of reaching out to other constituencies and stakeholders to learn from them. This is vital if we are to develop innovative new approaches to the SDGs—solutions that draw upon a range of expertise and where ego, pride and self-interest do not prevent openness to change.

Using Reflexivity to Stimulate Epistemic Humility

We propose reflexive activities and pedagogies as an ideal means to stimulate epistemic humility. These approaches inherently require self-reflection and can be directly linked to self-evaluation of students' specific knowledge and capabilities. In so doing, reflexive activities can challenge students' own privileged positions and experiences (whether pre-existing or developed through their university education). This can be achieved by exposing students to unfamiliar environments and worldviews. These experiences cause disorientation and require reflexivity and the exploration of new ontologies—including humility (Anand et al., 2020). We can incorporate activities and topics in our teaching to stimulate a steady drip of disorienting dilemma, or we can expose students to a sudden shift and change in environment which creates an epochal impact. Exposures to the limits of one's knowledge can include asking students to live through—and not just think through—the

implications of their decisions for multi-stakeholder groups through embedded activities.

There are an array of ways that we could prompt reflexivity and support the development of epistemic humility. We have found immersive experiences to be particularly beneficial. For example, creating immersive learning experiences with alternative business forms (e.g., benefit corporations and B Corps), and with vulnerable stakeholders can stimulate students to rethink, re-analyze, and expand their impact as business leaders. Rather than creating an island of exceptionalism for students to study together as an elite cohort, we can create opportunities for direct interaction and for empathy and engagement. A powerful example of this is students providing services to less-privileged communities as practiced at the Goa Institute of Management which requires its Masters students to spend 1 day per week, for 20 weeks, with less-privileged communities to understand their situation and, jointly, find solutions to improve their livelihoods. This engagement is significantly different from the typical focus on large enterprises or successful entrepreneurs and so offers a sudden disorientation, prompting reflexivity and supporting epistemic humility.

The engagement typically includes immersive experiential projects with partner organizations and classroom discussions of artifacts, films, and articles to reinforce the importance of being socially responsible. Through such experiences, students also learn to listen rather than relying on assumptions or applying managerial heuristics. Underpinning these initiatives is the experience of taking responsibility for others and reflecting on such experiences—essential for inculcating responsible behavior and instilling epistemic humility. The approach challenges students' view of their local communities, prompts them to reflect on their own privileged status and to question how businesses could meet social challenges.

Rethinking and Reframing Business School Education

Epistemic humility through reflexivity is needed to restore the social license for businesses and business schools to operate and address the world's unprecedented and complex challenges. Our collective responsibility is to guide our business schools toward embracing a perspective that acknowledges the limitations of our individual expertise and promotes collaboration. This is particularly important given the multitude of challenges that the SDGs present which require complex and nuanced action, beyond the scope of a single discipline or narrow technical expertise. We need to challenge privilege and instill epistemic humility in our graduates. This is particularly

relevant and valuable in a polarized world, where differing opinions often lead to conflict. Adopting a teaching and learning culture of humility will promote a more inclusive mind-set and provide a better chance that the business leaders of tomorrow deliver the change that our environment and our society are in desperate need of.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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