



Conclusion

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This book is a collective work comprising 17 chapters by the deans and leaders of important business schools from six continents.

Its conception occurred as the coronavirus crisis was in its beginnings and we were starting to sense its enormous consequences. The chapters themselves were written at a time when the pandemic was hitting societies all over the world and creating a new reality by having a strong impact on the systems in which business schools operated and on their prospects.

At the time of writing the conclusion to this book, everything suggests that we are, however, at the end of the coronavirus crisis; several vaccines have had their effectiveness demonstrated and are gradually being distributed throughout the world. Many astute observers foresee the end of the effects of this crisis in the months to come.

One might thus worry about the relevance of this book, which could be seen as little more than a work about a crisis that has ended, whereas marketing-inspired behavior could give rise to the temptation to shift the subject of the book from how to face the coronavirus crisis toward a reflection on the consequences of COVID-19, the latter being considered a violent but time-limited exogenous shock.

We feel, however, that the present work retains its strong relevance because of the fault line that it reveals in the way two groups of authors apprehend the consequences of COVID-19.

On one side lie the analyses that underscore how the COVID-19 crisis has brought to the fore trends that were already underway and have simply accelerated – that is, trends one could have all the same expected to establish themselves at a later date. A good example of this is distance education, which was progressing slowly but very surely.

On the other side are the authors who, to the contrary, feel that the coronavirus crisis has created possibilities for business schools that would never have been able to emerge in such a strong way without the crisis. Many are the chapters in this book that maintain that

COVID-19 has induced a recombination of possibilities in the world of management education. Trivial but relevant examples of this development include the upheaval experienced by business school selection systems and the increase in the number of students admitted to the most reputable business schools – developments that nothing prior to the pandemic had previously hinted at.

Thus, this book highlights a split and a classic opposition in business strategy between those approaches in which organizations must adapt to respond to constraints and conditions created by their environment (which is considered an exogenous datum) and approaches that, on the contrary, hold that companies may not even be able to influence the market conditions in which they operate and that this must constitute an integral part of their strategy.

These two attitudes are found in many major, highly recognized works of business strategy. They are not limited to this work. Literature is an excellent way to understand the gap between the two approaches, which are generally considered to be radically opposed.

They can be understood through the distance between the declaration of principle that Shakespeare puts in the mouth of the character of Page in Act V, Scene V of the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, “What cannot be eschew’d, must be embraced,” and the modern, proactive stance of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1950) in his posthumous work *Citadelle* (or *The Wisdom of the Sands*), paraphrased as, “The future is only the present to be put in order.”

This opposition, found in both business strategy and in literature, can be spotted just as well in many other areas where human thought is exercised. Remarkably, it always consists of a strong opposition between an opportunist attitude that renounces acting on the world but wants to take advantage of the latter’s conditions and a voluntarist attitude that, on the contrary, aspires to influence its environment and society.

Our teaching in universities and business schools often makes it a point of honor to insist on the incompatibility between these two positions; the academic approach would designate such a rapprochement just the sort of paradigmatic dissonance that we teach our students to beware of.

On the contrary, reading this book makes the two attitudes coexist. Reading the contributions that make it up leads one to think that when faced with the COVID-19 crisis, the best attitude for business schools

to adopt to meet both their educational mission vis-à-vis their students and vis-à-vis the need of companies for human resources training and to face their own constraints regarding their sustainability consists, conversely, of finding a compromise between these two attitudes.

To meet the challenge posed by COVID-19, business schools have had to both adapt to the constraints imposed on them by the conditions of the crisis and, at the same time, develop policies aimed at inducing market and social conditions that are different from those encountered during the crisis.

But above all, this book shows that the theoretical posture that emerges as an adequate response to the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic is not limited to this particular crisis. To the contrary, through the dialogue that underlies it between the different chapters, this book establishes that the bias that consists of *both* accommodating the constraints of the crisis and creating the conditions for overcoming it by acting on the social system constitutes a mode of crisis management whose validity goes well beyond the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, it conveys the message that the attitude that seeks adaptation corresponds in particular to the sustainability needs of educational institutions, whereas the movement that seeks to act on the system corresponds more to the educational mission. In general, such a dual attitude is affirmed as constituting the very mission of business school leadership.

The scope of this important message makes this book not simply one more book on “management education and COVID-19” but, rather, a treatise on management education strategy that the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) is happy to have initiated.

References

- de Saint-Exupéry, A. (1950). *The wisdom of the sands*. Stuart Gilbert, trans. Harcourt, Brace & Co.