

Business schools and hubris: Cause or cure?

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In this essay published in Academy of Management Learning and Education we offer firstly the 'Provocation' that business schools may have been a cause of hubris in business and wider society, and secondly the 'Proposal' that business education is a vital means for tempering hubris and mitigating its negative effects. In so doing we seek to contribute to ongoing debates about the nature and purpose of business education as practised in the institution of university business schools and contribute novel theoretical ideas in business ethics and management learning and education (MLE) pedagogy for mitigating hubris (nurturing the virtue/meta-virtue of humility through learning, critical reflexivity and moral habituation). We offer these general comments as they pertain to the institution of the business school, cognizant of the pitfalls of over-generalizing and appreciating the existence of very different business school 'personas' across the broad spectrum of 21st century business education.

The conclusion of our deliberations are that given the scale of the business education enterprise any unintended consequences accruing from the negative outcomes associated with hubris, as history attests, are unlikely to be localised or trivial. Allowing hubris to flourish in business may threaten intellectual, social and moral legitimacy and well-being of wider society. According to some critics, if business schools were 'really doing their job' graduates would be known for their humility, not for their hubris, and they would exit the academy with an epistemic humility, i.e. 'an acute appreciation of what they do not know' and have the self-assurance, self-awareness, and authenticity to be able to say so honestly and unashamedly.

We have proposed that the meaningful change in awareness of humility and its benefits happens along with habituation of humility in the community of the academic environment. Therefore, business faculty and business schools must prepare graduates to both reason about humility and deploy it tacitly and practice what they preach in this regard. In our 'Provocation' our argument has been that, thus far, business schools may have contributed to the fostering of hubris (cause) rather than instilling a sense of humility that keeps hubris in check (cure). In our 'Proposal' we have suggested how humility could temper the excesses of overestimating of one's power and significance and one's successes and achievements.

As part of the 'cure' humility is meta-attitude or meta-virtue that should be within most people's reach but may be beyond the reach of some (for example, narcissists), and needs to be readily at hand in situations where there are temptations for individuals or institutions of 'thinking big' of themselves because of their special gifts and unique accomplishments. By integrating humility into management education, whether it be in the epistemology, curriculum, pedagogy or the wider systems and structures, we can temper the 'intoxication' of hubris. In so doing we can influence positively the educational, intellectual, pragmatic and moral legitimacy of business education at a time in which business schools and the managers and leaders of the future that they seek to develop need to be ethically grounded and morally resilient.



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