It’s Time to Dismantle the Zero-Sum Systems in Business Schools

Courtney Masterson
School of Management, University of San Francisco

The antiquated belief that some groups of people are better than others distorts our politics, drains our economy, and erodes everything Americans have in common, from our schools to our air to our infrastructure. And everything we believe comes from a story we’ve been told. (McGhee, 2021, p. xxiii)

Business schools, especially in the United States, are built upon a foundation of zero-sum thinking. Stories of profit maximization and dominating competition are deeply woven into the fabric of our systems. Yet, by acknowledging the shortcomings of our past and present, we have the opportunity to create a new future—one that is grounded in maximizing well-being and inclusion.

Even before students walk into the classroom, many business schools leverage zero-sum narratives to play the rankings game and gain prestige in the market to entice applicants. For example, institutions can “climb” national rankings by attending to particular factors including low acceptance rates. This means that many of the “best” schools are those who exclude more folks than they include. Additionally, ranking systems have celebrated schools with higher average student entrance exams scores (e.g., GMAT exam) even though there is debate around the value of these exams as predictive tools of student success. Unfortunately, schools have also considered these exam scores when making enrollment and financial aid decisions which means that applicants with greater financial resources to secure tutors and preparation classes are the ones rewarded with lower tuition. As another example, ranking systems factor in job salaries suggesting that the “best” schools are those who connect students to higher paying jobs. This narrow view of student success suggests that individuals who earn more money are more valuable to society.

Faculty can also fall prey to perpetuating zero sum models inside the classroom. Students are commonly trained to prioritize viewing the world through quantitative goggles and assessed through the same set of lenses, at the risk of viewing individuals as data points instead of human beings. Particular groups of students are praised for their potential and given the benefit of the doubt while women and BIPOC individuals feel pressure to prove their worth, again and again. Unfortunately, BIPOC students also have to look too hard to see their own experiences reflected in professors as business schools have moved slowly to cultivate diverse faculty. A 2021 report by the AACSB, the world’s leading business school accreditation association, revealed that nearly two-thirds or more of faculty and deans are men and/or white.

Although it's becoming increasingly clear these zero-sum models are not serving us well. A system that has largely dismissed the experiences and needs of diverse students and faculty, is now described to be in crisis. Interest in business and management degrees has even declined at some of the most prestigious institutions.

Yet I still root for business schools to succeed. Not just because I am a professor of management but because I know that businesses can significantly reinforce the critical infrastructure and policy changes McGhee proposes. Business institutions, leaders, and schools can leverage their resources to profoundly shape the well-being of workers and their families. Encouragingly, I am not alone. There is a growing understanding of the responsibility business schools have to create and tell stories that challenge the fallacy of zero-sum gains. Many administrators and faculty are genuinely committed to shifting the narrative and, more importantly, our systems. A few of the ways include…

We can build administrative and course structures grounded in equity and compassion. This means intentionally seeking, welcoming, and supporting students, faculty, and staff who do not fit "traditional" business prototypes. Rather than rely on rigid rules and processes centered in whiteness, we can listen to students–especially when they need us the most.

As educators, researchers, and community members, we have platforms to showcase stories of social value creation. Instead of glorifying the wealthy few who generate profits at the detriment of the many, we can celebrate firms that actively address social issues to enhance stakeholders' welfare. We can bring attention to and partner with companies that collaborate with communities, not crush them.

We can develop business leaders who lift-up workers–all workers, not just the privileged few who work in corporate and tech jobs. This includes teaching and modeling the importance of treating workers with dignity, especially those who are exploited and marginalized, with the same vigor as we teach strategy and operational efficiency. We can advise future leaders how to collaborate with worker unions, not how to stop their formation or "beat" them in negotiations. We can frame a real living wage as a necessity, not as a debate.

As McGhee expertly explains page by page, when we shed zero sum thinking we, as a collective, can all benefit.

Courtney Masterson is Assistant Professor, School of Management at the University of San Francisco. She conducts research that investigates employees' well-being inside and outside of the workplace. Her research focus aims to advance understanding of the role of business in society and the impact that organizations have on stakeholders' well-being. Dr. Masterson's most recent research addresses women's career mobility and issues at the intersection of work and family.