

# **The Engaged Business School**

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# The Engaged Business School

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# Preface

## **Overview of the Engaged Business School: Fulfilling Potential or Thwarted Ambition?**

The Engaged Business School is a road map to unlocking the potential between business and business schools at a time when it really matters: responding to a global, economic and social recovery. It is a call for academics and businesses to come together and realise the potential that frustratingly is so often unfulfilled.

This call to act has at its core a simple question, which is where the first chapter begins. It would seem to be self-evident that businesses and business schools should be natural partners, the one benefiting from its engagement with the other. Yet frequently this is not evident in practice. This prompts the questions: Why does something that seems to intuitively make sense end up being so hard to do?

Chapter 1 sets out the rationale and case for the engaged business school from the perspectives of both business and business school. The intent is first to make the argument for why engagement matters, and then in subsequent chapters explore how this might be realised. Business and business school needs, national policy and global crises all combine to make a compelling case for engagement, not only reinforcing that it matters, but that it matters now: there is an urgency to the call.

The road map introduces a new model for the engaged business school supported by a framework and process. The flow of the discussion in the book firstly explores the framework, model and process, setting out what is meant by the Engaged Business School. However, there are long-standing and deep-rooted tensions inherent in the relationships between business and business schools. Understandably, they need to be addressed before progressing to explain the engagement model in detail. Then the focus turns towards action and considers what the engaged business school could look like in practice and explores ways in which it could respond and contribute to recovery from crisis.

## **The Model, Framework and Process of Engagement**

The book develops the idea of an engaged business school using three descriptive tools: a framework, a model and a process. A framework surfaces different levels and varying depths of engagement and clarifies what is meant by effective

engagement. It provides a structure for businesses and business schools to better understand what effective engagement means and how it is defined. Then the model shows how factors for successful engagement are interconnected in order to bring engagement to life. Finally, the process identifies the steps and stages which will need to be considered to translate the model and framework into action.

Engagement is an often used term in higher education with many different interpretations, and as a result is not well understood. The intent of the framework is to provide a common language and structure to build a shared understanding between business and business schools. It helps them to determine the level, depth and degree of engagement possible. The framework reflects four ways in which engagement can be understood. Firstly, engagement as activity is probably the most understood, since activities are tangible. Yet activities can be disconnected and transactional in nature, and of themselves provide a limited view of engagement. Secondly, engagement as relationship is less understood but pervasive for effective engagement. Relationships provide a context for business need to be better understood and to connect activity to that need. Thirdly, engagement as vocation gives energy and motivation to the activities and relationship. Fourthly, engagement as mission stresses the significance and meaning of the activities and relationships, giving direction and focus to the energy of vocation. Not all engagements are created equal, and many do not work very well. The framework provides a way to assess the nature of engagement, helping businesses and business schools to make sense of their relationship and put in place building blocks towards an effective engagement.

However, there are long-standing tensions associated with business schools and their engagement with business. These tensions provide a difficult context to navigate and need to be explored before a model of engagement can be proposed. Two areas dominate. Firstly the relevance versus rigour debates and secondly, the contrasting views about the legitimacy and identity of business schools. Not surprisingly, addressing these tensions is central to understanding how business schools engage with business. Given that these tensions tend to be deep-rooted, an approach is advocated to re-frame the tensions and to seek different thinking and fresh perspectives. This approach of re-framing tensions then emerges as an important means to address tensions more generally in the discussion of an engaged business school. Consequently, understanding how tensions can be analysed is a necessary step before progressing to explore the model of engagement.

Tensions highlight important areas to consider within the engagement model. The model weaves the factors of successful engagement together. It brings engagement to life capturing the connections between important themes and concepts. The model attempts to represent how the inter-relationship of the themes that reinforce effective engagement are reflected in a dynamic rather than a static model. That said it is acknowledged that all models are simplifications and in that sense, as the British statistician George Box famously said 'all models are wrong' (Box, 1976). But they can be what Box went on to describe as useful approximations of the real world. The hope is that the model simplifies to aid clarity, without erring towards being simplistic. To that end the model, in contrast

to static one-dimensional linear approaches, recognises the more nuanced inter-connections which underpin engagement and emphasises circular, cyclical and iterative relationships crucial to the development of an effective relationship. The model helps business and business school alike to chart a path towards effective engagement.

The third tool is a process indicating the steps and stages which will need to be considered for businesses and business schools to engage. Engaging in a single project or intervention is often hard enough to do well. The process indicates the steps that are needed for a single engagement, but whilst these steps are necessary they are not sufficient for an on-going engagement. The hallmark of effective engagement should be a long-term mutually beneficial relationship, and that needs commitment. The engagement process crucially highlights the steps and stages that need to be considered to build for the longer term.

Having explored the three practical tools for engagement the focus moves from ideas into action to illustrate the engaged business school in practice. The engagement framework is used to demonstrate three valuable applications. Firstly, the framework is used to develop a mission for an engaged business school. Secondly, it is used to better understand stakeholders and their differing expectations. Thirdly, it is used to map activity and connections in the business school providing a rich picture of engagement across the four levels of the framework.

The discussion then continues to consider how engaged business schools might differentiate themselves. To do this the engaged business school is considered from the different perspectives of a business, a manager, a student, an academic and their host university, to think about how each group can make the most of their connection. Finally, the argument progresses to explore how business schools can seek to play an important role in supporting recovery from crisis. Two broad strategies are proposed, the first is to use grand challenges to shift the focus towards areas of significance and the second utilises the concept of tensions to identify opportunities for different thinking. Together they show how the engaged business school can, through significance and different thinking, achieve impact.

The conclusion ends with a challenge to answer the call made in the opening chapter. Despite compelling arguments for change from many different perspectives over a prolonged period of time, little impact has been made. This chapter seeks to understand why change seems to be so difficult. Yet there is a real opportunity with the two worlds of business and academia having distinctive things to offer each other. So the potential for change is emphasised by two final challenges which provocatively question our willingness and whether we care enough to make it happen.

It would be remiss for a monograph not to end with an explanation of the research upon which the book is based. Chapter 10 is therefore a short explanation of the study behind the engagement story. Given the focus of the engaged business school, the discussion highlight three areas. Firstly, to explain how the engagement stories, which feature in the development of the engagement model, themselves emerged in the study. Then secondly, to recognise that the central role tensions play in shaping the discussion, is also reflected in the approach to analysis

of the research. Finally, and interestingly a perspective is outlined of researchers being story tellers. In that respect, I hope that I have been faithful in telling the stories of those engaged in business and business school relationships, and that in some part this book helps us all to develop our own stories of engagement.

## A First Approximation

With that in mind, the intent of this book is not to prescribe but to describe. It is hoped that business schools will utilise the ideas to make their own assessment of their engagement and develop strategies which bring together their strengths and aspirations to chart their own way forward. Similarly for businesses, they too can assess their needs and learn how to connect more effectively to maximise the potential of the relationship.

From the discussion so far it may appear that the problems all reside with business schools. Whilst there clearly are problems, this is not to suggest that business schools do not engage with businesses. On the contrary, with all the competing priorities at play, admirable and important work is being done, often more than is formally recognised. Rather, the idea of an engaged business school is an attempt not to prescribe but to ‘describe with insights’, to use Mintzberg’s turn of phrase (Mintzberg, 2004). It is also written in the spirit indicated by futurist Alvin Toffler in the introduction to his seminal book, *Future Shock*. He argued that when considering the future, imagination and insight are more important than precision and certainty. At the same time, he provocatively suggested that in this context theories do not ‘need to be “right” to be enormously useful, not as a final word but as a first approximation’. (Toffler, 1970). I have tried to put forward a positive argument for an Engaged Business School in the spirit of description, insight and approximation which I hope will be useful.

The book is written for those who care about the relationship between business and business schools; they have more than a passing interest. It is for managers, academics and students alike, with the hope of bringing business and academia closer together. It is an audience with some involvement, interest, knowledge and indeed experience of the issues. With that in mind, I hope to explore the issues and themes of an engaged business school, asking readers to make their own connections and consider the extent to which the perspectives argued resonate with their own experience. Readers are therefore encouraged to engage in their own sensemaking and to make up their own minds (Elliot, 2005) as they reflect on their experience. This represents an approach which Tsoukas (2009) suggests is particularly relevant for a practitioner audience, those who are involved, knowledgeable and hopefully engaged.

The book is grounded in my experience of the potential and frustration inherent in business to business school relationships, experience which I suspect many from business and academia share. This book captures the lessons from practice, listening to the voices of those directly involved in making the relationship work. Too often I have spoken to businesses, who don’t see the need, or aren’t able to connect effectively with a business school. Similarly, I have worked

in business schools, who have not realised how they could be so much better connected if only they knew how, or were willing to do so, or perhaps would do so if it mattered more?