

Teaching without “trade-offs”: Turning a sacrifice mindset into a sustainability one

By Miguel Cordova

Traditionally, it is common to teach in higher education using several cases of businesses exchanges as trade-offs that organizations have to deal with in order to remain competitive, achieve their goals, or deploy new products or services. Historically, some of the top creative characters such as Freud and Einstein had to make trade-offs which involved sacrifice of important parts of their lives, through what Gardner (2014) called “Faust pacts”, which allowed them pursuing their primary passion. Classic literature reveals the same pattern, making us uncomfortable while Jim Hawkings’s mother had to stay alone keeping Admiral’s Bembow tavern meanwhile his son left her to join the bounty hunt in the Treasure Island of Robert Louis Stevenson. The same feeling that we found when Captain Grant’s children put aside their pain and decide to go after his father’s quest in *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant* of Jules Verne. Recently, Harari (2018) reminded us how digitalization is taking off our liberty from us, exchanging it with a still unfulfilled promise of global informational benefits. The latter recalls us what Vergara (2018) exhibited as a trade-off between economic growth and institutional strength, a disease that is consuming the foundational basis of some emerging economies, who think that they have to choose among both. Nowadays, according to the World Economic Forum - WEF (2019), the time for trade-offs is over. We need to find the way on how to get rid of the classic trade-off mindset, and begin to think from a global perspective, how to fulfill all stakeholders’ expectations, even ambitious as it seems. We need to embrace a triple and overlapped perspective, thinking at the same time about social worries, economic growth, and environmental care, which form the three axes of sustainability.

Hence, how to introduce the principles of sustainability into students’ mindsets in order to make them, even unconsciously, behave and decide in a sustainable way? How possible is this? This could be an enormous challenge, since we already have trouble finding the way to deal with global issues using our limited national structures (Harari, 2018), as Gonzalez-Perez (2016) stated:

“Against all the expectations, in the last day of the COP15, it only was achieved what the media and analysts called “a weak political declaration”...”

According to Rimanoczy (2017), a sustainability mindset could be developed in young leaders under the presence of two important elements: (i) a new broad understanding of the interrelated systems that operate in the environment, and (ii) a new capacity of self-knowledge, recognizing the values that drive those leaders into action. Then, being aware of how complex structures’ inputs and outputs have several manifestations into others similar, we would help leaders to find creative paths, avoiding trade-offs. They would be able to see truly the complete processes’ configuration in order to not fall into any social, economic, or environmental sacrifice.

However, in order to achieve this holistic perspective, leaders must believe first that this is actually possible to reach. This is where leaders’ personal values come in, obtained through a self-knowledge journey. A young leader, who recognizes her/his values and mobilizes them into her/his organizational broad new perspective, could be a natural steward of sustainability, who guards its principles against old-fashioned agents who resist abandoning trade-offs. As Gladwell

(2000) appointed before, we teachers have to identify if we are in front of an educational tipping point that could change the world forever.

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