

Organizational Meaning in a Brazilian Business School in COVID-19 Every Day Life

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Abstract

COVID-19's pandemic has been changing our everyday lives. It has been made all countries, with no exception, to adapt themselves to the new world. Like countless numbers of institutions, the Business School of the University of São Paulo [FEA] had to rapidly change the way of being managed. FEA has must comply with the needs and directions of the health organizations, the governments, and the rector of USP to the calls for social isolation. In this context, FEA should create mechanisms to support their educators and students develop knowledge and create their reality. Addressing this research problem, we are going to answer the following question: how does a Brazilian business school change its processes to create meaning for educators and students in COVID-19 everyday life? The methodological path will cover the evidence construction through a semi-structured interview, a survey, and documental analyzes. Participant recruitment aims to get as much diversity as possible, which includes people from the three departments – business administration, economy, and accounting and actuarial science - among educators and students. We expect that the results of this research may contribute to acknowledging the impact of organizations in everyday life (Contrafatto, Thomson & Monk, 2015; Cooper & Lapsley, 2019). Also, this case is particularly relevant because it is a deep investigation of a catastrophic human life event, which has an unmeasured and unknown impact on people, organization, and life. The study of the business school at USP is a particularly special setting because of its importance on shaping public policies for São Paulo state during and after COVID-19 in São Paulo, the main epicenter pandemic in Brazil. Therefore, the results could be worthwhile to the management of business schools, once the FEA experienced could bring important insights to its development and other business schools.

Keywords: University Management; COVID-19; Business School; meaningful organization.

Context and Motivation

COVID-19's pandemic has been changing our everyday lives. Our lives were rapidly beat by a virus that impacts the way of living of billions of people, and it has been made all countries, with no exception, to adapt themselves to the new world. "The virus does not respect borders", says the WHO director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (February 27th of 2020, CNA). Since March of 2020, Brazilian society has seen the number of people infected by the virus increasingly grown. All sorts of schools, gyms, restaurants, parks, many stores, and businesses must change their business model. Thousands of people have already lost their jobs and many others are probably going to lose in the next months. Another thousand businesses have broken down and others are going to closed. At the same moment, we all have to learn how to survive and create meaning for our new reality.

Like countless numbers of institutions, the Business School of the University of São Paulo (FEA) had to rapidly change the way of being managed. FEA has must comply with the needs and directions of the health organizations, the governments, and the rector of USP to the calls for social isolation. In early March, the USP decided to take the first actions against the pandemic. On March 12nd of 2020, the first official communication was released, warning the community about the surveillance of the pandemic. On the day after that, the first official message from USP' rector was published. On march 15th of 2020, three days after the first comment about COVID-19 situation, the USP settled that many decisions regarding social isolation would be implemented and the classes should be suspended from march 23rd of 2020 (Jornal da USP, Coronavírus webpage: <https://jornal.usp.br/coronavirus/>).

Case: on line, real time reaction

Following these decisions, the FEA suspended the classes and the most face-to-face services on March 23rd. The professors had 15 days to adapt their syllabus to the online format because all classes should be fully virtually delivered. To make it possible, FEA brought a license of an online platform that allows all professors to work in an online format. On April 6th of 2020, the classes begun at this platform with the complement of another online university system, which was already used by professors and students.

The disruptive changes have caught everyone unexpectedly. COVID-19 everyday life is new for everyone. Professors had to adapt their work for the new reality, students had to adapt themselves to a new routine of studies, and the business schools had to review its priority accordingly to the three main roots of universities, education, research, and outreach programs. No doubts a challenge for all.

Even though in "normal" times, business schools are awaited to develop new technologies, innovations processes, mechanisms, and so forth, to adapt organizations to a challenge and changing world. In all these processes, it is expected from them to lead their people, like students, professors, and employees, as at the same time, the needs of civil society, to a better or at least meaningful new world (Trkman, 2019; Mousa, Massoud, Ayoubi & Abdelgaffar, 2020).

It is a difficult time for everyone: educators from different ages, students in different moments of their lives, everyone, no matter if older or younger, has to self-adapt, be motivated, and be engaged. However, how could it be made? How does a business school change their educational processes to be adapted to these people's new reality?

Directions of the paper

Business Schools should create mechanisms to support their educators and students develop knowledge and create their reality. At this point, it is very valuable to understand somehow organizations can create means to deal with these different constituencies and allow them to create meanings in the new world that has been constructing.

Addressing this research problem, we are going to answer the following question: how does a Brazilian business school change its processes to create meaning for educators and students in COVID-19 everyday life? Based on that direction, we are going to answer the specific questions below:

- (a) Which were the mains problems of the Unit?
- (b) How were the main changes operated in the educational process?
- (c) How do the professors adapt themselves to it?
- (d) How do the students perceive these changes?
- (e) Which were the main constraints and challenges?
- (f) How do we feel in the middle of the road?

Drawing empirically on the FEA experience, this research is going to analyze somehow the changes in the educational process impact the shaping of new realities. Considering the research purpose, we will adopt an interpretative research approach to understand how meaning has been created for different actors, as managers, professors, and students at the FEA. Based on that, the evidence construction will be made through a semi-structured interview. Participant recruitment aims to get as much diversity as possible, which includes people from the three departments – business administration, economy, and accounting and actuarial science - among educators and students. After that, the research processes will construct evidence from a survey to gathering relevant information pointed out in the interview phase. This instrument will be addressed to educators and students at FEA. Also, the evidence construction will be made by documental sources, such as the official releases about the coronavirus news. Particularly, this kind of information is a key element to help people create a sense of belonging in their organizational context.

This research may contribute to the previous literature to acknowledge the impact of organizations in everyday life (Contrafatto, Thomson & Monk, 2015; Cooper & Lapsley, 2019). This case is particularly relevant because it is a deep investigation of a catastrophic human life event, which has an unmeasured and unknown impact on people, organization, and life. The study of the business school at the University of São Paulo is particularly special because it is an important scientific institution for economic issues in São Paulo state and, as the whole University of São Paulo, this college has been playing a relevant role in shaping public policies for São Paulo state during and after COVID-19 in São Paulo, the main epicenter pandemic in Brazil. Therefore, its results could be worthwhile to the management of business schools, once

the FEA experienced could bring important insights to its development and other business schools.

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