

Climate change: Learning how to negotiate on behalf of the planet

Johanna Bocklet, Research Associate at the Institute of Energy Economics, University of Cologne shares her views on climate change, focussing on learning how to negotiate on behalf of the planet

Many of today's business students – our next-generation business leaders – feel a sense of outrage about climate change and the lack of urgency in this arena.

What some may not fully grasp, however, is just how slow progress can be, reaching a multi-stakeholder agreement to move towards a more permanent solution for a sustainable future.

Youthful idealism can quickly evolve into frustration and even disillusionment when making the transition from academia to the world of work.

So how can we better prepare them for the complexity of real-world dynamics? How can we build the leadership and negotiating skills, as well as the knowledge, to equip them to drive a better future for us all?

CEMS has found an interesting approach to all of this. In May this year, 150 Master in Management students from nine CEMS business schools came together in Barcelona. This gathering was the culmination of the CEMS Model UNFCCC programme, a series of lectures and seminars covering key concepts and literature on climate change. The Barcelona event is the centrepiece of this programme: a full-scale simulation of the COP23 climate change negotiations, in which each student plays the role of government, non-government or industry representatives. And the impact on students has been really powerful.

Simulating COP23: Three critical learning outcomes

First, there's the learning itself. Taking on the role of negotiator lights a fire that simply doesn't happen when students write a paper or give a presentation. You see them come alive as they bring their arguments

to life. While knowledge gleaned in the conventional classroom context can fade over time, building real passion and this kind of intrinsic motivation embeds the learning differently – implanting a more visceral commitment to leading business into a low-carbon future. Then there's the deepened understanding.

Before the simulation, students sometimes argue that the failure of the Paris Agreement is down to unambitious NDCs or the non-binding nature of the accord itself. But they often fail to appreciate the sheer complexity of reaching an agreement with so many diverse interests at play. The simulation provides a kind of realism: it helps young leaders to understand that their ideas and interests are not the only ones in the room. They experience the reality that leading change in a business environment requires you to see the bigger picture, to listen to others and to develop the skill of patience.

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It is important for young leaders to understand that there are no simple solutions. And that change can only be led by leaders with the empathy and the perseverance to see it through. If the Paris Agreement is built on vaguely phrased accord and is non-binding in nature, it is still a remarkable achievement in finding some common ground across so many diverse players. So, the role play exposes students to the heterogeneity of culture and the economic backgrounds at work in these negotiations.

And thirdly, students learn about integrity. In today's business environment, leaders might want to talk about



climate change, but they often still run from one plane flight to another, jetting around the world to meetings. It's hard to escape some measure of hypocrisy in the failure to walk the talk.

The CEMS Model UNFCCC simulation called for every participant to mitigate the impact on the climate, financially supporting train travel to Barcelona. Something we were all asked to consider was how to stick to a CO₂ emissions baseline – during the simulation and after. Sticking to climate change commitment in a complex working environment calls for strong personalities and sustained integrity. And it calls for an embedded commitment to responsible leadership – leadership that needs to come from every single one of us. This is also a key learning for business students. That leadership can be found everywhere.

The role for business of climate change

The climate problem has been traditionally framed as a global policy challenge.

But in these turbulent times where international relations are prone to complexity and uncertainty, it seems likely that policy on its own cannot solve the problem. Businesses will play an important role in leading the transformation towards a low-carbon world because they have the capability and resources to innovate and develop new solutions.

Of course, this transition won't be simple. It will take strong leaders – leaders with the courage to implement changes. These changes might well be extremely costly in the short term and the benefits may well only become apparent in the longer term.

Business education has a key responsibility here to help the leaders of the future develop the knowledge, the commitment, the fortitude and the resilience to be the winds of change. Not just for business, but for our people, our societies and our planet. ■

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CEMS is a global alliance of 31 leading business schools, 72 multinational companies and seven NGOs that together offer the CEMS Master's in International Management (MIM).

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