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PRME LOOKING BACK

Enabling systems leadership

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By the mid-2000s, several sustainable business initiatives had been developed calling on businesses to focus on “people, planet and profit” instead of only the financial bottom-line; the most visible global initiatives were the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the UN Global Compact (Elkington, 2020, p. 31). At the UN Global Compact, a multistakeholder platform set up by the United Nations in 2000 for sustainable business transformation, key stakeholders argued that many business leaders were insufficiently equipped to transform their organizations to become global or local sustainability champions. Many business leaders had been, prior or during their career, studying at a business or management school. This led to the question whether this higher education sector could become a critical lever for change. A closer look, however, revealed that the mainstream curriculum of top-ranked business schools – most of them were US-based – featured responsible business themes only in optional courses. While exceptions existed, this model

had been replicated at business schools across the world (PRME, 2017). To enable change and following a consultation by UN Global Compact with its academic community (Escudero, 2006), a first meeting was convened at the 2006 *Business as an Agent of World Benefit* conference at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, USA. Meeting participants representing business schools, associations, and the UN Global Compact agreed to launch the process to develop a set of principles for the transformation of management education. An international task force subsequently developed a set of six Principles and the initiative was officially launched in July 2007 by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the UN Global Compact's Leaders Summit in Geneva, Switzerland. At its outset, PRME was a call to transform management education based on the initiative's six Principles and its mission to inspire and champion responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally (Godemann et al, 2014; Haertle and Miura, 2014). The following parts look at key decisions that enabled PRME to develop into a network of networks and a global movement, by focusing on the levels of community, individual, and system (see Figure 5.1 and endnote 1).¹

Figure 5.1 Systems leadership elements according to Dreier, Nabarro and Nelson (2019).

5.1 The community: coalition-building and advocacy tactics

From the outset, coalition-building was a critical factor for the PRME initiative's development. As a call for change originating partly from outside business schools (from both the United Nations, an intergovernmental organization, as well as the UN Global Compact and its business stakeholders), and given the voluntary engagement model of PRME, achieving progress required a departure from traditional top-down, hierarchical and linear approaches to implementing change. Instead, it required innovative and adaptive approaches that engaged broad networks of diverse stakeholders to advance progress toward a shared vision. The engagement of key business school accreditation bodies serves as a good example and will be described in the following part.

At the global level, there are three leading business school accreditation systems, AACSB International, EFMD, and AMBA, in addition to regional, specialized, and national-level accreditation systems. Key to PRME's development was the involvement of all three global accreditation organizations and some key specialized or regionally focused accreditation systems like CEEMAN's and CLADEA's. The role of accreditation organizations in the initial phase of PRME was to promote the PRME principles among their membership (Kell and Haertle, 2013). In the early phase of PRME a high number of PRME signatory business schools were accredited by these organizations. Not surprisingly, as an ever-increasing number of business and management schools began to include responsible management themes in the curriculum and strategically across the organization, the pressure increased for accreditation systems to reflect this new reality. The first one to adapt was EFMD's accreditation which in 2013 incorporated a new chapter on Ethics, Responsibility and Sustainability (ERS) with reference to a school's commitment to PRME. In 2016, AACSB International adopted a new vision and mission and called for transforming business education for global prosperity, which it defined through making contributions to major world issues, such as those identified by the Sustainable Development Goals. PRME at that time had adopted the Sustainable Development Goals as a key goal for its signatories.

A number of other examples – for instance, in the area of student engagement the coalition with key student organizations such as Net Impact and

oikos International, or, in the area of research, engaging the Academy of Management and some of its key groups – could be further analyzed to show the important effects of coalition-building and the respective advocacy tactics for PRME's development.

5.2 The individual: skills of collaborative leadership to enable learning, trust-building, and empowered action

The development of the abovementioned initiatives and coalitions was driven by the sustained effort and commitment of many individuals. Importantly, these individuals contributed to and influenced the evolution of the PRME initiative, as the following examples show.

Three years after PRME's launch, key individuals from different regions around the world recommended to consider and incorporate local contexts and perspectives into the initiative. Pioneered by the PRME Asia Forum in 2010, a range of regional and local PRME meetings, convened by faculty and deans of PRME signatory institutions, were organized to facilitate this adaptation process. These meetings proved to be powerful means to promote awareness and better understanding of responsible and sustainable management education. This localization process also led to increased local business school outreach and participation, culminating in the creation of regional PRME Chapters endorsed by the PRME community during the 3rd Global Forum in 2012. While initially serving as vehicles for local collaboration and peer learning, PRME Chapters became integral networks that advance the Six Principles and scale up engagement within and between PRME signatories. The PRME initiative also provided opportunities for other learning communities to emerge through PRME Working Groups – issue-area collaborations of faculty, industry experts, business leaders, and students exploring a range of topics and their implications for responsible management education – which emerged since 2008 and that enabled cutting-edge research into new trends in pedagogy, along with new avenues to expand responsible management education. Later, important impulses also came from the PRME Champions group – a select group of institutions that transformed their curricula and research around the Six Principles, and which was launched in 2014 (Haertle et al, 2017).

Key to the success of all the above-mentioned networks were individuals from within or outside each of these groups who, at critical moments of

the development could catalyze the formation of a powerful new network, or, when necessary, provide the crucial intervention to restore trust and commitment. Not all groups were equally successful but the learning from failure helped other groups and the initiative.

5.3 The system: understanding and dealing with complexities

In 2015, the international community through the UN General Assembly had committed to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At the heart of this were 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Global Goals) covering a range of priorities from poverty eradication, to gender quality, to action on climate, and more – each grounded in local realities and global trends. Before the 2030 Agenda, the future outcome of responsible management education in academia was opaque and undefined. The Six Principles offered a framework for transformation in teaching, research and thought leadership, but what form that transformation should take or how it was measured was left intentionally vague – priorities were defined by each individual higher education institution and communicated independently to its stakeholders. The Global Goals provided a structure to PRME's vision to transform management education, they offered a clear outcome. As the PRME initiative had become a vehicle for management education to be advocates and champions for responsible management education, many PRME signatories became early adopters and advocates for the Global Goals and many made them a key focus of teaching and research. Underpinned by the global movement of stakeholders and signatories, the PRME initiative transformed into a coordinating and mobilizing platform for the Global Goals. Importantly, the goals and related efforts to reorient societies and economies became one rallying call for several business and management schools. The PRME initiative's impact was a key factor in this transformation.

5.4 Learning from the past to inform the future

Future progress of the PRME initiative and in its stated mission “to transform management education and develop the responsible decision-makers of tomorrow to advance sustainable development” requires a collective

embrace of complexity. As in the early phase of the initiative's development, it will require the commitment of organizations and individuals joining together to take collective action through large networks and coalitions with the aim to create impact and systemic change at scale. It will also require innovative approaches that engage new networks of stakeholders, harnessing their complementary capacities. Finally, it will require strategies that are adaptive and flexible to reflect the changes in which management education providers operate.

Note

- 1 Key decisions will be analyzed through a systems leadership perspective based on a report by Dreier, Nabarro and Nelson (2019), which provides a useful framework of the "set of skills and capacities that any individual or organization can use to catalyze, enable and support the process of systems-level change," and which comprises three interconnected levels: individual, community, and system. This framework is well-suited to analyze the complex challenges in the development of PRME and the responsible management education field which required collective action where no single actor was in control. Given the space limitations the following part needs to be selective and is written from the author's perspective.

References

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