

The School of the Future

Introduction

“When you’re done with your units, please turn in your tablets and get ready to present. I will only mediate the debate, as per usual.”

Only one of the students, Laura, deviates her attention from her screen and looks up at me. I walk towards her and notice that her designated unit is Public Health Policy. Makes sense, as her main interests have pivoted towards the biological and social sciences. I return to my seat and think back to when, eleven years ago, the world went through the worst health crisis in the twenty first century...

Pasta, Drinks, and Fear

Sunday, March 15th, 2020. My boyfriend and I are at one of our favorite Italian places, Pettiroso Ristorante. While I wait for my *tagliatelle amatriciana*, I sip on my Aperol Sprit. Looks like a perfectly normal and relaxing (Brazilian) summer. Except for the fact that people – both fellow diners and restaurant staff – are tense. Uncertainty plagues the national atmosphere, as the international news outlets display terror, yet our president denies the seriousness of this “supposed” virus, a “fantasy” as he has recently called it¹. Who is telling the truth? Are so many people *actually* dying? Should we be quarantined? If so, what will happen to Brazil’s already crumbling economy?

We finish our meal and, on our way out, are thanked by the very owner of the restaurant.

I still wonder if he already suspected back then that his business would unfortunately end up permanently closing less than a year later...

The Debate

The students take turns to present their findings on their designated units. One of them mentions why he thinks we have failed to reach the 2030 SDGs. In hindsight, it’s easy for us to point fingers and attribute blame.

It’s the OECD countries’ fault, as agriculture halted climate change initiatives; no, it’s the richest countries’ fault for not providing financial support or aid to the less privileged ones.

Yet, these were complex goals that implicated important opportunity costs. In hindsight it’s easy for us to say what should and could have been done. But despite their relative

¹ G1. “Bolsonaro Diz Que 'Pequena Crise' Do Coronavírus é 'Mais Fantasia' e Não 'Isso Tudo' Que Mídia Propaga.” *G1*, 10 Mar. 2020, g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/03/10/bolsonaro-diz-que-questao-do-coronavirus-e-muito-mais-fantasia.ghtml.

“failure”, we now have significant knowledge to guide future policy makers, just as the UN remedied inherent flaws of the League of Nations in its creation.

Hindsight

We had no precedent, no previous reference or hindsight to the situation we were going through. Although the term “unprecedented” was sorely overused, it was nonetheless true. All we knew was that we were going through a global pandemic. We didn’t know how long it was going to last or its long-term health and economic impacts. I had just expanded my business and signed a lease to a bigger office; I was barely breaking even. What would that implicate?

When our mayor announced that we were going on lockdown, I almost panicked- *almost*, but thankfully, didn’t.

Expertise

In 2015, I graduated from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania with a Bachelor of Science in Economics and concentrations in Finance and Behavioral Economics. Prior to starting PrepMe Education, a college consulting company, I had had some experience in finance and advertisement, but none in education management. Although the company was almost five years old when the pandemic hit, I was still no expert in education management. So, I turned towards the best, mirroring some of their actions.

I started off at school...

Part of PrepMe Education’s services involves consulting projects for prominent private Brazilian high schools. That means that we are constantly exposed to education management in action. So much of our crisis management strategies stemmed from what the schools were doing. I’d like to use a case study of a specific school that was especially efficient during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to maintain the school’s privacy, I will call it “School X”.

Here are some vital steps and actions that School X took, which I believe secured its successful crisis management policies:

1. **Act quickly:** When rumors about a possible lockdown began, the school’s management team immediately came up with protocols they’d put in place according to different scenarios. That included 100% virtual learning, reduced capacity, and rigorous health and safety measures on site.
2. **Transparency is key:** The next step was to inform the entire school’s community of what was going on and the possible action plans. The management team also admitted that they wouldn’t know the exact protocols to put in place until the government released their decisions. However, they showed how the school was prepared to take action in multiple scenarios, which in turn, gave staff, parents,

and students confidence that the school was prepared to face and adapt to such unforeseen circumstances.

3. **Training staff:** With crisis comes change. Therefore, the school put in action intensive teacher training regarding online learning to not only school staff but also parents. The workshops continued for an entire year, helping the school community adapt to the new circumstances.
4. **Take calculated risks:** This links back to the first item “Act quickly”. Crisis means that certain actions are time sensitive. That means that managers may need to make decisions based on their “gut” rather than go through intensive research. This means that they need to take calculated risks. In School X’s case, much of those risks involved health, but also overall learning of the students. When classes resumed, who should be prioritized? How should classes be divided with the limited space and reduced capacity? What would happen if teachers got sick? All these complex decisions had to be made in a matter of days and, at times, hours, which meant that calculated risks were inevitable.
5. **Taking costs into account:** School X was one of the few private schools in Brazil that refused to reduce their tuition. Their rationale was that they were investing more money into equipment, staff training, and an onsite COVID-19 ambulatory for when live classes resumed. Moreover, with that, the quality of teaching and services had not been affected. Therefore, tuition shouldn’t be reduced. Despite facing some backlash, School X did not lose any student. Its student body actually increased.
6. **Accept that some changes came to stay:** The pandemic caused a major shift in teaching methods and the way that students learn. That meant that some changes came to stay, like the use of technology in teaching, customized learning according to each student’s needs and interests, and hybrid learning.

Taking Action

Analyzing schools, like School X, I knew that much of PrepMe Education’s services could be migrated virtually with barely losing quality. I also knew that I needed to retain my existing clients and momentarily halt initiatives to attract new ones. So, the first action I took was to contact every student and their families individually, even if it was just to check in and see how they were doing. That decision was pivotal, as it secured my clients’ trust in me and my company’s work. After all, “Management is about human beings”², and human beings long for human contact, especially in Brazil. I was also honest with them, admitting that I wasn’t sure of what the effects of the pandemic would mean for college admissions, but that I’d keep them updated.

Drucker wrote that what managers do in different countries is the same, but “how they do it may be quite different.”³ In Brazil, people like to talk, especially clients to the people

² Drucker, Peter F. “Management and the World's Work.” *Harvard Business Review*, 1 Aug. 2014, hbr.org/1988/09/management-and-the-worlds-work.

³ Drucker, Peter F. “Management and the World's Work.” *Harvard Business Review*, 1 Aug. 2014, hbr.org/1988/09/management-and-the-worlds-work.

or services they hired; they like attention. Being extra-sensitive to our clients' needs was essential in that moment of crisis in 2020. Despite having to work a lot more hours, I didn't lose any clients during the pandemic. In fact, just like School X, our revenues even increased.

Having had to adapt quickly to the virtual format, I engaged in research and observed the actions taken by other start-ups and schools. Seeing that Zoom had been working well, I signed up for a subscription, set up guidelines for our virtual workplace, and trained my staff accordingly. Drucker stated that "every enterprise requires simple, clear, and unifying objectives."⁴ In the beginning of the pandemic, it would have been easy for our company to lose its objectiveness, which is why I set up the new guidelines, setting clear and achievable goals for myself and staff. Those goals no longer emphasized expansion, but rather, retention of clientele and, most importantly, quality of our services. I also invested in Zoom subscriptions for everyone as well as Apple Pencils for our tutors.

Just like parents asked for a tuition discount at School X, many of my clients asked me for one too. That was, perhaps, the hardest decision I had to make. Different from the schools, my investment hadn't been as significant. Therefore, we could afford to give some clients a discount. So, I evaluated and considered each case individually and was honest about each decision. These conversations were very well received and, in the end, we did not suffer any financial burdens.

Extrapolating Conclusions

While this event lacked precedent and could not have been predicted by your average manager (although Nicholas Taleb might argue otherwise)⁵, we did learn many lessons. In fact, we're still learning. The Brazilian educational systems have been historically resistant to change. Much of that is a reflection of Brazil's heavy bureaucracy, which has created a culture of rigidity and red tape. On a grander scheme, this crisis has highlighted the importance of reducing governmental and institutional bureaucracy. In doing so, managers and politicians are able to implement swift changes when needed and lead innovation, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Reduced bureaucracy also allows employees to be granted more autonomy, which has been an important shift in the workplace⁶ in the recent years.

⁴ Drucker, Peter F. "Management and the World's Work." *Harvard Business Review*, 1 Aug. 2014, hbr.org/1988/09/management-and-the-worlds-work.

⁵ Avishai, Bernard, et al. "The Pandemic Isn't a Black Swan but a Portent of a More Fragile Global System." *The New Yorker*, 21 Apr. 2020, www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-pandemic-isnt-a-black-swan-but-a-portent-of-a-more-fragile-global-system.

⁶ Wartzman, Rick. "What Peter Drucker Knew About 2020." *Harvard Business Review*, 5 Nov. 2014, hbr.org/2014/10/what-peter-drucker-knew-about-2020.

Education-wise, the pandemic has highlighted yet another opportunity and, consequently, deficit: the integration of technology in learning. While 100% virtual classes posed an emotional burden on the students, hybrid learning, in many cases, rendered positive results. Moreover, it gave families and schools more flexibility and adaptability. Unfortunately, this also highlighted Brazil's social inequality. A great part of our population does not have access to adequate technology and Internet connection to attend virtual classes, significantly setting back our education levels in 2020-21. This has served as yet another signal that much is institutionally wrong with my country.

While I contemplate the Brazilian school of the future- one where students are genuinely excited to learn, are free to design their own curricula, and have debate-based classes (like the scenarios I outlined at the start of this essay), I am also sad for my country.

This may have started as management-based essay, but it has also helped me reflect on my role as an education professional in Brazil. Although access to basic and secondary education has dramatically increased, we still face great challenges. I can only hope that the obstacles we've come across as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic can serve as a triggering agent for change in my country. And I hope to be part of this change.

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