Confusion and Consequences: The power of 'We'

Maureen Royce iD

Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, UK (M.A.Royce@ljmu.ac.uk)

Abstract

Business education is still driven by individualistic cultures (the 'I'), which provides the sociocultural container for what education is and can be. Paradoxically, the pandemic's drive towards online collaborative working is a stark reminder of alternatives (the 'we'). This thought piece calls for a deeper re-examination and emphasis on the 'we' as a basis for educational development.

Introduction

Rapid change and the interdependence of teams and individuals with diverse skill-sets working in shared virtual and live spaces has led to a surge of interest in collaborative working and the measurement of work in non-standard settings. For many years, performance management systems in organisations have revolved around the notion of measuring contribution, and ways in which this can be individually assessed. In identifying individual attainment as the measurement tool, organisations also signal value. As individual contribution becomes the marker for success or progression, the espoused collective and collaborative goals or ways of working are diminished and perceived to be secondary in value. Given complexity in the world of business and education, the focus on 'I' negates efforts to engage staff in collective activities – 'We'. As the culture of 'I' becomes the default so we pass subliminal messages to the future generations of educators and business leaders to place a lower value on co-operation and

collective efforts to focus on an individualised agenda which may support reward and recognition. The tension between the collaborative 'We' approach and the processes recognising 'I' more readily can result in confused or even contradictory priorities. One of the consequences of this may be reduced effectiveness and increased strain as efforts are made to create balance.

Institutional Positioning

If the institutional positioning on assessing performance is individualistic, this signals priority and relative importance to all within the organisation. For educational establishments, this culture translates into our teaching and learning designs. Taking their cue from institutional culture, educators may fail to recognise the value of leadership or teamworking skills in student activity. As education increasingly moves into a sphere where students collaborate and curate content then measurement tools for these team focused contributions from students need to be built into elements of assessment. I would question

whether this is because we lack the tools to measure collaborative contributions, and would suggest that it is more about the culture of individual achievement, and the ways in which this becomes deeply culturally embedded, and seen as being superior (Hammond, 2017).

The nature of managing individual and team performance has been subject to significant research in the business world. The contradiction between developing collaboration and identifying individual success has been widely considered in the human resource and development literature. in 2012, Rowland posed questions about mixed messages regarding team contributions and the impact this might have in creating disparities in organisational rewards and level of burden. To investigate how collaboration was being considered in professional circles during 2022 I turned to two reports from CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development), a professional body specialising in managing people. Their work indicates that organisations may struggle to define the factors contributing to the achievement of outcomes. As more traditional processes tend to focus on individual achievement the recognition of a collaborative culture may be informal, sitting outside the formal processes of both education and business practice. Barends et al (2022) suggest that consideration of the GRPI model (Goals, Roles, Processes, and Interpersonal Relationships) may be helpful. The model's basic assumption is that to be effective, a team requires clarity, agreement, and support regarding four features:

- Goals: what is the purpose of the team, what are the targets or the desired outcomes, and how is progress measured?

- Roles: who is doing what, and are all roles and responsibilities clearly described and understood?

- Processes: how is information shared, decisions made, and conflicts resolved?

- Interpersonal relations: is there trust among team members, and what is the general atmosphere within the team?

The reliance of interdisciplinary team members on collaboration to resolve issues may give this model a role in discussion of structures for our complex world.

Translation to Academic Settings

Translated to an academic setting; roles, processes and interpersonal relations are all areas which require further consideration. Role ambiguity (lack of information regarding how to perform the job adequately and uncertainty about expectations) can negatively impact decision making on priorities as teaching and research, pastoral, and governance duties a swirl of expectation but also uncertainty about value as messages about student support and teaching quality can be drowned out by the heavy emphasis on individualistic achievement. The choices made within academic teams may also lead to a mismatch between expectations and demands on the part of two or more team members. Where there is no shared understanding of role, purpose, and priority then the risk of a negative impact associated with performance is potentially higher. Practice in this area may be ahead of process. Although the pandemic highlighted the importance of interdependency, the review processes and governance link more naturally to the work of the individual. In part, this is due to the difficulty associated with identifying the contribution individuals make to a collective effort particularly where skills sets may be quite different. However, this should not prevent an articulation of the role and value of individuals to a collaborative success. It is little wonder that academics struggle with the design of collaboratively based assessment for students when their institutions struggle to define the value of academics beyond the more conventional measures. Business education has been moving toward student co-creation of content which invariably involves a measure of peer support and peer evaluation. Double et al (2019) identified the effectiveness of peer assessment in formative work but suggested that this might be transferable to other contextual situations in both learning and assessment of learning. In placing greater value on peer assessment of practice or application of knowledge we might move towards a better structural understanding of the way collaborative contributions can be articulated and measured.

Summary

Higher education institutions have been characterised at times as slow to change and bureaucratic in nature, but it is also true that institutional processes and academic practice proved capable of extremely rapid change as the pandemic closed the more normal arrangements. The response to online teaching at short notice was a collective piece involving academic, professional, and technical staff. A process which might more normally take nine months, or more was brought to life in weeks or even days as teams formed and reformed to transition to an environment alien to many educators and students. Here is the proof that rapid change and collaboration can produce successful outcomes and as educators we can use the confidence of navigating a complex environment to encourage us to experiment in process and practice and establish norms in assessing value of collaborative contributions. Rowland (2013) suggests that empowered and trusted teams may be best placed to measure the value of contributions. The nature of trust has been examined more closely post pandemic in the discussion of hybrid and flexible working with traditional control models challenged by an increased desire for location flexibility in many sectors including Higher Education. Wall (2016) suggests that it is in embracing our human spirit we can recognise with greater clarity the behaviours which will support our endeavours. Understanding the way in which our human behaviours contribute and being able to articulate this contribution brings out the humanity in our work butt also sees value in the human attributes. Questions around the most productive workspaces for team and individual working increase the importance of understanding the relative value and contribution of each. As newer patterns of working becoming more established the need to articulate the relationship between collective and individual effort will be greater.

Disclosure statement

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