

Courageous Conversations: Preparing Students to Lead in a Politically Polarized Business Environment

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Absract

We describe an experimental curriculum innovation that creates a safe space for students to engage in courageous conversations—to openly share diverse thoughts and opinions as well as vigorously debate politically charged issues of critical business importance. Course evaluations and online surveys of student experiences and reactions strongly suggest that the courageous conversation model, properly incorporated into a business school’s curriculum, is an excellent way to prepare the next generation of successful business leaders. In a world where politically polarizing issues embedded in America’s culture wars increasingly impact business viability, profitability, and competitiveness, such leaders are both highly coveted and key to organizational success.

Introduction

Numerous states have passed laws or are contemplating enacting legislation that prohibits higher education institutions from taking positions on politically polarizing issues of critical importance in American society (AAUP, nd; Cowen, 2022; Dean, 2023; Katz, 2023). Purportedly, these political neutrality laws and legislative proposals

do not limit free speech of individuals—faculty, staff, and students—within higher education institutions so long as expressed views are solely those of the individual and not attributed to the affiliated institution (Dean, 2023). However, the push for political neutrality in higher education institutions is highly controversial, with strong arguments advanced for and against such laws and policies (Bowen, 2023; Cavanaugh, 2023; Diermier, 2022; Fox, 2023; Higher Voltage, 2022; La Noue, 2022; McKinlay, 2023; McNeilly, 2022; The Kenan Institute of Ethics at Duke, nd; Thorp, 2022; Walker, 2018; West, 2021; Will, 2023).¹

Our goal in this paper is not to debate the veracity of various perspectives on higher education political neutrality. Rather, we specifically address an accompanying, emergent challenge in business education: how to prepare students to be successful business leaders in a world where politically polarizing issues embedded in America’s culture wars increasingly impact business viability, profitability, and competitiveness (D’Innonenzio, 2023; Donnan, 2022; Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2022; Geraghty, 2023; Holpuch, 2023; Laparmentier, 2023; Lianukonyte, Murray, 2023; Tuchman & Zhu, 2023).

1 Reportedly 87 higher education institutions have instituted formal free speech policies.

We begin by discussing the specific challenges America's culture wars and political neutrality movements pose for both corporate leaders striving to maintain the viability and profitability of their firms and business school administrators striving to train the next generation of business leaders. Next, we describe an innovative instructional approach we have implemented on an experimental basis in an MBA elective course we co-teach. This approach, which we have labeled the "courageous conversations model," is designed to equip students with the leadership skills required to navigate polarized societal terrain as they embark up their careers in corporate America. We conclude by presenting key takeaways from the course experiment and sharing qualitative insights from the student evaluations, which highlight the value of this curricular innovation.

Critical Background and Context

Research confirms that, in today's highly contentious political environment, corporate leaders increasingly confront—and are woefully unprepared to deal with—culture war issues (Alexis, 2020; Hodak & Kaupe, 2012; Pollack, 2020; Silver & Shaw, 2022; Walker, 2019; Wierson & Honan, 2023).² Consequently, when searching for new hires, corporate recruiters intentionally seek talent capable of successfully navigating an ever-changing array of geopolitical challenges at the intersection of business and society—workers who can "groove on ambiguity" (Fair, 2019; Staffing Advisors, 2011).

Today, business schools offer curricular concentrations and elective courses in social enterprise; environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG); and inclusive leadership (Hodgson, 2022; Jack, 2019; Worthen, 2022). Some argue these offerings are not enough. As Wierson and Honan (2023) opine, "Business schools aren't teaching the next

generation of leaders about the real-life push and pull of operating in an increasingly politicized and polarized operating environment." High-profile cases of blowback or retribution contribute to many business school professors' aversion to incorporating politically sensitive content in their courses (Stripling, 2023).

Among other forces, the culture war issues corporate leaders face stem from disruptive demographic trends, including slowing total population growth, white population decline, below-replacement-level fertility, declining college enrollment and labor force participation, and premature deaths of despair among prime working-age males (Case & Deaton, 2020; Felix & Shampine, 2022; Johnson et al., 2021; Welding, 2023). These demographic headwinds are dramatically transforming our contemporary business environment and polarizing debates about international migration, white population replacement, marriage equality, reproductive rights, gender diversity, gender pay equity, affirmative action, and even the threat of a race-war in America (Brubaker & Bibbins-Domingo, 2022; Chamie, 2022; Johnson & Bonds, 2020b; Johnson et al., 2021; Kochhari, 2023; Liptak, 2015; Morrison, 2021).

Corporate culture war challenges also derive from the increasing periodicity of public health crises, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, and adverse weather events triggered by climate change (Johnson, 2021; Mathieson, 2022). Such developments are sparking growing labor activism and disrupting population settlement, work patterns, and global supply chains (Crowley & Eccles, 2023; Hodak & Kaupe, 2012; Johnson et al., 2022; Maurer, 2023; Vanderford, 2023; Walker, 2019).

The skills required to navigate the turbulence that undergirds political neutrality and culture war issues and challenges extend beyond subject matter expertise in the

² As Wierson and Honan (2023) assert, "...politics is now front and center in corporate decision-making, and CEOs are grossly unprepared to deal with the effects of this collision."

core functional areas of business education. Furthermore, the case method of instruction, team-based projects, global immersion experiences, elective activities, and communication courses designed to develop presentation skills do not attend to the complexity of effective leadership communication amidst societal political polarization (Meyer et al., 2021; Worthen, 2022). Developing talent for today's VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—global business environment requires curricular changes that engage students in critical and reflective discourse across the traditional functional areas about politically polarizing, pressing issues that increasingly affect businesses (Mehlman, 2023).

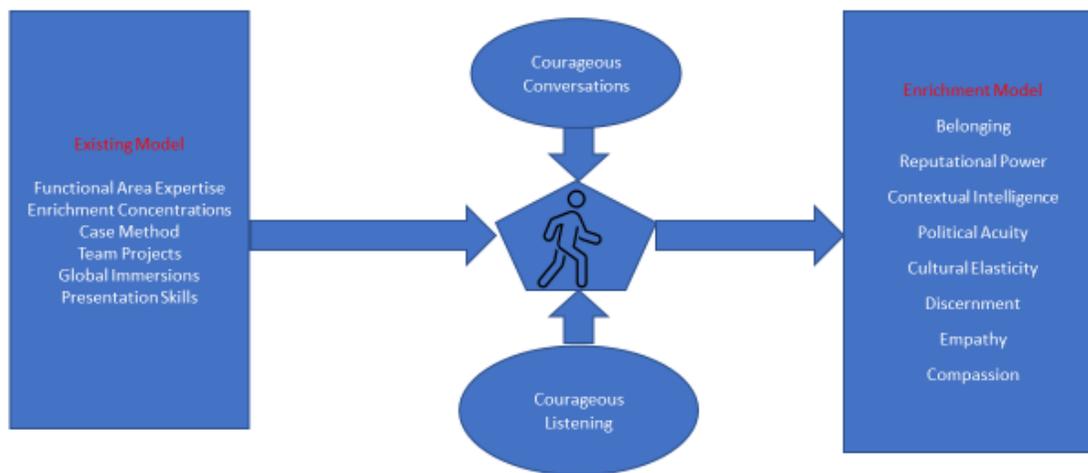
Quoting a corporate communications executive, “MBA students need exposure to grey issues at the crossroads of corporate strategy, political acuity, and public relations” (Wierson & Honan, 2023). Business schools must produce graduates with a strong sense of discernment, enhanced

cultural sensitivity, and a communication toolset designed for successfully navigating the turbulence and uncertainty that characterizes the current global business environment (Bennett, 2013; Eatough, 2021; Kreek, 2021; Renken, 2020).

Most urgently, corporations need talent with contextual intelligence—keen awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the ever changing geo-political, economic, technological, and environmental landscape—that can be strategically leveraged to minimize the likelihood of being blindsided by unanticipated change (Johnson & Bonds, 2020a). As we and others have noted, business schools must take steps, as Figure 1 shows, to better equip students with the leadership skills and tools needed to help corporations successfully navigate a new normal characterized by “certain-uncertainty” (Khanna, 2014; Kutz, 2017; Johnson & Bonds, 2020a). We refer to this vision of business school education as the “enrichment model.”

Figure 1

Existing and Enrichment Models of Business Education



Source: authors.

A Curricular Innovation

Recognizing the urgent need for curricular change in business education, we piloted a pedagogical innovation in our co-taught MBA elective course, “Leading Diverse and Inclusive Organizations,” at the Kenan-Flagler Business School. Our experiment with curricular innovation is anchored in two foundational beliefs. The first belief, which aligns with the sentiments expressed in a recent letter to the editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, is that “[s]tudents should attend college with the idea of expanding their knowledge and increasing their curiosity about ideas and opinions different from their own” (Starner, 2023). And the second belief, as articulated by Diermeier (2022), is that:

Universities operate best when they serve as a platform for the robust exchange of ideas. Their role is to encourage [and facilitate] debates, not settle them.

Based on these two foundational beliefs, we create a safe space for students to engage in courageous conversations—to openly share diverse thoughts and opinions as well as vigorously debate politically charged issues of critical business importance. Notably, our goal is not to indoctrinate or advocate for any specific stance or viewpoint; rather, it is to facilitate honest, respectful, and transparent dialogue so that students are fully aware of the veracity of diverse viewpoints—strengths, weaknesses, pros, and cons—that undergird politically polarizing issues.

To facilitate dialogue around politically sensitive issues of critical business importance, we employ a modified version of the fishbowl method of in-class conversation. First introduced by Karl White in 1974, the fishbowl method has been used in multiple academic and practitioner contexts to facilitate individuals’ abilities to develop a strong sense of self and self-efficacy within challenging, complex situations (Cummings, 2015; Gronostay, 2016; Gronostay, 2017; Hensley, 2002; Meyer et al., 2021; Smart & Featheringham, 2006; Yung, 2020; White, 1974).

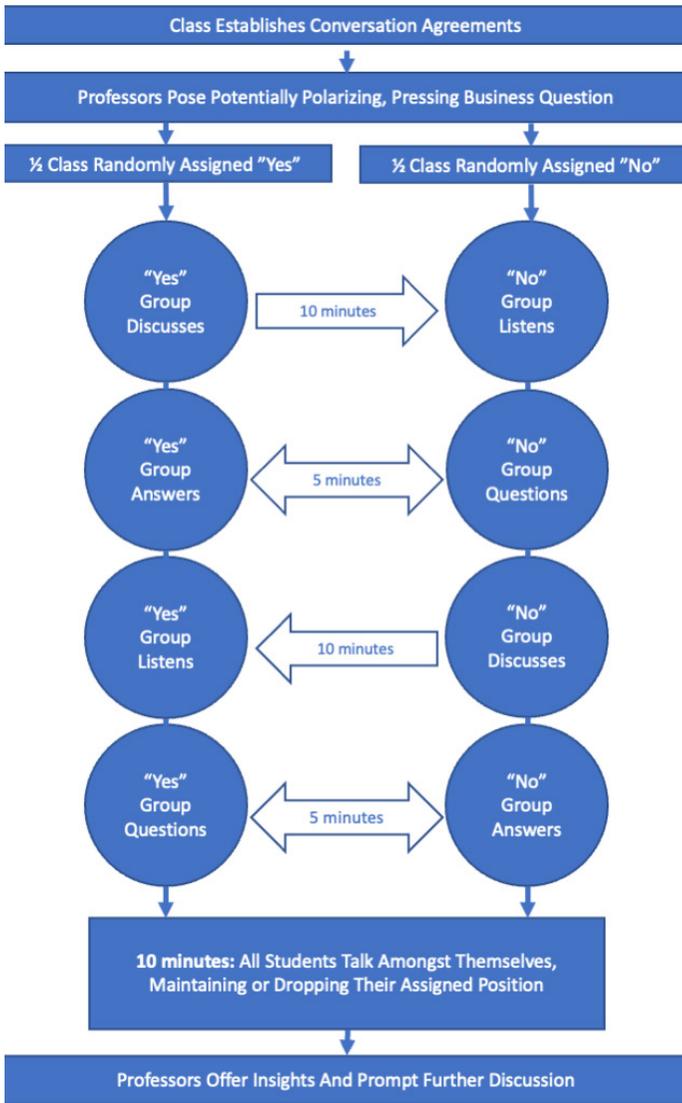
The fishbowl method follows a standard base structure: students are broken into two groups that take turns operating as an in-group talking among themselves and an out-group observing and learning from the in-group conversation. Halfway through a fishbowl discussion session, the groups switch—the out-group becomes the in-group—and the roles of discussant and listener are reversed. Many published adaptations of the model exist, and we can only guess as to how many unpublished versions circulate in educational and professional settings.

Commenting on the utility of the fishbowl method, Meyer et al. (2021) assert that, “[i]n this divisive sociopolitical climate, creating a comfortable space for students to educate themselves and discuss sensitive topics with their peers is invaluable.” They were among the first researchers “to offer educators empirical evidence that if they continue implementing this technique in a college environment, students’ comfort and participation may increase over time” (p.32).

Our courageous conversation model, depicted in Figure 2, is a modified version of the standard fishbowl structure. The specific goal of the exercise is to engage students in critical discourse about polarized topics in a way that discourages student commentaries that align solely with their pre-existing beliefs or identities. Therefore, we add a pre-conversation deliberation of shared conversation agreements, a question-and-answer period after each in-group conversation, and an unstructured conversation period at the end of the exercise. These modifications were incorporated to enrich the learning experience in three important ways.

Figure 2

Courageous Conversation Discussion Model



Source: authors

First, crafting the conversation agreements creates a shared experience and understanding of the classroom space amongst all students before dividing them into opposing groups. Second, the question-and-answer periods incentivize careful listening on the part of the out-group and encourage complex elaboration on seemingly binary positions. And third, the unstructured conversational period at the end of the exercise allows students to drop their assigned positions and contribute their own perspectives—adding, if they choose, personal stories and reflections that may otherwise not surface from assigned positions. It also provides space for students to synthesize ideas and further disrupt rigid, polarized thinking.

For our course, we extract the courageous conversation topics from the extant business literature, and students are required to complete assigned readings representing the divergent perspectives causing political polarization on the chosen topics. In preparation for the weekly conversations, students are also encouraged to gather their own business intelligence on the selected topic. To ensure that what they gather is reliable information from reputable sources, we introduce the students to the director of research services in the applied business research arm of the Kenan-Flagler Business School.

Given that politically polarizing issues can create a classroom climate of unease and discomfort, we go to great lengths to establish an academic safe space for our courageous conversations. Our conversation agreements, established as a class, generate a set of shared expectations and productive behaviors to abide by as we discuss polarizing questions of critical business importance. These mutually agreed upon rules of engagement ground us as a community, and we revisit them several times throughout the course. A list of agreements developed in one of our recent classes appears below (Table 1).

Table 1

Class Conversation Agreements
Give grace and freedom for others to express themselves
Listen non-judgmentally; try to understand that people’s views are the products of their experiences (or assignments) rather than their character
Assume the best intent, especially given that we’re in a classroom
Practice active listening and open mindedness to new perspectives. Listen to understand, not respond
Demonstrate respect and patience
Try not to interrupt, especially during vulnerable moments. Be understanding if/when interruption happens
Practice reciprocity and accountability with feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge best intentions • Name what happened • Describe impacts
Embrace the contrarian
Be authentic—express your thoughts
Believe what people say about their own experiences
Stories stay, lessons leave
Step up, step back

Source: authors

The intent of the conversational agreements is to help students feel comfortable speaking about challenging topics. However, we do not presume that the agreements will make everyone feel completely safe and confident when participating in a courageous conversation. Rather, building on the work of the Center for Creative Leadership (2023), the goal is to create a modicum of “psychological safety” for each student participant in our courageous conversations—a belief that they “won’t be punished or humiliated by speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.”

We randomly assign students to opposing positions on the politically polarizing business issues we choose to address. We do not allow students to pick their sides, and we discourage them from saying anything along the lines of “this isn’t actually my opinion.” In doing so, we prepare them for the discomfort that may arise when listening to or participating in a conversation that does not align with their own beliefs. Much is said of finding comfort in discomfort, and courageous conversations are one tool for building this muscle.

Success hinges on the degree to which students commit to engaging in courageous listening: listening nonjudgmentally and with an open mind to views, opinions, and perspectives that differ from one’s own (Norwood, 2016). Such a practice develops individuals’ capacities for recognizing and confronting confirmation bias, the natural tendency to seek out information that reaffirms one’s pre-existing beliefs (Kahneman, 2013). The tendency to self-affirm one’s already held position typically shapes—and often stymies—discussions of politically charged issues, including those that define America’s culture wars and political neutrality debates (Bryant & Sharer, 2021; Burrell, 2008; Crowley & Eccles, 2023; Donnan, 2022; Geraghty, 2023; James & Wooten, 2022; Leparmentier, 2023; Mehlman, 2023; Minson, 2023; Minson & Gino, 2022). As we show

below, the conversation agreement element of our model is a powerful step towards facilitating courageous listening within politically polarized environments.

Key Takeaways

We have accumulated teaching knowledge and experience as well as qualitative and quantitative student evaluation data from running our courageous conversation experiment six times across three semesters. Based on course evaluations and an online survey we conduct to gauge students' experiences and reactions, we believe three key takeaways from our courageous conversation experiment hold significant implications for the future of business education.

First, our courageous conversation experiment confirms that business school students crave educational opportunities and experiences that allow them to explore with their peers competing perspectives on critically important, politically charged business issues. In our survey of their experiences in the most recent course offering, nearly all the students (97%) agreed with the statement "I found our courageous conversation to be a valuable learning experience."³

Two students commented specifically on the workplace implications of the learning experience. One said,

This course has made me revisit how some of these conversations can be discussed at the workplace and I aspire to be the voice for my team/function/department to bring out issues that most are not comfortable to speak [about]!"

The other stated,

It was a great experience and [I] thoroughly enjoyed the exchange of ideas and rationales. Looking forward to being part of such conversations and surely using them at my firm.

Extant academic research buttresses this finding—having classroom conversations about controversial subjects is an important educational experience within democratic societies (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018; Kraatz et al., 2022; Reynolds et al., 2020).

Second, the structured nature of our modified fishbowl methodology encourages students to think beyond deeply held personal beliefs. Participating in the conversations hones their listening skills, and they uncover the value of gathering contextual intelligence from reliable sources representing divergent opinions on politically polarizing issues.

Responding to our most recent survey of class experiences, most of the students agreed with the statement, "The courageous conversations encouraged me to think critically about contemporary DEIB-related topics."⁴ Nine out of ten students agreed with the statement, "As a result of our courageous conversations, I have reconsidered my opinion on one or more DEIB-related topics." And one student elaborated by noting,

Valuable learning experience! Being involuntarily placed to defend a position we personally fight against helps us gain a better understanding on how we can tackle the inequities we are aware of and understand to ultimately improve organizational DEIB.

³ Full survey data available upon request

⁴ DEIB is an acronym for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

Third, students appreciate academic safe spaces—classroom environments that encourage and facilitate respectful debate on issues that may be beyond their comfort zone. Commenting on this aspect of our courageous conversation experiment, one student said,

I think everyone was a little leery at the beginning, but y'all [the professors] created a very safe atmosphere where everyone felt fine speaking up and not worrying about accidentally saying something wrong or offensive. I was nervous about [the courageous conversations] but actually really enjoyed them. They felt like a very critical component to the class.

After three years of teaching the course and two dozen separate courageous conversations, we have found that the creation of an academic safe space is an essential part of this exercise. Without it, students are often afraid of their peers' opinions—or their professors'—and limit their participation, especially their willingness to play the role of contrarian and voice potentially contentious perspectives. Our findings align with research that attests to the importance of creating safe spaces in which individuals feel confident speaking up (Agbanobi & Asmelash, 2023; Bresman & Edmondson, 2022; Center for Creative Leadership, 2023; Edmondson, 1999; Preston, 2021; The US Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-being, 2022; Zahneis, 2023). By teaching students to find comfort in discomfort, we prepare them to lead in a highly politicized and polarized business environment.

Discussion and Implications

Research confirms that the ability to hear and consider all facets of an issue, even those that you may personally find challenging or distasteful, is an essential business skill (Bryant & Sharer, 2021; Meyer et al., 2021; Minson & Gino, 2022; Yeomans et al., 2020; Zenger & Folkman, 2016). In a recent Harvard Business Review article, for example, James and Wooten (2022) persuasively argue that,

If you don't make judicious use of all the information you need to determine all of the losses and gains that crises foreshadow, you'll leave yourself and your organization in the dark when you most need to see light at the end of the tunnel [emphasis from original].

Another student elaborated on the value of the academic safe space we created by noting,

The conversations were something that I began looking forward to each week. I liked being pushed to have these deep and meaningful conversations with my colleagues.

And a third student asserted,

"This [the academic safe space] is a unique part of the class... while the conversations often pushed me out of my comfort zone...I did enjoy [them]."

Courageous conversations teach students how to courageously listen and make their mark in a VUCA world.

In Spring 2023, we engaged students in facilitated courageous conversations on four topics of critical business significance: corporate social advocacy, movements for racial justice, return-to-office mandates, and colorism in marketing.

Assessing the value of the experience, one student said,

I loved the structure of these conversations. They required me to think about how to articulate my positions clearly and effectively while also challenging me to consider the other side of the argument.

Elaborating on the perceived value of the course structure, another student said,

I've shared this structure with other professors [in the business school]. It was a great way to start class [each week] to get us talking and I loved the opportunities to explore an alternative perspective. The questions were thought provoking and it was interesting to see how they related to the course content. Great way to develop mastery.

A third student had a different take on the course structure, stating that,

3 hours a week is not enough! Also, this needs to be part of the MBA curriculum since the people who need this the most are not here!

Echoing a similar sentiment, another student commented,

I really appreciated learning other people's perspectives and at the same time sharing my perspectives in a safe and understanding environment. This course should continue and perhaps [be] made compulsory for every MBA student.

Based on consistently positive evaluations like these and the continuous improvements we have made in the design of the experiment over the past three years, we are convinced that the courageous conversation approach deserves serious consideration as a core element of MBA programs intent on producing the next generation of business leaders. Once properly incorporated in business schools, we believe corporate recruiters will increasingly view graduates as having the full complement of skills and sensitivities required to weather the political turbulence that businesses will continue facing well into the future. The culture wars are in the boardroom, political neutrality movements are in the classroom, and business schools should respond by enriching their curricula with opportunities for vigorous, academic debate about polarizing topics.

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