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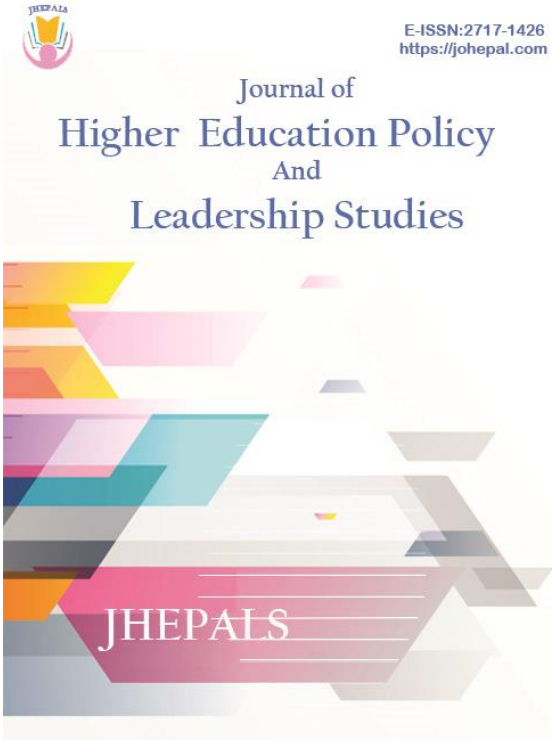

Positive Practices and the Positive Impact of Higher Education: An Interview with Prof. Kim CAMERON

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Interview

Positive Practices and the Positive Impact of Higher Education: An Interview with Prof. Kim CAMERON

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Dr. Kim S. Cameron is the William Russell Kelly Professor of Management and Organizations in the Ross School of Business and Professor of Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of Michigan. He is a co-founder of the discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship—the scientific study of what produces extraordinary performance in organizations and their employees. His research on organizational virtuousness and the development of cultures of abundance has been published in more than 140 academic articles and 15 scholarly books. He was recently recognized as among the top 10 scholars in the organizational sciences whose work has been most frequently downloaded from Google.

He has served as Dean of the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, Associate Dean at Brigham Young University, and as Associate Dean and academic department chair at the University of Michigan. He actively consults with business organizations on five continents, federal and military organizations, and health care and educational organizations. He received BS and MS degrees from Brigham Young University and MA and PhD degrees from Yale University. He is married to the former Melinda Cummings and has seven children.

https://michiganross.umich.edu/faculty-research/faculty/kim-cameron

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It is an honor and privilege for us to host Prof. Kim CAMERON as one of the globally renowned scholars whose research, books, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged throughout the world.
We are sure that Prof. Cameron's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policy-makers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question: What are the bitter, toxic and baffling truths which led to the critical challenges in the expected performance from the universities and higher education institutes? We would like you critically scrutinize all the pertinent dimensions!

Answer: Institutions of higher education certainly do face difficult challenges and obstacles. The worldwide pandemic is just the latest of significant tests colleges and universities have faced throughout history. On the other hand, institutions of higher education are among the most resilient and effective organizations in the world. They have weathered tremendous disruptive events and threats in the past and have, largely, emerged successful. For example, a study was conducted to identify the organizations in the Western World that existed in the year 1530 and still exist today. 66 organizations were identified—the Lutheran church (founded in 1530), the Roman Catholic church, the parliaments of the Isle of Man and of Iceland, and 62 universities. Challenges have and will come and go, but institutions of higher education have proven in the past, and I suspect, will prove in the future, to be extraordinarily robust and vigorous.

Question: What is your critical analysis of the chaos and confusion between reality and delusion in the current status of the Higher Education worldwide? What are the reasons behind your analysis for such chaos and confusion?

Answer: Many focus on the chaos and confusion facing higher education, and it is understandable that difficulties, problems, and obstacles capture a great deal of attention. There are other aspects of higher education that receive much less attention and press coverage, yet they are at least as important. This includes the extraordinary impact of higher education on the economic growth of nations, the improvement in quality of life for millions of individuals, the values dissemination that serves as a bonding glue for most of civilization, the innovation and creativity that have dramatically improved society as well as the well-being of countless individuals, and the life-long networks of relationships that are fostered in university settings. Whereas it is important to attend to elements of chaos and confusion, these seem less significant in the broader purview that the incredible progress being made throughout the world because of the higher education industry.

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Question: According to the Karl E. Weick's (2001) theory of "Sensemaking in Organizations"; how do you portray your lived experiences within the realm of Education in general and Higher Education specifically? We would like to receive your exciting, rewarding, and inspiring view for Higher Education students and academic staff!

Answer: Upon graduating from a university with a Masters degree, I began seriously exploring where I wanted to study for a PhD as well as in what specific discipline. I knew I wanted a doctoral degree, but I was not certain in what exact subject area or where to study. Fortunately, I had been provided the opportunity to teach in a small college about five-hours north of the institution from which I had graduated. A year or so after I began my teaching assignment, my alma mater hired an internationally known scholar in the discipline in which I had received my degrees. I decided to contact him to request that he take me on as an independent studies student for the summer. I was willing to drive the five hours to meet with him periodically if I could be given the chance to expand my scholarship through his tutelage. I was interested in becoming better prepared for a PhD program.

He postponed replying to my request until he had pulled my transcript from the central administrative office and determined that meeting with me would be worth his time. We scheduled a time to meet in his office, and I made the trip on the appointed day. In our first meeting, he handed me two of his published articles that had appeared in the top-rated journals in the field and which I had read during my own studies. The articles had become classics in the discipline. His first assignment to me was to identify the weaknesses in the articles, offer suggestions to make them stronger, and identify ways to enhance the significance of their contributions.

I was nonplussed. I replied to him that I knew of these articles, that they were classics in the field, and that I was surely incapable of adding value to their significant contributions. His kind reply to me was essentially: "Well, you and I need to have a chat together." That chat turned out to be one of those life-altering experiences. It was because he taught me what the aim of higher education should be about.

In brief, he helped me understand that if I behaved as a subordinate to him before I received a PhD, I would continue to be a subordinate after receiving a PhD. He guided me to begin to behave, and to think of myself, as a contributing colleague rather than as a subordinate. He helped my see possibilities that I had not seen before. His mentorship and encouragement changed the way I defined myself as well as the ways I subsequently defined and behaved toward doctoral students and junior colleagues as well as senior gurus and heroes in the field. His positive example changed my professional career and my outlook on life. He provided a role model for one of the key benefits of higher education—to enrich and elevate lives.

Question: We believe that Higher Education enjoys an enriched deep meaning which can be portrayed from different dimensions. We would greatly appreciate it if you could illuminate your deep meaning and understanding of Higher Education to portray its categories, trends, and concepts! Do you believe that we are witnessing a transformation in the objectives and missions of

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the Higher Education in the 3rd millennium? If YES, we are willing to learn from your perspective in this regard!

Answer: I have been involved in some studies of the effects of implementing positive practices in institutions of higher education. The last 20 years of my career has focused on the impact of the positive practices and strategies on the performance of the organizations as well as on the individuals that reside in them. Colleges and universities have been the focus of some of those studies.

One set of studies was conducted in the world's largest university consortium. This organization owned 69 universities in 12 regions throughout the world. In one set of studies, 14 different experiments were conducted to assess the impact of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) and positive leadership practices on university students in classrooms located in India, Peru, and Spain. Instructors across a variety of disciplines volunteered to participate in the study. They agreed to implement a variety of positive practices in their classrooms, but no prescribed curriculum or approach was designated. The disciplines in the study included Accounting, Analytic Design Methods, Architecture, Art, Economics, Education, Human Resources, Nutrition, Physiology, and Statistics. Instructors were exposed to positive leadership practices in a workshop and then asked to incorporate whatever practices they desired in their classrooms. Data were collected comparing the POS classes to previous classes taught by the same instructors the year before.

In a university in India, student satisfaction scores in the courses that used POS practices were almost a full point higher on a 1 to 5 scale than courses without a positive approach the year before. In another analysis of six separate classrooms at the same university, average student test scores and grades were significantly higher compared to the year before, and student attendance was 10 percent higher compared to the instructors' courses the year before. In four separate classrooms in a Spanish university, average student test scores and course grades were a half a point higher in the POS classes compared to the previous non-POS classes.

These are not rigorously controlled experiments and clearly a variety of other factors may be at play in accounting for the results. The outcomes do suggest, however, that positive practices had a non-trivial impact on the institutions and on students in the classroom even across different disciplines and cultures. I The data are convincing that the implementation of positive leadership practices and principles of Positive Organizational Scholarship have significant impact in enhancing the outcomes of students in institutions of higher education

Question: What are the current political approaches to Higher Education Systems worldwide which you think they might not be further adopted and also have lost excessively their effectiveness and efficiency in Higher Education? Further, what are the policies which are taken for granted over the years and now must be considered in Higher Education?

Answer: The successful implementation of positive leadership practices and positive organizational strategies has now been verified through a variety of empirical studies throughout the world. Examining these studies has led to several common practices for successful interventions in institutions of higher education. For example:

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- Visible and enthusiastic support from senior leaders. All major initiatives require complete dedication from the top of the organization.
- A challenging, positive, and time-bound goal for implementing positive strategies and practices. Deadlines and benchmarks must be in place.
- Immersive training in positive leadership practices and positive organizational strategies that includes large numbers of organizational members. No specific, orchestrated architecture for implementation is needed, just the freedom to implement what works.
- The availability of empirical research to bolster the veracity and credibility of the positive principles to be implemented. It is not unusual for constituencies to initially interpret positive practices as soupy, touchy-feely, irrelevant, feel-good advice. Providing empirical evidence that positive practices significantly affect bottom-line performance is helpful for gaining acceptance and involvement in implementation.
- No single prescribed process or set of procedures. Organizations themselves are remarkably adept in determining what works in what circumstances. Costa Rica did not implement positive principles in the same way as did Germany or New Zealand.
- The embedding of POS into the culture of the institution (including vision, values, and the physical environment). The reward system, the articulated values, the physical ecosystem, and the hiring criteria must reflect POS aims.
- The on-going collection of data for guiding the implementation of POS practices. Not only does data gathering help maintain accountability for progress, but decision making must be informed by on-going data trends.
- A central coordinating entity. At least one individual or office should be the central gathering place for data collection, on-going reporting of best practices, identifying needed resources, and dissemination of progress on an on-going basis.

Additional explanation of positive practices and positive organizational strategies can be found in three of my books: *Positive Leadership, Practicing Positive Leadership*, and *Positively Energizing Leadership*, all published by Berrett Koehler Publishers and available in all bookstores.

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