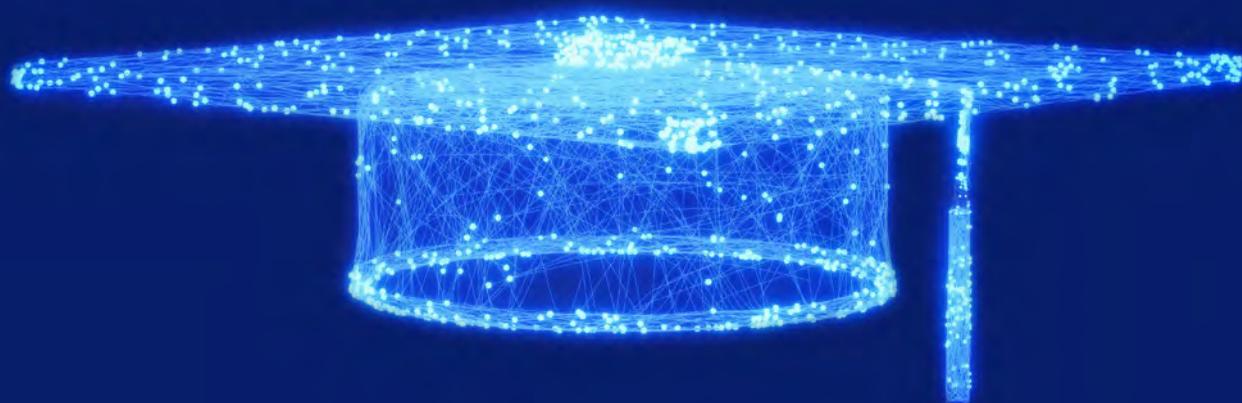


Dean SK 2.0

Can part II ever be better than part I or does the Godfather movie series remain unchallenged?

Sherif Kamel on his journey from undergraduate to Dean, twice, and the challenges of an interconnected global environment



You can always plan as much as you want, but more often, life takes you to other places. Growing up, I wanted to be a diplomat. However, the combination of job opportunities, the quest to learn more through pursuing graduate studies, and the emergence of ubiquitous technology environments redirected my career path. One important lesson I learned is that you should never look back when you decide to pursue a particular endeavour.

The American University in Cairo (AUC), established in 1919, is an institution I have been privileged to be associated with since 1983, when I first stepped foot on campus as an undergraduate student. Upon graduation and following a spell as a civil servant working for the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), a think-tank affiliated to the Cabinet of Egypt, I went back to AUC in 1996. I joined the Department of Management as a full-time faculty after completing my Ph.D. at the London School of Economics, studying information systems. By 2008, I was tenured and promoted to full professor, and have been leading the school's executive education programmes for five years, turning it into a revenue-generating operation averaging \$4.2 million annually, which prompted the dean to promote me to be the school's first associate dean; my mandate was executive education. In April 2009, following an international recruitment process, I was honored to be short-listed then selected to start work in July 2009 as the founding dean of the School of Business, a re-organised structure and a revamped mandate of the School of Business, Economics, and Communication established in 1993.



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Becoming dean was a significant responsibility, an incredible challenge, and a unique opportunity to lead the school's ambitious plans. By 2009, I had been part of AUC for many years, doing different things; each of them was a great learning experience that contributed to my professional career and personal development. It turned out that my tenure as dean topped them all in terms of exposure, engagement, and contribution to the school's programmes, activities, and its different stakeholders both on- and off-campus.

As is naturally the case, the beginning was difficult. Moreover, the fact that the university had moved in 2008 from its historic downtown campus in Tahrir Square –where it had been since 1919 – to a new location in one of Cairo's suburbs did not make my start any easier since I was living less than two blocks away from the downtown campus. However, I came into the job with the firm belief that self-confidence, commitment, hard work, feeling good about the job, and being determined to make a difference, coupled with a positive mindset, usually guarantees over 50% of the success that can be realised. I was focused on achieving the planned transformational change for which the school has been restructured. My previous experience studying the value of analysed data for optimal decision-making and the importance of data-driven organisations always affected how I handle different issues. Timely, accurate, and validated information is critical for organisational success, and such information was not completely available when I joined the dean's office. I can list the challenges that I faced, but the excitement, passion, and momentum were overwhelming and appealing, and that took priority. Many people were watching, and the expectation level was high. Besides, it was not easy to lead a school where some of the faculty were my former professors, former classmates, and even former students.

Every school of business – and any organisation, for that matter – is usually defined by the culture that the leadership creates. Accordingly, I was adamant about creating a culture of change that is ambitious, dynamic, adaptive, and that uses a collaborative, bottom-up approach to decision-making and governance. I truly believe that the leadership of a business school is about the ability to understand the big picture, formulate a vision, focus on strategic issues, identify key goals, build a strong and agile team including faculty and staff, inspire and engage different stakeholders, and help realise a sustainable and scalable impact. Therefore, one of the first orders of business was to get the school constituents aligned around the motto of “one for all and all for one.” I think that effective leaders who leave an everlasting legacy are not set out to be leaders but rather, and more importantly, help create a strong and impactful transformational team that includes promising future leaders.

Before the end of the spring 2010 semester, my family moved to Canada – a personal challenge I had to deal with – but what happened during the 2010/2011 academic year was difficult to envision, expect, or even plan for. In January 2011, Egypt went through a difficult time due to the political unrest that led to an uprising, starting with mass protests across the country for 18 days and leading to the change of the regime that had been in power for three decades. During the following few years, the country went through a cycle of hardships that had significant implications for Egypt’s social, economic, and political life and, consequently, for the school. However, despite the challenges, the school proceeded with its plan. In December 2011, building on the culture of continuous improvement, the school maintained its AACSB accreditation. The peer-review visit which was



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delayed by 11 months given the difficult circumstances in Egypt was mainly conducted virtually. Besides, the school initiated the process for EQUIS and AMBA accreditations and established multiple development funds for research advancement, faculty and staff development, and student exposure. In spring 2012, based on a three-year review, the school offered to renew my contract for a second term. Later in 2012, the school launched its Executive MBA in collaboration with the Kellogg School of Management (Northwestern University) and the Hong Kong University for Science and Technology; the school also started a Master of Science in finance focusing on fintech.

In 2013, the school established Egypt’s first university-based incubator, the Venture-Lab, focusing on innovation-driven startups. Besides, the school was the first in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region to be ranked by the Financial Times, coming 68th in the open enrollment executive education category. In 2014, the school was awarded EQUIS and AMBA

2013

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accreditations becoming the 71st school, and one of the top 1% of business schools in the world known as triple-crown. During the period from 2009 to 2014, the percentage of the school's international faculty was 38. Furthermore, fundraising efforts resulted in two endowed professorships in banking and private equity with a total value of \$3.4 million and over \$12 million in scholarships, sponsorships, donations, external funds, and grants.

During the fall of 2013, with all the twists and turns at the country level, I felt it was time for some changes at the personal level. I have always believed that as much as one's career path and professional accomplishments are of paramount importance, family is equally invaluable and should come first. Therefore, I decided to step down as dean at the end of the 2013/2014 academic year. The plan was to join my family during my sabbatical and work on revitalising my research. It was the proper closing of a successful chapter of my career where – despite all the challenges faced – the

school with the university leadership's unwavering support managed to navigate these difficult times, and its plans and strategic objectives were successfully realised and accomplished in a timely manner.

In January 2017, almost three years later, I received a call from the provost of AUC, inviting me to apply again for the position of the dean of the school of business. It came to me as a complete surprise. We talked for about half an hour, and I respectfully declined; the reason I gave to the provost was, *"I have never seen part two of a movie that is better than part one except in the Godfather movie series, so thank you but no thank you."* We both laughed, and we agreed to discuss it again in a couple of weeks, but in my mind, I was adamant that I would not apply for the job. The provost is not just a colleague; he is a close friend. We spoke a week later and again during the following month, and after a long call, I was still not entirely comfortable, but he convinced me to apply for the job and see what happened. Nothing was guaranteed anyway given the international nature of the recruitment process. Over the following few months, I went through the interview process, and during the spring 2017 semester, I was pleased to know that I was short-listed for the job.

During that time, the school had an interim dean. For the record, my reluctance had nothing to do with the position itself. Being a dean was the one job I liked most throughout my career. The hesitation was mainly because of what made more sense to me to be doing at this stage in my career, including deaning at a different school. In May 2017, the provost informed me that I was the top candidate based on the search committee's recommendation and offered me the job as of July 2017. I was honoured and pleased, but I still asked for some time to think about it. He was accommodating and asked the interim dean to continue until a final decision was made, which I truly appreciated. I had a couple of follow-up

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conversations with the provost until he called me on Christmas Eve 2017, at 12:15am Montreal time, 7:15am local time in Cairo the following day. We spoke for over an hour, and I accepted the job. I must admit, I still had mixed feelings, yet deep inside, I was thrilled with the idea of being back as the dean of Egypt's leading business school and one of the top business schools in the Middle East and Africa. Before we hung up, I told him, *"My signature has always been SK, from now on, I guess it will probably be SK 2.0"*, and the rest is history.

It was a strange feeling to go back as dean after over 42 months. During that period, on the personal side, I had enjoyed spending quality time with my family, lost 17 pounds, enjoyed walking around 10-12 km per day, and wrote a book on *Leading Change in Challenging Times: Lessons of Disruption and Innovation* that I hope

to publish soon. On the professional side, my sabbatical period was repeatedly interrupted. I served as the university vice president for innovation management in 2016, followed by a year as a special advisor to the university president for strategy, although the latter was done mostly remotely. The minute I accepted the job, many questions went through my mind, including: How will the school community react? What will it be like? Will it be more challenging? The reception I had from faculty, staff, and alumni meant one thing: it was great to be back home. On my first day in the office, the minute I sat at my desk, I decided that the last thing I should do is to have the attitude of *"I have been-there-done-that"*.

I have always believed that a successful business school dean operates more like the CEO of an intellectual enterprise. Therefore, those who served outside academia before becoming deans usually have a comparative advantage. Arguably, the responsibilities and expectations differ from one school to another, but the triangle of leadership skills, business acumen, and intellectual and scholarly contributions are invaluable to realising success. Deaning is an exciting, challenging, demanding, and exhausting job. My experience so far attests that these elements, coupled with the expectations from the university leadership and the school community, are multiplied and magnified when a dean is going back for a second spell at the same school. As one of my colleagues told me right after I agreed to return, *"The only person you will try to better is yourself given the accomplishments of the school during your first spell."* So far, almost four years down the road, he is right.

When I started my second spell as dean in January 2018, many things differed from when I had left. There was a sharp decline (55%) in graduate programmes enrolment coupled with a university-wide hiring freeze. Besides, there was a new president, a new provost, and in general, the dynamics on campus were different, and all schools enjoyed a lower degree of decentralisation in decision making than before. Also, Egypt had gone through an economic reform programme including floating its currency, resulting in a 100% devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which meant that the tuition for all degree and non-degree programmes became more expensive. Furthermore, it became more challenging to solicit donor support for scholarships, and the revenues from the executive education programmes, collected in Egyptian pounds yet reported in US dollars, plunged.

At the higher education market level, competition in Egypt and MENA had risen, as several universities had been established in the intervening years. Besides, the impact of social media including Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram grew to become powerful communication platforms to expand awareness of the school locally and globally. In many ways, the conditions at the school, the university, in higher education and in Egypt at large were utterly different. On a different note, the number of international students coming to AUC had increased – compared to 2014 when there was a travel advisory – leading to the resumption of international students coming to Egypt, which was invaluable for campus diversity. Therefore, becoming part of the CEMS (Global Alliance in Management Education) network in 2017 and offering its master's in international management was a step in the right direction at the right time.

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100%

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The expectations of the dean were completely different from the period 2009/2014. Besides, it was imperative to adapt to Egypt's changing economic, business, and higher education conditions. More importantly, there was a need for a new ambitious project to rally the entire school community around it, one that could help build momentum and become an anchor and a catalyst for the school's progress. From the outset, I asked my colleagues to think *beyond accreditation*, which was the overarching theme a decade ago. Therefore, three major projects were identified: revamping our undergraduate business degrees; introducing a cooperative education (co-op) programme, and to boost the research endeavour in terms of contribution to the literature and impact on policy as well as in the volume of external research grants solicited.

Today, the school is offering three newly designed bachelor's degrees in finance, marketing, and business and entrepreneurship. With its invaluable contribution to the students' learning curve, the introduction of the co-op programme is the first in MENA where students will be engaged on a full-time basis with external entities for six to nine months, working on projects relevant to their fields of study. The

research endeavour is seeing a surge in the volume of external research grants that were hovering around \$500K and is now exceeding \$3 million annually. Besides, in 2020, the school launched the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab MENA Research Center (J-PAL MENA) in collaboration with the J-PAL at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with a focus on alleviating poverty and improving lives through evidence-informed policymaking. Furthermore, the school helped launch a MENA family business consortium in collaboration with several business schools from Morocco, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates to develop research on family businesses' issues and challenges. Finally, to boost the school's visibility and showcase its multi-faceted impact, the school completed the Business School Impact System (BSIS) in 2020.

Incoming deans always inherit multiple legacies coupled with the natural reluctance of most faculty and staff towards change. However, I can now confirm that when a dean joins a school for a second spell, he/she is more familiar with the issues at hand, and thus more capable of handling them better. In terms of focus and priorities, besides the usual drill that comes with the job, deans of business schools should always keep an eye on adapting to the transformations taking place in the global space of business and management education. On this note, during my second spell, the focus on fundraising was magnified, although the conditions are not any easier. However, given the changes in the market dynamics, I identified the naming of the school through a significant endowment as one of the key initiatives moving forward.

When it rains, it pours. Before finishing the second year of my 2.0 journey, the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic causing a global shock that led to a slowdown in economies, affected financial markets, and disrupted supply chains with massive implications for higher education, Egypt, and the school. The disruption pushed business schools, ours included, to explore the possibilities of how to stay resilient,

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operate efficiently, adapt the curriculum to market changes including sustainability, governance, climate change, community engagement, and collaboration to be able to remain relevant. Furthermore, it is becoming more apparent that business and management education will require far more experiential learning than is currently offered, and business schools will have no choice but to capitalise on digital transformation and embed more blended learning elements into the delivery approach.

This is indeed a challenging time. It seems that everything is becoming increasingly fast paced and unpredictable, including how to lead an organisation such as a business school. So where to go from here? What would work better? What should be the new business model? What is the future of learning? What will be the impact of digitisation? What will the new norm in higher education look like? All this leads to one reality: there is a growing need for a different style of deanship that is more visionary, effective, pragmatic, tech-savvy, engaging, transparent, and able to lead in crisis times. In the age of continuous disruption, there is a dire need for deans who are humble and genuinely willing to reach out to their constituencies for guidance to effectively navigate the multiple and unprecedented uncertainties. In today's interconnected global environment, whether these disruptions are local or global, they all have interrelated repercussions. The pandemic has endorsed the idea that it is indeed a flat world and things can become rapidly disrupted and dysfunctional.

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I must admit that I never imagined that I would be leading the school through one of the most challenging times in its history. However, I am privileged to be part of an exceptional team that has responded with inspiration, creativity, compassion, and a unique sense of commitment, collaboration, and mutual commonality. Nonetheless, almost four years into the job, I can confirm my initial opinion back in 2017, that part two of any endeavour is always more challenging than part one if it involves a return to the same place and doing the same job. Such a return could become more complicated due to the environment, and more often, the challenges relate to elements beyond one's control. It is true that there is always room to improve, innovate, and excel but deep inside one's mind is usually the drive to better the accomplishments of the first spell regardless of the challenges.

2017

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More than ever, deans need to act as visionary leaders, compassionate individuals, effective communicators, social networkers, and masters of influence when driving their schools to adapt to the continuously changing and challenging environment. Life is a non-stop learning journey, and the deeper we dig, the more we realise how much we do not know and how much more we need to learn and adapt to succeed. Therefore, whether we opt for a new job, venture into a new endeavour, or go back to work at the same place, there will always be challenges to overcome and risks to face. However, there will also be ample opportunities to be creative and impactful. It all depends on what one makes out of it. For me, the journey continues, and one question keeps coming up in my mind: *“What could I do more or better for the school to remain relevant, agile and continue to engage and adapt to impact society?”*

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About the Author

Sherif Kamel is a Professor of Management and Dean of the School of Business at The American University in Cairo.