

5-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Tranfield, David and Denyer, David (2004) "Linking Theory to Practice: A 'Grand Challenge' for Management Research in the 21st Century?," *Organization Management Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4. Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj/vol1/iss1/4>

Linking Theory to Practice: A ‘Grand Challenge’ for Management Research in the 21st Century?

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Background

Some forty years ago the Ford Foundation (Gordon and Howell, 1959) and Carnegie Council (Pierson, 1959) Reports set the key mission for management research to establish itself as a legitimate social science. As a result, generations of management researchers have diligently pursued actions and engaged in debates which have extracted and used both substantive content and research methodologies from associated and adjacent social sciences such as business economics, industrial sociology and occupational and organisational psychology.

Benefits and costs of this mission

In dedicating themselves to this overall goal, management researchers since the early 1960s have performed with considerable success. By and large a much more scientific approach to the understanding of the management field has been developed and uniformly applied across virtually all of its many sub-areas. A very significant science base has been created with an extensive range of learned journals that have been used to house a significant and voluminous knowledge stock. This ‘scientization’ of the management field, formulated on such strong links into the social sciences, has been hugely positive in legitimising management as an acceptable and appropriate field of study within most academic institutions. An extensive cohort of academic staff dedicated to management research has been established worldwide along with a group of elite professorial gatekeepers. All of this has provided practitioners and users with a confidence in the reliability and well foundedness of knowledge in the field and has raised expectations and thresholds concerning the potential of the knowledge base created for practitioner impact and performance improvement.

On the other hand, there has been a downside to the pursuit of social science legitimacy. For example, a key issue of concern resulted from the separation of knowledge producers from knowledge users. This had the effect of introducing a schism, or ‘relevance gap’ (Starkey and Madan, 2001) which has become more marked over recent years. The initial ‘drawing in’ of social science disciplinary specialists to the management field may have had the significant benefit of providing some conceptual clarity and methodological rigor, but had more limited effect in terms of impacting the language and discourse of managers who traditionally have tended to use thematic or sectoral categories rather than disciplinary terms when speaking of their management issues and challenges. For example, it is a rare manager indeed who will

speak of his/her knowledge needs in terms of disciplinary language. More likely they will use categories emphasising theme or sector such as ‘... a change management problem in manufacturing’ ‘...a diversity problem in financial services’.

However, language and communication difficulties are not the only downsides to result from the scientization process outlined above. Attracting disciplinary specialists to the field, also meant engaging with a research ethos and methodological approach embedded in ‘normal’ science. Quite properly such an orientation brings with it an overall aim of describing, codifying and understanding ‘natural’ phenomena. Whilst these are the legitimate concerns of the social scientist, managers usually have more clinical interests and often require input focused upon prescription, design and intervention. It is only of relatively recent years that research methodologies such as action research, clinical method, collaborative enquiry, appreciative enquiry etc. have begun to address such a managerial perspective and, through these more clinical, close-to-user and interventionist research methods, reveal a dataset not readily available to ‘normal science’. Despite much discussion and debate, even today such approaches are usually not regarded as mainstream and their use often requires substantial justification.

Finally, construing management research as a traditional social science separated, in a temporal sense, knowledge creation from knowledge utilisation. The prevailing model of management as social science relied upon the creation of ‘fundamental and basic’ theory that was only later ‘transferred’ into practice. Such a pattern is essentially elitist, with managers having to wait for transfer to occur well downstream from production. Increasingly, this method of knowledge production has found itself under fire from practitioners who usually work to shorter timeframes and have to respond to the imperatives of ever reducing cycle times in change.

Changing times in knowledge production

Arguably a system of knowledge production is required which responds not only to user needs, but in a more general sense to two fundamental shifts in modern society (Gibbons, 1994). These are firstly, the success of higher education in the western world which has socially distributed research skills across large companies, small companies, consultancies, academic institutions and in some cases even into private homes and secondly, the rapidly falling cost of integrated IT. This latter has given problem solvers the ability to form spontaneously into problem solving, knowledge creating teams, before setting off on unprogrammable trajectories in their future work. Tranfield and Starkey (1998) argued the appropriateness of this so-called ‘mode 2’ approach to knowledge production (Gibbons et al 1994) in management research, a theme taken up by Huff (2000) in her Presidential address to the Academy of Management.

The Linking Theory and Practice section of OMJ is a creative and important response to some of the above challenges. It aims to capitalise upon the gains which have been made over the last forty years by publishing research of high academic quality which has been subjected to the blind peer reviewed process. However, it seeks also to address an agenda which is of relevance to practitioners, where research has been undertaken perhaps in collaborative fashion or using novel research methods and which produces output in digestible form not only to the academic community but also which resonates with practitioners and managers of all kinds.

The Linking Theory and Practice section needs to respond to academic debates in both the US and the UK academies. For example, in the United States Don Hambrick's (1994) presidential address to the Academy of Management provided a watershed statement concerning the relevance of management research. This debate was rekindled and revisited at the 2003 Academy conference in Seattle. Numerous other academics have contributed subsequently to the further development of these debates within Academy.

In Europe, various policy initiatives particularly in the UK, such as the formation of the Advanced Institute for Management (a UK Government initiative to further management research) and also the recent Lambert Review, 2003, (on Business-University collaboration for the UK Treasury), have provided policy statements and resourcing to further the academic-practitioner agenda. Increasingly, views have been expressed that management may be better thought of as taking a lead role within the social sciences as a 'professional' or 'design' science in the same way that engineering is regarded in the physical sciences or medicine in the biological sciences. A viable and useful aim of the Linking Theory and Practice section of OMJ would be to explore further these issues and provide a leading edge forum in which both academics and practitioners can contribute ideas to this discussion.

The management agenda for the future

So what are the key agenda items for management researchers and practitioners at the beginning of the new century?

From the viewpoint of practice there are a number that spring immediately to mind. To be a contemporary manager or practitioner must entail a pre-occupation with globalisation, the IT revolution and the impact of networked computing, alongside a continuing commitment to delivering change management initiatives and ensuring innovation in products and processes. Diversity and the war for talent is a major concern and challenge for many managers, as well as the inevitable need for downward pressure on costs resulting from global competition. Supply chain management and partnering, environmental sustainability and the need for a full life approach to service delivery, are already impacting much of the managerial agenda. Corporate social responsibility and the need for high quality leadership are further issues that resonate as topical and relevant across both public and private sectors. All of these areas represent just some of the challenges that face today's manager, and it is our desire to see them all represented within the Linking Theory and Practice section of the journal.

On the other hand and with regard to academic concerns, there is a need to specify and detail the next steps in the conceptual development of the management field as a 'professional science'. Already the initial steps have been taken. For example, there is considerable interest in understanding the management field as both social and design science, preoccupied not only with understanding and explanation, but also with specification and prescription. In this sense management research needs to concern itself not only with 'what is' but also with 'what might be', thereby creating and formulating ideas for systems and processes not yet in operation (Romme 2003). Theoretical and conceptual work has already begun on identifying the types of research products that might be thought appropriate for a professional science to deliver. For example, van Aken (2004) has already identified the 'field tested and grounded technological

rule' as an appropriate output for such a field. In addition, Tranfield et al (2003) have identified the possibilities presented by 'evidence based management' and are producing a systematic review methodology to provide a natural linking of science base to practice and can be facilitated electronically.

Conclusions: a 'grand challenge' for management researchers

All of the above adds up to an exciting agenda for both academics and practitioners. There is much to be done to meet the challenge of undertaking high quality research, rigorously produced yet in a form and manner that makes it accessible and utilisable by practitioners. In our view, healing the division between theory and practice constitutes a 'grand challenge' for everyone involved in the management field. Ignoring such a divide would be unthinkable in other professional fields, such as medicine or engineering, where a national scandal would ensue if science base and practice were not inextricably and necessarily interlinked. Why then should managers, key value adders in today's economies, not enjoy the same benefits that result from the tight coupling of knowledge base and action?

Consequently, producing knowledge "in the context of application" arguably should constitute a new and critical mission for management research in the 21st Century. The Linking Theory and Practice section of OMJ offers a vehicle to all of those wishing to engage this process. After forty years of legitimising ourselves as competent members of the social science community, perhaps now is the time for renaissance based on the view, 'mission accomplished....new mission'!

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