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MAKING A DIFFERENCE: A PROFESSIONAL, SCHOLARLY, AND ENGAGED EAM

Presidential Address, Eastern Academy of Management
Saratoga Springs, NY—May 12, 2006

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The Road Traveled

This is the 43rd annual meeting of the Eastern Academy of Management. The EAM is older than I am, and as such I respect my elders. There is a rich history that has unfolded in this time. I have consulted with our historian Joe Seltzer for some context on this; let me share a few interesting notes.

Thirty years ago, in 1976, our annual conference was held in Washington, DC. This is ironic as we have just approved in principle the very same location for our 2008 conference. There were a total of ten sessions on the 1976 program, as compared to the current schedule of over 50 sessions, often running as much as seven concurrently, across numerous time slots. To our ELA and CASE friends, there was one experiential session and two case sessions. A grand total of 74 people were on the program, as compared to between three to four times this number today. In addition to Joe, there were several familiar faces at the luncheon: Gary Powell, who went on to become president in 1986 (20 years ago), and Dave Palmer, who went on to become president in 1996 (ten years ago). This suggests that it is entirely possible that our presidents in ten or 20 years could be sitting in the room today, and if we are looking 30 years out it might even be one of the two young men who introduced me for this address. A final tidbit that I am hesitant to mention, for fear that my officers will besiege me, is that in 1976 “the board met for only a few hours” as compared to the almost ten hours of the Board of Governor’s meetings at this conference.

Now my involvement in the EAM spans approximately a quarter of its lifetime. I originally attended as a doctoral student and continued on as a junior and now senior faculty. My first “job” was counting ballots at the Saturday business meeting. I have presented many papers here over the years, losing several outstanding paper awards in a row before finally breaking through and winning a few. I have served as session chair and discussant, headed paper tracks, was vice president and chair of the Local Arrangements committee in New York City, was vice president and chair of the Program Committee in Providence, and now I have the great honor to be in the position of leadership. It has been quite a ride.

The EAM Today

In terms of the state of the organization, I can say that the EAM is strong and on the rise. This marks the third consecutive annual conference that has recorded historically-high submissions levels. We have simultaneously undertaken measures to increase the quality and rigor of the program, as well as launched creative offerings, all while achieving or surpassing our sponsorship and fiscal goals. EAM membership is vibrant and growing, and we continue to pioneer in many new initiatives to support our learning community.

In terms of my involvement in and contribution to the strategic direction of the organization, or at least my good fortune to be in the right place and not mess things up, there are several things that I am particularly pleased with: (1) programmatic mechanisms to increase the academic rigor of submissions and reviews; (2) innovative offerings such as speaker and panel series and expanded developmental consortia; (3) advances in technological support in the online submission and conference interface as well as improvements in the presentation technology available to our attendees; (4) new efficiencies in governance including the processes of board coordination, arrangements administration, program execution, and sponsorship management; (5) overhauled board structure with several new positions (sponsorship coordinator, historian, archivist) and appointments of individual EAM directors to chair specific committees that address important engagements and activities; and (6) successful re-implementation of an expanded planning model that supersedes the traditional “one-year scramble” for site selection and now projects multiple years in advance. In addition we are poised for significant election improvement and, with unanimous support from the board, will bring a proposal for electronic elections to the membership at the Saturday business meeting [*Postscript—the amendment passed at the 2006 Business Meeting and the EAM now has electronic elections*]. We have commissioned and received a report from a new ethics committee. We have also begun exploring a revolutionary new funding model for the organization and, in the light of wonderful relationships with CASE and ELA, have begun to explore the expansion of our partnership networks that might offer further promise for enriching the conference experience. Of particular interest are human resources and information technology, fields that might be especially synergistic with our membership base.

I would also like to briefly mention two of our most recent strategic initiatives. One, we launched the Eastern Academy of Management Membership and PR initiative. Letters from me were sent to every AOM member in the northeast United States, and letters from AOM President Tom Cummings were sent to every business school dean in the same area. This may have contributed to the over ten percent rise in membership as well as impressive submission rate for the conference, and surely helped spread the word about our organization and activities. Two, we launched the *EAM White Paper (EAM-WP) Series* that will speak to critical management issues in a way that is useful to managers. The first three articles have been commissioned with world-class scholars and will be published in a special issue of *Organization Management Journal* [published this past January] as well as circulated among several practitioner outlets and management associations. Future leadership has expressed their support for the EAM-WP initiative so we can look forward to a continued effort in this direction.

For those of you in attendance at my paper session this morning, you will recognize the positive thinking endemic in my view of our future. The best is yet to come. This is not blind optimism, hoping for a better way. It is positive thinking that envisions a path and is committed to making it happen. Things are going well, and we can certainly become even more efficient in our

process and even more effective in advancing our objective of career and knowledge enhancement in the field of management. However,...I am reminded of several laments that do not bode well for such a future. You may recall published arguments about “What if the Academy Actually Mattered,” suggesting that we do not in fact make the real difference in the world that we should. AOM president Don Hambrick remarked some time ago that this was a significant problem, and even ten years hence AOM program chair Tom Cummings reported that “Academy members...have been far less successful... in making sure that our knowledge is applied. Much of our knowledge fails to cross the gap between research and practice. Consequently, few practitioners read our research or appreciate its practical value.” On a personal level I recall a holiday card from a friend’s wife, no not Ed, who quipped (names have been changed) “once again Peter published several articles in journals that nobody will ever read.” Wow. This made me think, “Does our work really matter?”

I stand before you today to state firmly and unequivocally that... the Eastern Academy of Management most definitely matters. But it is also true that we can better make a difference in the lives of the individuals and institutions involved in the study, practice, and education of management. Many of you know that much of my recent scholarship has been focused on the nature of wisdom and how it might be developed and applied in organizations, as was mentioned at last evening’s keynote panel. In this spirit I would like to dedicate the remainder of my address to humbly offering three points, words of wisdom if you will, that might help in this endeavor.

A Vision for Our Future

First, we must be **RIGOROUS** and adhere to the highest professional standards in creation/conveyance of management knowledge. In the Jeffersonian and Elizabethan spirit, institutional ascendancy is attained via the enabling of individual ascendancy. Thus, we must enhance our efforts towards encouraging and empowering our membership. But this is not easy. As per insights from our field, Warren Bennis remarks that business schools may have lost their relevance, and Jeff Pfeffer points out that there is a prevalence of bad research and bad theory that is spawning bad management. This may or may not be so, but notwithstanding, I would recall the words of wisdom from Colin Powell, that “Excellence is an attitude.” So the question becomes how to acquire, promote, and execute this attitude.

We must continue to operate on a high level of academic, scholarly, and pedagogical excellence. We must leverage technology as a means to this goal. We must combine this pedagogical excellence with innovative practices and cutting edge offerings to support it. I will now say something that may not be very popular, something that has been whispered in the conference hallways but not directly addressed in a public forum such as this. It was the belief of some, and this is not so many years back, that the EAM was starting to lose its focus and lose its way. But thanks to the hard work and determination of a dedicated core, the organization has bounced back...and more. To the skeptics I quote the great Long Island philosopher William Joel, “The good old days weren’t all that good and tomorrow ain’t as bad as it seems.”

We cannot properly make a difference if we are doing the wrong things or poorly executing them. There simply cannot be any compromises on quality, whether it be in submissions, acceptance, design, or any of our offerings. Never. How can we do this? As remarked by past presidents Tony Butterfield and Bill Ferris, we all need to commit to submitting our best stuff, our best research, to the EAM. We also need to attract the best stuff of others, through a rigorous

and supportive review process. We also need to coach others' work so it can become their best stuff. An example of this is the "Internationalizing your research" workshops run by Theo Peridis and colleagues that helped attendees extend their scholarship to the global arena. I personally benefited from this workshop. And while we are on the subject of coaching let me also mention that we need to mentor others, especially those newer to the organization who might one day occupy positions of leadership. This is one of the most rewarding things a leader can do. My sincere thanks go out to the many people who honored me in this way, particularly Joel Harmon and Steve Meisel, who were of invaluable support, and have acted as EAM godparents, or 'crazy uncles' if you will, in my experience with and growth within the organization.

So the message we are to deliver, and the questions we are to ask, are the following: Are we the very best *professionals* that we can be? Is EAM the very best *professional organization* that it can be?

Second, we must be **REFLECTIVE** and consider management knowledge in the big picture, within the context of strategic, organizational, managerial, and human realities. As per the words of wisdom of Plato and Shakespeare, we should strive to lead the true and examined life. But this is not easy. As we heard last night but many no doubt knew all along, our field is dominated by extremely focused, statistically sophisticated manipulations that subsequently produce like-minded performance standards, metrics, and journal articles. As recently quoted by Steven Barley, Jim March is said to have remarked, "Name one paper that has made a substantial theoretical contribution to our field that also contained a regression equation." Karl Weick similarly lamented that organizational theorists tend to "bite off too little too precisely." I am thus inspired by the counsel, or words of wisdom, from Professor Einstein, that we must strive to marry the scientific with the spiritual.

This I feel is an area of strength for the EAM, and in fact, a core element of its essence: its willingness to think big and create a supportive learning community that enables such risks. Let us not be satisfied with superficial manipulations. Let us strive for keen insights and deep philosophical, spiritual, historical, cultural, and scientific principles. Let us maintain the truly supportive collegiality that gives us the means and the context to do this. As an example, I was delighted to witness the success of the EAM International conference in Cape Town this past June, and particularly pleased with the efforts to provide scholars all over the African continent the opportunity to join in the conversation. These are people who normally would not have the means to attend but who certainly enhanced our perspective and helped us look at how management knowledge could be used to address larger, more profound concerns than are typically debated at an academic conference.

We cannot properly make a difference if we fail to consider the context and relationships in which the knowledge is embedded or fail to foster a true learning community. We must dig deep, ask the big intellectual and pedagogical questions, and truly collaborate with one another. So the message we are to deliver, and the questions we are to ask, are the following: Are we the very best *scholars* that we can be? Is the EAM the very best *scholarly academy* that it can be?

Third, we must be **ENGAGED** and *apply* our reflective research and pedagogy to make the world a better place. As per the words of wisdom of Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, we must strengthen ourselves for the purpose of facilitating the betterment of others. But this is not easy. We have already referred to the observations of Don Hambrick that "We must break out of

our closed loop...recognize that our responsibility is not to ourselves, but rather to the institutions around the world that are in dire need of improved management,” and to his conclusion that this has yet to fully occur. We are therefore reminded of the words of wisdom from Confucius, that to see what is right and not do it is cowardice.

The EAM is striving toward becoming a true applications oriented organization. I think we are succeeding. We address our conferences to practical issues. We work with our ELA and CASE partners to explore applied learning strategies that make real differences in the lives of our students. We involve executives and cutting edge scholars in our academic programs. We launch initiatives such as the new EAM White Paper Series.

Let us never be satisfied with ivory tower thinking. Let us not stand for, in the words of my friend Jean Bartunek, the obligatory one or two paragraphs at the end of a manuscript briefly musing on practical implications. Let us strive to produce sensible applications, real improvements, and concrete results. We cannot properly make a difference if we just talk the talk, we need to walk the walk. We need to get our hands dirty building and creating. We need to become truly engaged in the phenomena that we profess. So the message we are to deliver, and the questions we should ask, are the following: Are we the very best *citizens* that we can be? Is the EAM the very best *citizenry institution* that it can be?

Again, I am happy to be here today as a member of the Eastern Academy of Management and am honored to be its president. And on Saturday afternoon I am looking forward to occupying the one position that I am told is better than president...ex-president. I am truly proud of where we have been and what we have become. To quote one more person, a famous yogi...Yogi Berra: “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” It is my sincere belief, and my prediction, that we can continue to grow even stronger as a *professional, scholarly, and engaged* organization and membership community, and I look forward to continuing the journey together. Thank you.