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Introduction to linking theory & practice section

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Linking Theory and Practice

Introduction to linking theory & practice section

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I am pleased to introduce two papers for our Linking Theory & Practice Section of this issue. The first paper, “Reinventing the future: Adding design science to the repertoire of organization and management studies” by Joan Ernst Van Aken and Georges Romme, presents a timely call for considering the design science research approach towards intervention-based research in organization studies (Bate, 2007). The authors trace the roots of design science research to the medical and engineering fields where the focus is, for example, using research for interventions to heal in the medical field or to accomplish new engineering projects in the engineering fields. Design science research includes several steps, such as systematic review of the theoretical literature, synthesis of knowledge, formulation of a strategy for design intervention, examining the intervention results and integration of new knowledge gained from the intervention (Huff, Tranfield & Van Aken, 2006). Although the intervention part of design science research may be relatively unfamiliar to some researchers in the organization field due to the widely accepted norm of minimal external influence when studying an organizational phenomenon, the call to include intervention is nevertheless not new as intervention is a core part of action research – an established approach in which field participants are encouraged to examine and find solutions to their problems as they study them from a research perspective (Susman and Evered, 1978). What design science research brings to the table is making intervention for performance improvement an explicit objective of research. Thus, it recognizes that research and intervention are not incompatible objectives if done with rigor, as shown in the medical and engineering fields. This paper is an insightful introduction into the relatively new design science research approach in organization studies with a timely call to ensure organizational research has practice relevance in the field.

While the Van Aken and Romme paper presents the design science approach as an alternative to traditional empiricism or interpretive approaches in social science research, “Employee Empowerment, Action Research and Organizational Change: A Case Study” by Victor Wooddell, illustrates the degree to which employee and organizational empowerment, and the action research model (Susman and Evered, 1978) could be implemented together in solving a problem in a public organization. The concept of employee empowerment is well recognized in the literature



(Seibert, Silver & Randolph, 2004). When this leads to organizational mobilization of resources to solve problems, organizational empowerment has occurred. The author shows how empowerment of employees in the organization to select a problem for examination led to ownership of the problem and subsequent organizational mobilization to solve that problem. In addition, by studying the process of identifying and solving the problem through an action research lens, the author demonstrates how, on the one hand, empowerment

can drive the organization to solve a problem, and on the other, action research takes place as mobilized employees gather data, examine alternatives and decide on solutions. This paper shows that an organizational phenomenon can and should be simultaneously viewed from more than one theoretical framework – in this case, employee empowerment and organizational empowerment to mobilize employees for action, followed by action research to find solutions to the problem.

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