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## Recent Research of Note

# Ethics & the 15 minute evidence-based manager: a review of a response to a critique published as “Evidence-Based Management: Concept Cleanup Time?” by Rob B Briner, David Denyer, and Denise M Rousseau (*Academy of Management Perspectives*, Nov 2009)

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Reay, Berta, and Kohn wrote a critique of evidence-based management that appeared in the November 2009 issue of *Academy of Management Perspectives*. Briefly, it argues that although evidence-based management looks promising, there isn't much high-quality evidence for it. Briner *et al.* (2009) published a *response* to this critique in the same issue – “Evidence-Based Management: Concept Cleanup Time?” The article that you are now reading is a *review* of that *response* to the original *critique* of evidence-based management. It also is an attempt to make a contribution to the way evidence-based management is conceptualized and practiced.

Briner *et al.* (2009) make four basic points.

1. Evidence-based management is something done by practitioners, not scholars...
2. Evidence-based management is a family of practices, not a single rigid formulaic method of making organizational decisions ...
3. Scholars, educators, and consultants can all play a part in building the essential supports for the practice of evidence-based management ...
4. Systematic reviews... are a cornerstone of evidence-based management practice and its infrastructure, and they need to possess certain features if they are to be informative and useful (pp. 19–20).

They list several misconceptions about evidence-based management. Then, they present an example of a general evidence-based management decision-making process. It has five steps, which are summarized below:

1. The “manager’s problem, question or issue ... is articulated as clearly and explicitly as possible.”

2. "Internal organizational evidence... [is] gathered and examined to check its relevance and validity."
3. "Published research [is] identified and critically appraised in... [a] systematic review."
4. "The views of stakeholders and those likely to be affected by the decision would be considered, along with ethical implications of the decision" (Briner *et al.*, 2009: 23).
5. All these earlier steps are considered and the manager makes a decision.

Briner *et al.* (2009) end their article by taking the model of systematic review that they advocate and using it to criticize Reay *et al.*'s (2009) original critique.

### **Put ethics first in evidence-based management**

Ethical concerns should come first in any evidence-based management decision-making process, and Briner *et al.* (2009) do include ethical concerns in their general evidence-based management process. Their version of evidence-based management is an improvement over early ones that focused only on scientific evidence. For example, Pfeffer and Sutton's (2006a) seminal work not only left ethics out of evidence-based management, they sometimes presented an ethically questionable case as "a nice example of evidence-based management" (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006b). One such case concerns an executive who, using evidence-based management, helped a chain of casinos increase profits by changing its strategy from a focus on rich "high rollers" to nearby repeat customers – presumably middle class, working class, and poor people who cannot afford to lose money on games designed to be impossible for long-term, repeat customers to win.

A model of evidence-based management that leaves out ethics is a dubious way to make management decisions; scholarship on ethical, environmental, and legal issues needs to be included. Even if evidence-based management indicates that a given management practice improves productivity or increases profit, if the practice is unethical or illegal, a decision to engage in the practice is a bad idea.

Although Briner *et al.* (2009) include ethical concerns in their example of a general evidence-based management process, their process would be stronger if it did not relegate ethical concerns to a comparatively minor place. In the five steps of the process mentioned above, ethical concerns are

relegated to the last half of the second to the last step. Instead of being a late and relatively minor concern, ethics should be a primary and major concern.

Why? Because ethical concerns are more important. Ethicists convincingly argue "that moral standards should be preferred to other values including (especially?) self-interest" (Velasquez, 2006: 10), and that "because ethics should govern all voluntary human activities and because business is a voluntary human activity, ethics should also govern business" (p. 38).

Ethics largely concerns the desirability of different values, means, and *ends*. The weighting of scientific evidence regarding effectiveness deals primarily with *means*. It only makes sense to start a decision-making process by examining the ethical desirability of the *ends* before spending a lot of time examining the effectiveness of the *means* to those ends. Managers who follow the evidence-based management process that Briner *et al.* (2009) suggest run the risk of going through the considerable effort they recommend in steps 1–3 (which includes a months-long systematic review) before asking whether the whole thing is a good idea. This is backwards; it is more important to find out the right *thing* to do before figuring out the right *way* to do it.

For example, if you were a manager at a national chain of organic food supermarkets and you followed Briner *et al.*'s (2009) model when you looked at the question of how to prevent employees from unionizing, you would first refine the problem, then gather internal data, and after that look at research on how to do it effectively. Months later you would then consider the morality of interfering with your employees' "right to form and to join trade unions" (see Article 23 of the UN Declaration of Universal Human Rights, General Assembly of the United Nations, 1948).

Ethical analysis should be a primary part of any evidence-based management decision-making process, and it must be addressed early on, if not first, in any such process. Briner *et al.* (2009) might respond to this critique by arguing that their general model of an evidence-based decision-making process was but a small part of their article, and certainly not what their article was primarily about. This is true, but it doesn't negate any of the points made in this review.

### **How often do managers have time for systematic reviews?**

The first time I taught evidence-based management to business students in 2007, I asked students



to identify a practice in their workplace that would benefit from the application of evidence-based management. The second step of the assignment was to determine what existing research was relevant. So that students could get a better idea of how it's done, I did a quick classroom demonstration of the steps I wanted them to follow, using the question: Should management monitor employee use of computers? Using the classroom data projector, I used a web browser to pull up a periodicals database (ProQuest) and typed in some key terms, limiting the results to peer-reviewed publications.

The resulting quick glance at the literature turned up abstracts of several relevant publications:

- an article that indicated that monitoring employee computer use generally improved productivity,
- a column by Jeffrey Pfeffer warning of unintended negative consequences of such policies,
- articles about possible legal issues, and
- an article that raised moral concerns about such policies.

Managers generally don't look at the scholarly literature before they make a policy decision, but managers who obtained just this sketchy amount of knowledge would be in a much better position to make a decision as they would have significantly more evidence that bears on the decision, as well as knowledge that there are some important potential ethical and legal problems that need to be looked into. It was striking just how helpful a 15-minute version of a literature review could be. (This first time that I had students do an evidence-based management assignment, I too left ethical concerns out of the process. It wasn't until this incident alerted me to the importance of ethical concerns that I included them in the process.)

Evidence-based management is not an either/or practice – it is a *process* that managers engage in to a greater or lesser extent. Reading Briner *et al.* (2009) and other evidence-based management literature (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006a), it is easy to imagine managers concluding that the kind of analysis of evidence they read about is beyond their abilities, and even if they knew how to do it, it would take too much time.

The amount of time managers have determines the depth and complexity of the evidence-based management process. Briner *et al.* (2009) make the important point that evidence-based management is done by managers, not scholars, but the evidence-based management processes they suggest are so

time consuming and require such knowledge of research methods that they are more appropriate for scholars than managers. Most of their article is about systematic reviews of research and their importance. But the reviews they describe take months. Even the “quick” version of the systematic review they advocate (the “rapid evidence assessment”) takes a minimum of 2 months, according to the source they cite (see United Kingdom, Home Civil Service, 2009). Few managers have 2 months to review evidence for most of their decisions. If managers have to use such a long and involved process, they can't apply evidence-based management very often, if ever. Managers may only have a week, a day, or even a half hour to look at evidence that bears on a given decision. If the advocates of evidence-based management insist that managers take such large amounts of time and that they have the research skills of a typical doctoral student, evidence-based management won't spread very quickly. And these managers are also likely to fall back to their default mode of decision making – doing what they've done in the past, what is most expedient, or what cultural norms imply.

Briner *et al.* (2009) wisely point out that evidence-based management is not one rigid process, but a family of processes. Building on their idea, I propose that the time constraints of managers be added to the way we think of the evidence-based management process, and that much quicker, less systematic evidence-based management processes should be included. If these are adopted into this family, many more managers will practice evidence-based management, it will be practiced much more often, and the result will be widespread, significant improvements in management decision making.

The above suggestion is not meant to say that managers shouldn't undertake longer, more involved, systematic evidence-based management processes when they can. They should, and all other things being equal, these processes are much better than the quick and dirty processes I mention here. In the family of evidence-based management processes, the full range needs to be included – from the “15 min lit review” to Briner *et al.*'s (2009) months-long systematic surveys. All are good because they improve management decision making by bringing more scientific evidence and more perspectives from the scholarly literature in other fields (for example, ethics, law, environmental science) into the management decision-making process.



### Conclusion

Briner *et al.*'s (2009) article provides a good opportunity to make the case that ethics should come first in any evidence-based management decision-making process, and to expand the family of evidence-based management processes to include the quick and dirty as well as the lengthy and rigorous. It also brings welcome news that evidence-based management approaches are being taught in business schools, such as Case Western, Cranfield and Carnegie Mellon; students are learning to evaluate management fads in terms of evidence; and students are learning how to evaluate evidence. Perhaps one day, we who teach manage-

ment will apply evidence-based processes to the way we teach. The past few decades of scientific research have led to the emergence of a consensus about what makes for effective teaching and learning (Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, 2000), and as I have argued elsewhere (McCormick, 2009), the field of management lags behind most academic disciplines in implementing the evidence-based teaching approaches that have come from this scientific consensus. This is ironic, because evidence-based management methods deserve to be taught with evidence-based teaching methods.

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