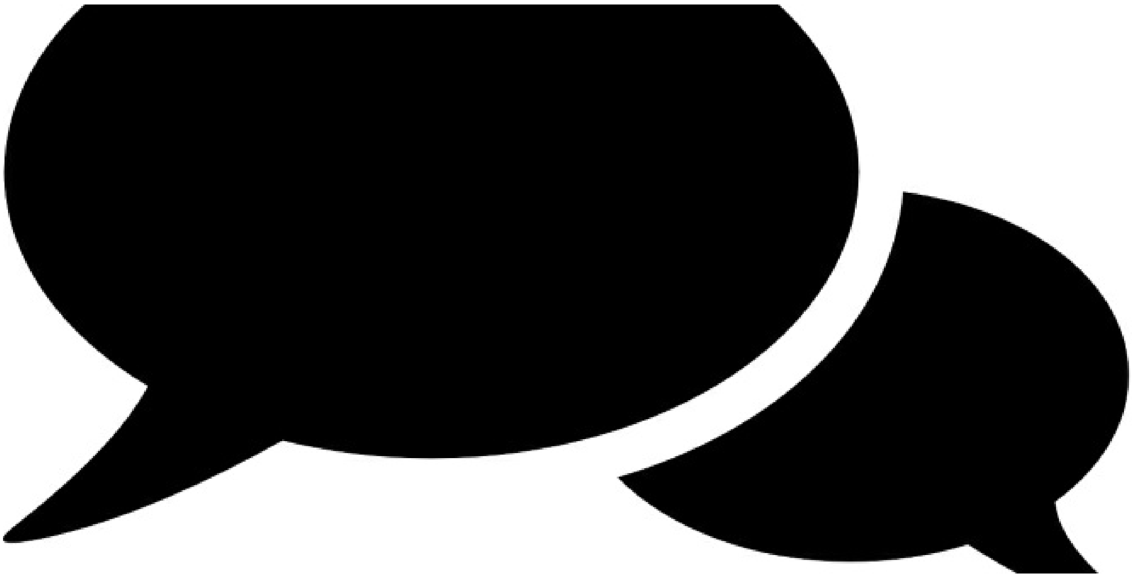
Management researchers and firm managers need to talk more with each other



Let us clarify an important point right away. Management researchers and managers can greatly benefit from talking (more) with each other. For researchers, the benefits reside in access to data to either test or build theory, while managers can advance their organisations either through evidence-based recommendations or by inviting researchers to ask the right kind of question, perhaps even before problems manifest themselves. Yet, we feel that both sides could do better in getting to talk to each other.

For instance, academics can alienate practitioners through the use of ‘pompous’ and ‘navel-gazing’ writing and speech. While we do think this represents exceptions to the rule, one of us attended once a presentation where a colleague presented an ethnographic study and boasted about the fact that he/she was ‘kicked out’ of the organisation for lack of practical relevance. Of course, the academic portrayed the eviction as the organisation’s disadvantage because they could not see the use of that study in the maze of pompous speech. Our worry is that this kind of talking reflects a tendency for self-indulgence rather than a serious attempt to find accessible vocabulary that practitioners can relate to. Worse still, it potentially deters organisations to open their doors for collaboration with academics. Who could blame them?

If we, as academics, commit the hubristic crime of believing that practitioners cannot relate to our ideas, then perhaps we have misunderstood our role as social scientist to begin with (i.e., to address human needs), and issue ourselves a convenient excuse not to *stretch ourselves enough* to affect practice. By extension, we struggle with the extreme version that academic research cannot be translated into hands-on advice because academics and practitioners dwell in different universes. That is a self-defeating argument and removes the incentive to engage with practitioners in the first place.

Universities can ‘incentivise’ initiatives for knowledge transfer through bonus payments, but it is worth keeping in mind that extrinsic motivation (i.e., contingent rewards) reduces and replaces intrinsic motivation (e.g., wishing to improve practice for the sake of it). In addition, disciplines socialise academics into writing ‘top publications’ to such an extent that having a paper accepted means for many – not all – that ’the journey stops’ there.

We object to this view, because if our work does not make a difference, whose work does? Advice provided in exchange for fees brings its own problems, as of one us has experienced first-hand. In any case, given the volume of articles published, there is much more scope for us to engage more with the media (e.g., through university press offices or our own social media channels) to reach those who can benefit from our work.

Therefore, we encourage more colleagues to go the extra mile after paper acceptance, and think of ways to 'pitch' their work to practitioners in accessible ways. Doing so would also reduce the possibility of our work belonging to the 80% of studies (in management) that Yiannis Gabriel recently speculated nobody would miss if they had not been conducted. That means using simple but not simplistic language, and implies starting with a broad statement about purpose (i.e., how does our research address human needs?) to generate interest and maintaining a concise but informative narrative to sustain that interest. We believe doing so can accomplish the twin challenge of improving practice while also finding more meaning in our work, simply because we *can* see that we *can* make a difference.

By contrast, practitioners can facilitate the communication with academics by recognising that they may not only have useful evidence at hand, but can also ask the right question that leads to problem identification, even before problems manifest themselves. Doing so enables us to move beyond merely describing the status quo and offer something to practitioners that they may find stimulating. This approach reflects often the pursuit of truth which can, but need not always, be at odds with corporate goals. For instance, managers who adopt a short-term perspective on staff motivation may rely in shaming the 'under-performing' staff in public. However, in the long term, studies show that shaming individuals can lead to increased depression. Once that point has arrived, we can then think about sickness-related absence from work and increased turnover intentions. The associated costs of accelerating actual turnover can then quickly overtake the short-term higher performance obtained from shaming 'under' performers at work.

The take-home message then is this: If management researchers use accessible rather than pompous writing and speech, and if they go the extra mile to explore creative ways of engaging managers after paper acceptance, while managers open up to evidence and kinds of questions that may appear at odds with corporate goals at first, then we can see real potential for win-win situations to emerge. And we would venture the guess that both management research and practice will be better off for it. Who makes the start?

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Notes:

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