

2020 Presidential Address

A YEAR TO REMEMBER: AN EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY FROM COVID-19 AND RACISM ONTO A PROMISING PATH OF INCLUSION AND AGILITY

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PRELUDE

As I thought about my presidential address, what came to mind was Mischel's work on situational strength when he asked "When are situations most likely to exert powerful effects and, conversely, when are person variables likely to be most influential?" (Mischel, 1977: 346). Situations matter most when they are strong as they constrain options and provide clear signals about expectations. My presidential year provided a strong situation in the form of COVID-19 and racial inequality. Both of these were united in their focus on the absence of health- the loss of life from COVID-19 or from racist brutality.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

If you want to see things differently, you have to look at them differently. Since we convened last year in August, the world is experiencing a crisis in the form of a health pandemic during which we are witnessing the spotlight on racial inequality, the escalation of racial tensions and protests. We experienced a tremendous shock as individuals, scholars, educators and as an overall community. Through this adversity, we as individuals, scholars, educators and as a community will grow, become more resilient and succeed because of it, not in spite of it. "Sometimes the bad things that happen put us directly on the path to the most wonderful things that will ever happen to us" (Reed, 2013, 118).

An unforgettable year: COVID-19 and Racism

We have had an unforgettable year since August and we are still living through it. We had moments of false hopes early in the pandemic that the spread of the corona virus was under control to be followed by global spread and spikes in infections. COVID-19 has become integral to our lives with its curtailment on our physical person to person interaction.

Its presence will shape our future but we, as a community, will adapt and thrive, learn and grow, as a consequence.

We have heard about the horrifying deaths from the Corona virus, alone and in isolation. We have also heard about the heroic efforts of front line medical staff to ensure that no-one died on their own. We have heard about the sacrifices that these employees have made in putting the lives of others before their own and in some instances paid the ultimate sacrifice with their own life. We have heard from our colleagues and friends who caught the virus and survived. In varying ways, our physical and psychological health has been challenged as we live our pandemic-imposed lives. We have been awakened to a more acute sense of our vulnerability, interconnectedness, and responsibility for the well-being of others.

Let's take a moment to be grateful to all those front line employees who put their lives on the line to help others. We have seen communities at their best helping each other, we have witnessed creativity and ingenuity in how communities have thanked front line workers and ensured that neighbours were cared for. We saw a greater connectedness, kindness and tolerance as the world confronted a global pandemic. We not only witnessed these but we were part of these communities as individuals, scholars and educators. We became closer as we maintained physical distance.

May 25th 2020, George Floyd was killed and the portrayal of his last few minutes repeatedly saying "I can't breathe" went viral. The world watched and reacted. There were many others before him. Some of us are privileged, others are not. Those of us in a privileged position can run as a form of exercise and not been seen to be running away from something. Ahmaud Arbery did not have this privilege.

Protests over the death of George Floyd quickly spread worldwide and have rallied against racial discrimination and the abuse of power. Many countries, organizations, celebrities and ordinary individuals sent messages of concern about the killing of George Floyd. 8 minutes and 46 seconds became a symbol of his killing and symbolized the outrage and pain at racial inequality in our society.

This year witnessed the power of communities to fight a global pandemic and protest racial discrimination. This indeed has been a year to remember for its traumatic events that hopefully we will look back at one day and say, "the change that happened was transformative and society is radically different for underrepresented groups". I hope that the Academy of Management will also transform and thrive.

Thank you to Past President Anita McGahan who through her efforts in late 2017 made it possible for the Academy of Management to take a professional stand against racial discrimination and the abuse of power. Thank you to members of the GDO division and the diversity and inclusion theme committee for promoting issues on behalf of underrepresented groups. As a member driven organization, meaningful change is driven from the grass roots. Keep your voices raised as we all will benefit. There is much more to be done.

The Crossroads

The Coronavirus pandemic erupted and organizations approached a crossroads: weather the COVID-19 storm and hope for the best or see the crisis as an opportunity to shift the modus operandi from marathon training to sprint training – a transformation that allows

for speed and agility. Sprinters focus on fast twitch muscle fibres for speed while marathoners focus on developing muscular endurance.

We, as an Academy of Management excel at marathons and we have acquired the muscular endurance for holding a large physical meeting for 10,000 plus attendees every year. We have the expertise, the routines and the developed requisite muscle for this through years of training.

The spread of COVID-19 around the world with countries getting their own moment in the limelight as the current hotspot pose the ultimate challenge for us – were we going to manage to hold our physical meeting in Vancouver? We had trained for this and we had trained all our members for this.

On the 7th May 2020, the Board of Governors took the decision to cancel the physical meeting and hold our annual conference virtually. We had three months to develop fast twitch muscle fibres and sprint! We had to throw out our endurance expertise and as Past President Carol Kulik said “we have to build the plane and fly it at the same time”.

We seized the opportunity to experiment with a virtual conference, the first in the history of the Academy of Management and with an adrenaline fuelled sprint, we broke through the barriers of our comfort zone. Rather than waiting for the next jolt to happen, we need to think about designing speed and flexibility into how we do things.

Our divisions with their agility and speed were able to pivot to translating part of their program to a virtual format; it was an extraordinary effort on their part and combined with the willingness of headquarter staff to enter uncharted waters, we have a ground breaking (for us) 2020 Conference. In the words of Nelson Mandela “it always seems impossible until it is done”. Mistakes are guaranteed, imperfections will be seen and we will throw in a few technological glitches for good measure. We will learn from these as we move forward to examining the role of virtuality in how we fulfil our mission.

The Present

“We must use time wisely and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right”. Nelson Mandela

It is time for management scholarship to shine. The world needs our help. Organizations have undergone change at an unprecedented speed in an uncertain social, political and economic context to address immediate challenges triggered by the global pandemic. With survival at stake as the imminent concern, organizations have the opportunity to build the competences they wished they had invested in pre COVID-19 – Agility 2.0 – enhanced digital capabilities, resilient cost structure, passion and energy for change as the basis for leadership, human centered employee practices, streamlined decisions and processes, empowerment of front line leaders, trust and flexibility in all its forms. Those fast twitch muscle fibres for speed and change of direction.

The world of organizations and the world of work has changed. As a professional association of management and organizational scholars, we have the opportunity to demonstrate our scholarship, to shape the debate and contribute to improving society at an historic moment globally.

We have the knowledge to help facilitate public-private partnerships in the race to combat the corona virus

We have the knowledge on community resilience and on the importance of sociable communities to weather the impact of contagious diseases

We have knowledge on the consequences of job loss on individuals, organizations and communities

We have knowledge on the importance of social connections to the health and well-being of individuals

We have knowledge on the abuse of power

We have knowledge on racial discrimination

We have knowledge on social inequality and its damaging effects

Let's collectively use our knowledge to shape the future of our society for the better.

There are questions to be asked and answered. To the young management scholars, this is your moment. Much of the transformational management research was propelled by catastrophic events. WWII pushed social scientists to understand human nature in the hope of making us better human beings. Kurt Lewin was driven to use science to solve problems in society. One of his early studies set out change the perception of housewives to cooking animal organs as the available meat was being shipped overseas to feed soldiers and allies. Fast forward 80 years and we are living through a defining moment in our history which raises critical and fundamental questions to help us understand the world we are living in and ultimately to use our knowledge to improve society.

To the young scholars, be bold, ask the difficult questions, be ambitious and groundbreaking in your research as you are the future of our field.

“Even the greatest was once a beginner. Don't be afraid to take that first step”
(Muhammad Ali)

To senior scholars, use your wisdom to help us thrive. You've been through many societal changes and challenges and you are critical to this call for action, to provide leadership in a time of tremendous change.

As an organization of management and organizational scholars, let's celebrate our newly acquired online teaching skills and how quickly we transitioned when it mattered. We have adapted and we will continue to adapt. We are now zoom experts and more accustomed than ever to online interactions. As we engage with our first ever virtual conference, this is an opportunity to equalize our community by creating a level playing field for the exchange of ideas and have a more inclusive reach. We are not together physically, but we are together in our community to provide value as the world seeks to heal.

As a community of scholars, we need to recognise that each of us may have a different experience of our pandemic life. As with communities at large that have demonstrated kindness, tolerance, helpfulness and gratitude during COVID-19, let us build our virtual conference around these same acts of respect, support and appreciation.

COVID-19 is in flight, its destination and ETA is unknown. We are stronger together and it is time for management research and teaching to shine as we have never been as relevant as we are now. Our members will always make the Academy a great organization for professional development and our members translate our vision “to inspire and enable a better world through our scholarship and teaching about management and organizations” into action. Let’s ensure that we use our knowledge and direct our efforts to creating a better society.

In the words of the late Katherine Phillips, Columbia Business School “what small change can we make as individuals to capture the benefits of diversity? Fight the impulse to seek out commonalities with those we encounter and instead embrace differences by talking about contrasting experiences”. Let’s engage with her advice and give voice to the experiences and perspectives of underrepresented members of the Academy of Management.

In closing, imagine the Academy of Management in 2025 having survived the global pandemic and thriving in its aftermath – what would it look like? What would it be doing? How would we get there? If you want to see things differently, you have to look at them differently.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead. Thank you.

POST SCRIPT

As COVID-19 cases near 120 million with over 2.6 million deaths (WHO, 16th March, 2021), few individuals have escaped the devastating consequences of this pandemic in terms of their physical health, psychological health, loss of income, uncertainty and the list goes on. Although public health experts predicted another influenza pandemic (Taubenberger, Morens & Fauci, 2007), no-one could have predicted the severity felt globally as the lives of individuals were thrown into chaos overnight. COVID-19 did not treat individuals equally but exposed the health inequalities in our society with black and minority ethnic communities bearing the brunt (CDC, 2020), particularly those in front-line low paying jobs that have been providing essential services throughout. This wake-up call has provided the impetus for change and should refocus our attention on equity, inclusivity and agility to achieve social impact. COVID-19 laid bare the cracks in society and organizations, our field, our role as researchers and educators.

I join with the voices of former Presidents of the Academy of Management in calling for change in what we do, how we do it and why we do it. The time has come for us to firmly embrace a *raison d'être* to solve pressing problems and have a meaningful impact on individuals, groups, organizations and society. We need to collaborate with those facing the pressing problems and jointly arrive at the research questions and design. We need to focus on relevance and societal impact and less on the publication outlet – what should matter is what is *in* the publication and not where it is published. We need to serve as agitators to organizations through our research to get them to think (and act) on fundamental questions such as their role in society, their obligations to the health and well-being of employees, critically assess their contribution to perpetuating inequality and marginalization, challenge their commitment to diversity and inclusion, promote the societal benefits of decent work and

ensure that those “essential” employees in precarious work situations do not have to choose between their health and the need to earn wages to pay for basic necessities. As educators, we could do more in accentuating social impact rather than profit maximization; alleviation of poverty vs shareholder dividends; equality vs elitism; work meaningfulness vs extravagant bonuses; gratitude vs. entitlement. My message is similar but the context is different and context matters! (Johns, 2001; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). There is no turning back.

As organizations cultivate resilience and become more agile in shifting from slow transformation to rapid response to crisis, they will have to become a decathlete in orientation and “resist working on strengths in favour of weaknesses”. (Daley Thompson, Olympic Decathlon Gold Medallist).

What if all members of the Academy of Management conducted a study where the phenomenon was not clearly defined, the methods rough and the outcome unknown but it addressed a pressing problem.....If one 100-year-old man, Captain Sir Tom Moore, can raise £33 million for the National Health Service in the UK by walking laps in his garden, what could a global community of management scholars accomplish through their research?

The disruption and chaos triggered by COVID-19 will provide fertile ground for social scientists for many years to come. Future scholars will be the judge of how the field fared in addressing the disruptions created by COVID-19 and the fissures it spotlighted, to create an equitable, inclusive society through asking and addressing the thorny yet fundamentally important questions. I hope and believe that the judgment made by future generations of management scholars is resoundingly positive.

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