Enabling Evidence Based Management: Bridging the Gap between Academics and Practitioners

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Abstract

Several barriers, grounded in differences in knowledge, training, skills and awareness, interfere with academics communicating successfully with practitioners about evidence. We describe several ways to reduce these barriers. These include providing sources that are trustworthy and accessible to managers, the development of managerial skill in diagnosis and carrying out evidence-based practice, and the communication of evidence in ways that are attractive, understandable, memorable, and actionable and through channels where they are likely to be noticed. We suggest several means for accomplishing each of these.

Keywords: Accessibility, evidence
Diagnostic skill, development
Barriers to communicating research
Evidence channels
Memorable evidence
Trustworthy sources
The two authors of this chapter illustrate “in practice” what we are writing about “in theory”. The first author had supervisory and other practitioner experience prior to beginning a doctoral program. The second author is a long term academic who is increasingly concerned about links with practice. We put these two sets of experience together to discuss how academics may communicate with practitioners in ways that will foster the application of scholarly evidence.

The expectation of evidence based management is that scholarly evidence, produced from sound academic research, can help managers and their organizations operate more effectively. As Rousseau, Manning and Denyer (2008), Rousseau and McCarthy (2007), and Briner, Denyer and Rousseau (2009) and others indicate, using evidence should make it possible for managers to develop and use substantive knowledge as opposed to faddish beliefs, and thus be more successful. Even if particular bodies of evidence exist, however, how best can this evidence be conveyed across the “great divide” (Giluk, In Press; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001) from scholars to managers, from academia to practice, so that it is truly both usable and used?

It has been clear for decades that it is difficult to cross this divide (e.g. Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1984). Recently, in fact, Kieser and Leiner (2009) have argued, based on Luhmann’s (1995) systems theory, that the worlds of academia and management are, by definition, unbridgeable. Although considerable empirical evidence suggests that multiple bridges indeed have been built (e.g. Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009), the ongoing dispute
reflects the difficulties of finding an appropriate way for scholars to speak to managers (and vice versa) in ways that both can understand.

We are not going to restate all of the arguments regarding academic-practitioner relationships; that has been done often (e.g. Bartunek, 2007; Rynes et al., 2001; Shani, Mohrman, Pasmore, Stymne, & Adler, 2008; Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2007). Rather, we want to focus on a few arguments pertinent to barriers to the communication of academic evidence to practitioners that we believe are particularly salient and important. Then, based on practitioner as well as academic perspectives, we will suggest some ways that academic evidence might be presented to practitioners in a manner that might garner their interest and positively affect their practice.

An important assumption this chapter makes is that managers are conscientious, able to think critically, and want to perform well for the good of the organization. This means that motives for using (or not using) evidence such as the desire to appear accountable or appearing to have super managerial powers derived from experience, are not considered here. We are aware of political motives that may cause some individuals to ignore evidence (e.g. leading by “gut instinct” is less replicable than leading by evidence). We are also aware that some managers (and some academics) are more adept at critical thinking than others, and that this skill will also affect the capacity to use evidence well (Toulmin, 1984). But these issues are beyond the scope of this chapter. Potworowski and Green (In Press) address some of them more fully.
We will begin by focusing on four types of barriers to communication of academic evidence from scholars to practitioners. These have to do with knowledge, training, skills and awareness. Figure 1 shows the barriers.

Barriers to Communication of Academic Evidence

Practitioners’ knowledge sources are different from academics’. Management practitioners typically do not read academic journals. They are much more likely to seek out and read trade books, trade journals (especially if they are in technical fields) and periodicals such as the Harvard Business Review (HBR), California Management Review, Sloan Management Review, and Business Horizons, which are much more readable, accessible and apparently applicable. These also tend to have more novelty. For example, they may have catchier titles such as “Who Moved my Cheese” (S. Johnson, 1998) and are sometimes written by famous people, e.g. “Trump 101: The Way to Success” (Trump & McIver, 2006).

In addition, there are clear stylistic differences between the ways articles targeted at practitioners and academic journal articles are written (Kelemen & Bansal, 2002). Unfortunately, the style in which journal articles are written tends to alienate most practitioners (Kelemen & Bansal, 2002). Further, although articles in academic journals often include implications for practice sections, the language used in these sections is typically at a beginning graduate school level (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010), and often includes unfamiliar words and phrases.
Measures used to assess the readability of texts focus on the number of syllables in their words and the number of words in their sentences. This does not take into account the fact that many terms used (e.g. variable, log linear) are not familiar to practitioners regardless of the length of the words (cf. Bartunek & Rynes, 2010).

Furthermore, the content of HBR and other business periodicals is very different from that of academic journals. The level of abstraction is at a higher level in the latter and there is a greater emphasis on practice in the former. In terms of Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), academic journals tend to focus on evaluation, synthesis, and analysis while practitioners are most helped by application. The implications for practice or application in academic journals are often not the reason for writing the article and are added as an afterthought. In practitioner-oriented publications such as HBR, the purpose of the articles is to help practitioners improve their practice but the analysis and evidence for those practices is often lacking. Further, the time frame mindset is very different for academics and practitioners. Since academics often are not addressing immediate problems, there is little urgency for journal articles to have relevance to immediate managerial concerns. Scholars are also largely writing for other scholars, with the goal of advancing theory and not necessarily improving practice. The articles that practitioners read, on the other hand, need to be current and relevant.

Even if managers believe in the relevance of Evidence-Based Management (EBM) in the abstract, academic journals are unlikely to be their primary sources of usable evidence. For example, as a practitioner, the first
author was familiar with HBR. That was her primary source of management knowledge until she started her PhD program. Even within HBR, not all of the issues appeared relevant. She was a supervisor in a music school, and many of the articles were about industries of which she had no knowledge. She didn’t know how to bridge gaps across industries, let alone between theory and practice. Further, no one else in the school where she worked below the director position read HBR (or any other management periodical) on any regular basis. The only way she could learn more about what she was reading about in HBR was to attend a night school management program, which she did -- at Harvard -- obtaining a masters degree in management. Even here, the reading focused almost exclusively on practitioner articles and cases, largely from the Harvard Business School.

Management education doesn’t include training in scholarly literature. Business schools are classified as professional schools, just as law schools and medical schools are. But in their training in medical schools and law schools, potential doctors and potential lawyers read articles from scholarly medical journals and law reviews; they may even write (or review) such articles themselves. As Barends, ten Have and Huisman (this volume) point out, medical researchers and consultants have had clinical experience and MD’s have had training in research methodologies and the scientific method. After MD’s complete their training they continue reading these materials when the articles are pertinent to their work. No one would imagine a doctor learning and advancing in his/her craft primarily by reading popular books written by famous doctors.
Yet, many people who become managers (as was initially the case with the first author) have little or no formal management training on either the graduate or undergraduate level; their becoming a manager is based in part on their technical skills. Further, it is a point of honor for many MBA students, at least in the United States, that they do not read the scholarly literature in management. Even some academics posit that the scholarly literature in management is irrelevant and “deliberately recondite” (Oviatt & Miller, 1989). Some professors feel they need to justify teaching theory (Zell, 2001).

Some of this might be a residual sentiment of the late 19th century, when the formation of the first business schools at universities began to be considered. Critics such as Thorstein Veblen thought that business schools did not belong in universities because the purpose of business proficiency is for acquiring “a facile command of the ways and means of private gain” (Veblen, 2009/1918) whereas the purpose of other professional schools was to train people to be proficient at being “serviceable to the community at large” (Veblen, 2009/1918). In other words, from the beginning of their consideration, there has been some discomfort about the appropriateness of business education.

Despite their critics, business schools did attain the status of professional schools. Further, after the scathing criticism of their “trade school” approaches by the Ford and Carnegie foundations (Gordon & Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959) business schools have moved towards a model in which scholarly research is an expectation of faculty, many of whom are trained in liberal arts disciplines rather than management.
Ironically, this has happened at the same time as there has been an emphasis on making business school curricula more practical (Ball, 2006). For example, starting in the 1980’s, business leaders wanted more influence in MBA program curricula (Ball, 2006). Business Week, U.S. News and World Report and similar rankings have also created an environment in which MBA students were becoming more and more like customers and demanding that course material be clearly linked to practice (Zell, 2001). In more recent years, the trend has been to employ more adjunct practitioner faculty, who bring their extensive business experience to the classroom (Ball, 2006). When (as is often the case), these adjunct faculty have MBA’s but not PhD’s, they are more likely to concentrate on their experiences and not academic research when they teach (Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007). Furthermore, the fact that many adjunct faculty do not have PhD’s also means that they are likely to be unfamiliar with scholarly journals. Since their source of business knowledge is likely to be from practitioner literature such as HBR or Business Horizons, their syllabi naturally include the same.

Since business schools expect tenure-track and tenured professors to conduct research, why don’t management students learn from academic literature as doctors and lawyers do in their training? Rousseau’s (2006) point that management is not a real profession suggests one possible reason. Unlike doctors or lawyers, managers do not have to attend professional schools or acquire any kind of license to earn their titles and they don’t have to participate in any continuing education to keep them (Rynes et al., 2007). It is also not clear whether or not an MBA education makes one more qualified or knowledgeable
about management (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Barends et al (In Press) also point out that students have normative beliefs as to what they need to learn in their management programs and as a result, face validity and readability trump scientific rigor. These issues are at the heart of the divide between research and practice -- there are no required network, educational, or social links between managers and scholars.

Management skills are often learned primarily through experience. Many managers prefer to rely on their experience or company-based training as a source of learning. After all, what can a bunch of nameless scholars who have never had to meet a payroll tell them about running their business? Implicitly, if not explicitly, many managers believe that it is impossible for professors to know how to teach anyone about management unless they have had experience as executives or high-level managers. To the extent that managers believe this, it is difficult for academics to convince practitioners that evidence based management is relevant; the “school of hard knocks” trumps academic research.

Law and medical school faculty, in addition to conducting research, are typically also practitioners in their fields, and, as such, are mentors for their students. It would be difficult to imagine a medical faculty in which members had never treated a patient or a law faculty whose members had never tried a case or met with a client. But in business schools, “it is possible to find tenured professors of management who have never set foot inside a real business, except as customers” (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005, p. 100).
While it is not realistic for all professors to have the time to be executives or consultants on the side, there is also little incentive for many academics to contribute to the building of bridges between the academic and practitioner worlds by writing articles that translate scholarly research into practical applications. Professors are typically not rewarded for non-academic writing (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). Managers are also not necessarily rewarded for building bridges, especially if the act of asking for help may suggest or “signal” that they do not know what they are doing. Even in healthcare systems, where one would think that evidence-based decision making would be the norm, the search for evidence is often impeded by time pressures and other obstacles (Kovner, In Press).

Further, practitioners’ awareness of research evidence does not necessarily mean that they apply it to their practice (Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002). Organizations have unsystematic ways of making decisions (Yates, 1990), and are unlikely to change this process without compelling reasons. For example, many business schools only started to take teaching seriously when periodicals such as Business Week began including teaching in their ratings; simple generic statements about the value of teaching certainly did not accomplish this on their own.

Academics and managers often don’t learn very much from each others’ work. Many scholars do not have the time, desire, skill or obligation to do consulting work or ethnographic research through which they would be able to see better what is happening in many work organizations. Doctoral training in
business schools tends to move doctoral students away from concern about practice (Polzer, Gulati, Khurana, & Tushman, 2009). This situation contributes to a knowledge production problem (Van de Ven, 2007), characterized by practitioners wanting to know one thing and management scholars finding the answers to questions that practitioners do not necessarily see as being relevant (cf. Ekbia & Hara, 2008). But as Pettigrew (2001) points out, “dissemination is too late if the wrong questions have been asked”. In their chapter in this volume Salipante and Smith (this volume) suggest training that links doctoral students more fully with practice, but such training is neither common nor accepted in many esteemed doctoral programs.

Some organizations have research departments or may work with outside consultants that conduct internal research by distributing surveys and collecting data from within the organization. However, the surveys are often not based on academically validated scales, and results are typically not disseminated publicly, let alone to the academic community. Rather, they are often seen as proprietary knowledge. Even within the organization, the results of the surveys might or might not be released to everyone.

There have also been cases of organizations that have attempted to educate their executives but stopped the program due to unexpected results. For example, in the 1950’s at Bell Telephone Company, executives were trained at a program established with the University of Pennsylvania. The result was that the young executives started reading more widely after the program and became more confident and intellectually engaged (Davis, 2010). These were positive
outcomes. However, the executives also became less interested in prioritizing the company’s bottom line ahead of everything else in their lives, an outcome that was not so positive from the company’s perspective. Organizational leaders are more likely to see the value of working with academics if they believe that the results serve organizational purposes and do not diminish organizational commitment.

Thus, academics and practitioners both create knowledge. They just don’t do so for each other as much as those working with evidence-based management would deem optimal.

**Given These Barriers, How Can Academics Foster Evidence Based Managing**

These are formidable barriers to the successful sharing of academic evidence. Some are related to individuals or groups of managers or academics, and some are largely structural, having to do with management learning, education, and taken for granted routines. Some have to do with persuasion and some have to do with accessibility. Some have to do with skill level and understanding. Different types of barriers may sometimes be combined.

While no one approach will succeed in dealing with all of the barriers we have described, literature on persuasion offers ways into considering them. This literature (e.g. Johnson, Maio, & Smith-McLallen, 2005; Petty, 1994) provides evidence of a wide array of factors that affect people’s attitudes towards something, including, in our case, evidence-based practice.

Applying persuasion literature to the acceptance of EBM and over-simplifying this literature, we suggest that, in order for academic evidence
pertaining to management to have impacts on managers’ practice, it is important that 1) the sources of such knowledge be trustworthy and accessible to managers, 2) managers receive assistance in developing skill in diagnosing situations well and carrying out evidence-based practice, and 3) evidence be communicated in ways that are attractive, understandable, memorable, and actionable and through channels where they are particularly likely to be noticed. These ways of addressing the barriers and some examples of each are shown in Figure 1.

**Accessibility of Trustworthy Sources**

Literature on persuasion emphasizes the importance of trustworthy sources for messages to be convincing. While it would be nice to think that a compendium of management evidence along the lines of the Campbell or Cochrane Collaborations would be easily accessible and seen as trustworthy and convincing on their own merits, the chances are good that this would not be the case. Rather, it would likely be more convincing if people who are already credible to managers present the evidence and that they be available for follow up. Fortunately, there are a number of academics who fit in this category.

Thinkers.com, for example, posts an annual listing of “the world's top 50 business thinkers” ([http://www.thinkers50.com/gallery](http://www.thinkers50.com/gallery); accessed 9/16/2010) based on such criteria as originality and practicality of ideas, presentation style, written communication and loyalty of followers. Several academics are included among this year’s top 10: CK Prahalad, Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, Philip Kotler, and Gary Hamel. Academics in the top 35 include, among others, Michael Porter, Howard Gardner, Richard D'Aveni, Rosabeth Moss Kanter,
Clayton Christensen, Vijay Govindarajan, David Ulrich and Henry Mintzberg. Presentation of evidence in a convincing manner by academics such as these is likely to be much more impactful than presentation by university professors who are not seen as concerned about practice.

Simple presentations by influential business thinkers, though helpful, are unlikely to be enough to inculcate new practices. Other means that might help are executive development training in settings that are based on serious scholarship and also attuned to practice. A primary exemplar of such a center is the Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California (http://ceo.usc.edu/; accessed 9/16/2010), whose mission is to “improve how effectively organizations are managed.” Research scientists there both do research and collaborate with practitioners, and have built up considerable practitioner credibility. Consulting firms that include doctoral trained senior staff can also be sources of the inculcation of evidence, especially if they were part of scholarly efforts to develop it. One such exemplar is Decision Strategies International (thinkdsi.com), which sees as its purpose “to help organizations develop a "strategic compass" to be prepared for whatever unexpected events come their way.”

The thinkers.com list is obviously not a complete list of people (including academics) who are trusted as having impacts on business. But the list does suggest the value of convincing academics about potential values of academic evidence for practice and discussing with them how to convey its value to practitioners (e.g. Bartunek & Rynes, 2010). It also makes clear that academics
who wish to be seen as credible to practitioners need to take steps outside the academic community to be known.

Such steps are sometimes taken, and they make a difference. Karl Weick, for example, one of the most renowned theorists in the world, dialogs with practitioners (e.g. Weick & Putnam, 2006), treats them seriously, uses provocative imagery that enables them to link with his work (e.g. (O'Leary & Chia, 2007) and sometimes makes presentations at conferences that include practitioners (e.g. http://www.high-reliability.org/Conferences.html, accessed 7/23/2010). Some other scholars do this as well (cf. Bartunek, 2007). If academics assume practitioners’ basic intelligence and interest they are more likely to be able to communicate in a comprehensible and trustworthy manner than if they do not.

**Skill Development in Working with Evidence**

A feeling of competence in carrying out new behaviors pertinent to working with evidence is very important to willingness to adopt new practices. It is one thing to know about evidence and another to act on it. Thus, we will discuss several aspects of and means of skill development pertinent to evidence-based practice.

**Diagnosis**

Diagnosis is a critical skill required to use evidence well. One of the principles of EBM (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007) is that it is important to understand underlying factors associated with a problem being addressed. Otherwise, even sound evidence-based approaches will not be effective because they don’t respond to the correct issue(s). For example, Senge (1990) described a systems archetype
called “shifting the burden” that we discuss more below. This term refers to managers treating the symptoms of a problem, but not the problem itself. Senge suggests that such action leads to constantly “fighting fires” as core problematic issues remain unaddressed. Without a coach or skills of reflection, it is often difficult to recognize that the repetition of the same issues is just a symptom and not the underlying cause.

In other words, as Briner et al. (2009), Rousseau and McCarthy (2007) and others argue, appropriate diagnosis and skill in carrying it out are key to the proper use of evidence. Symptoms are important because they alert the practitioner that something is amiss, but responding solely to symptoms usually does not solve the underlying problem. For example, abnormally low profits may be a clear symptom, but the underlying cause might be elusive. What can academics do to help managers develop skill in diagnosing situations so that they respond both to symptoms of a problem and their underlying causes?

One means is through book level guides such as Developing Management Skills, 7th ed. (Whetten & Cameron, 2006) and Organizational Diagnosis: Bridging Theory and Practice (Harrison & Shirom, 1999) or books that include considerable diagnostic information, such as Diagnosing and changing organizational culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). These books, all of which are based on sound research, can help practitioners learn how to diagnose organizational issues in more depth. Whetten and Cameron (2006), for example, include skill assessments, discussion questions, and other exercises that could be done individually or in groups, and Harrison and Shirom (1999) include
conceptual frameworks that guide managers’ approaches to diagnosis. This book revolves around the idea of “sharp image diagnosis,” an approach that helps practitioners “move quickly and decisively from initially stated problems and concerns to the identification of underlying forces that produce ineffective outcomes (Harrison & Shirom, 1999). Cameron and Quinn (2006) include a conceptual framework based on the competing values model (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) and questionnaire measures that can be used to diagnose it as it applies in organizations and to individual managers.

Another means academics may use to help managers improve their diagnostic skills is to provide models for them of how managers took steps to understand what was going on beneath the surface of a particular situation and then respond to it. Models can be found in the form of an appropriate case study, a series of steps such as Kotter’s (Kotter, 1996) eight steps for organizational change, or a systematic approach for diagnosing core issues such as Harrison & Shirom’s (1999) sharp image diagnosis.

One common pedagogical tool in business schools is the use of case studies. Many MBA programs revolve around the case method. Using a variety of case studies can help practitioners see the differences and commonalities of using various approaches in different contexts, in order to discern which responses are useful to many contexts and which are limited to certain contexts. Some case studies might even trigger the insight, “That’s exactly what’s happening in my organization!” Case studies are intended to give the practitioner an arms-length
distance to help see situations from a more objective perspective and serves as a form of simulation that can potentially prepare them for the real event.

An illustration of a manager who recognized the need to treat both the symptom and cause of a problem appears in the HBS case, “Children’s Hospital and Clinics” (Edmondson, Roberto, & Tucker, 2001). In the case, before creating a strategic plan to improve patient safety, the new COO Julie Morath employed the principles of EBM. She first made presentations to the hospital staff about research on medical errors. The purpose of this was not only to create buy-in for the organizational change that was to come; the presentations also highlighted the importance of using evidence and research to persuade others that improving an organizational process (i.e. improving patient safety) was necessary. Additionally, she conducted focus groups with employees and parents (of patients) to gather more information to diagnose the possible causes of medical accidents.

This case highlights the point that EBM involves both qualitative and quantitative data (Rousseau et al., 2008; Briner et al; 2009). While the presentations about medical accidents were from the Harvard Medical Practice Study (HMPS), which showed quantitative data such as the percentage of patients that experienced an adverse event, the diagnosis stage involved considerable qualitative data gathering in the form of focus groups and discussions with various members of the hospital community.

One of the concerns that hospital employees had about holding a discussion about patient safety with a group of parents was that it might signal
that the hospital was not safe. However, this was based on the assumption that parents were not aware that accidents happened. Morath did not take the assumption as fact, but persisted, eventually succeeding in obtaining permission to talk to the parents, who turned out to be already aware of “near misses” and welcomed the opportunity to contribute their ideas to the new initiative.

If we consider Morath an exemplar of how to use evidence in practice, one of the most important lessons from this case is that practitioners (and scholars) must test assumptions (i.e. engage in “double-loop learning”) (Argyris, 1976, 1982) while in the field. Morath might have been the only one to question the assumption because she was a newcomer and might have had the intuition that parents were already aware of “near misses”.

COO Morath and CEO Nelson then introduced a new Patient Safety Initiative, which included a new policy of blameless reporting. Rather than assigning blame to people after a medical accident, anyone who was involved in a medical accident could write up the accident anonymously. This was counterintuitive to many employees because they assumed that staff might act less responsibly if they were not held accountable for their mistakes. However, Morath’s goal was to change the organizational culture from one that was described as the “old ABC model of medicine: Accuse, Blame, Criticize,” (Edmondson et al, 2001) to one that enabled learning to take place after a medical accident.

This was an excellent example of how an organizational leader used both evidence and diagnostic procedures to understand what was going on beneath the
surface of the situation and improve an organizational process. Even if it was not explicitly stated with academic terminology in the case study, Morath diagnosed that if defensive routines (Argyris, 1990) kicked in, they would lead staff to hide their mistakes and not reveal processes that led to errors. In other words, rather than merely treating the symptom by disciplining employees that made medical errors, blameless reporting enabled everyone who was involved to learn and treat the underlying cause of the medical errors.

At present most teaching cases are not meant to illustrate evidence-based practice. However, the development of more such cases would be particularly useful for training.

**Developing Systems Thinking Skills**

Managers well versed in systems theory should be more likely to accurately diagnose organizational issues that occur repeatedly because the systems archetypes show the underlying causes that lead problems to recur over and over again. There are multiple approaches that incorporate some type of systems thinking.

First, one of the five disciplines in Senge’s (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* is systems thinking. Such thinking is embodied in several archetypes. For example, “shifting the burden” is the archetype that shows how treating a symptom and not the root cause will lead to the problem to coming back over time. In the Children’s Hospital case, Morath’s new Patient Safety Initiative enabled staff to work together in finding the root causes of medical accidents instead of merely treating the symptom by reprimanding those involved in the accidents.
Management schools can offer instruction in this type of systems thinking for managers and management students. The first author included two sessions on systems theory in her undergraduate organizational behavior course and the students were able to understand and apply the systems archetypes. For their final projects, many students were able to apply systems thinking to popular movies and television shows. It is conceivable that combined with situational examples or case studies, systems thinking skills can arm management students with a powerful set of tools that they can use to analyze organizational events and make better decisions at work or in leadership positions.

There are also consultants who offer training in this approach to systems theory. Consultants affiliated with the Society for Organizational Learning (http://www.solonline.org/; accessed 9/16/2010), in particular, offer programs that foster this type of awareness and skill. There are also several field guides that address management issues from a systems thinking perspective. Those field guides are outlined in a subsequent section.

Second, Goodman’s (2000) book, *Missing Organizational Linkages*, describes some ways that systems thinking can be applied to gaps between organizational units and across organizational levels, e.g. between individual or group performance and organizational performance. It suggests why great individual or group performance does not necessarily lead to great organizational performance; for this to happen it is necessary to understand and create linkages across levels and units. Goodman provided systems tools that can be used to describe and understand the links among various systems components. These
tools, however, are not simple and straightforward for any practitioner to apply; like many pieces of evidence they do not provide “quick fixes” to complicated organizational arrangements.

Third, Cascio and Boudreau’s (Cascio & Boudreau, 2008; Cascio & Boudreau, In Press) work suggests ways that many decisions made in organizations can be considered much more systematically than they typically are. Cascio and Boudreau note, for example that many of the activities associated with staffing such as recruitment, initial screening and selection are typically treated independently, as separate elements. However, by using a metaphor of supply chain management as a guide, and taking an organizational perspective on what is sometimes seen as solely a Human Resources issue, it is possible to understand how decisions such as these are interdependent with each other. The same pattern can be applied to many types of organizational processes, including processes that cut across organizational units (e.g. HR and marketing).

Developing Translation Skills

Students who are studying management in MBA or, perhaps, undergraduate programs, may develop some tools for “translating” academic writing into practitioner writing during their studies, and these skills may help them assimilate academic knowledge more readily later. Such skills may be particularly helpful, for example, in searching out the types of online resources Werner (In Press) addresses in another chapter in this volume. As one way of how to do this, Professor Deborah Kolb, of Simmons College in Boston, has her MBA level negotiation students translate an academic article about negotiation into
prescriptions that everyday managers can use. The assignment is included in full in Appendix A.

**Increasing the Modes and Accessibility of Self-Training**

There are many training materials that practitioners can use to help themselves and to enhance their own thought processes when addressing organizational issues. Training in skills related to evidence-based practice does not have to take place only in formal settings.

**Videos**

One recent trend that is becoming more popular with managers is the TED video series, which is available online (ted.com). According to its URL ([http://www.ted.com/pages/view/id/5](http://www.ted.com/pages/view/id/5); accessed 9/16/2010), the creators of this website “believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and ultimately, the world. So we're building here a clearinghouse that offers free knowledge and inspiration from the world's most inspired thinkers, and also a community of curious souls to engage with ideas and each other.”

Especially if some type of index of evidence-related programs is available (and especially, as noted above, if these programs are presented by credible sources), managers might find it easier to find relevant information about EBM from websites like TED or youtube.com than searching through books or periodicals or courses. The Internet is easy to access and there are filtering mechanisms (tags, search engines, etc.) that make it easier for those who are interested to find what they are looking for. Further, Ted.com includes talks on various topics including technology, business, science, global issues, design, and
entertainment. Many videos are quite short, making it easy for busy people to watch them and learn in short spurts. Within the business category, there are videos on leadership, motivation, and other related topics.

Many of the videos address ideas that may seem unconventional or counter-intuitive in some way. Speakers often challenge conventional wisdom in ways that may make viewers think differently about the world, and that may foster appreciation of the importance of evidence. Daniel Pink’s TED video (http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html; accessed 9/16/2010), for instance, provides a pertinent example of how standard taken for granted assumptions about incentive systems are often wrong. Pink reveals the results of a lab experiment in which people who were financially compensated for the quality of their performance did better than the group not compensated when the task was simple and straightforward. However, when the task involved cognitive skill, the group that was not compensated did better. This is surprising in itself. But what are the implications? Should managers pay creative workers less? Without adequate explanation, it would seem so.

But Pink goes on to emphasize that managers need to make sure that creative workers, and all those not simply carrying out routine tasks, are financially secure, and then provide them with opportunities for intrinsic motivation by means of autonomy, mastery and purpose. For anyone doing knowledge work, simple if-then rewards destroy creativity. For those who are not doing creative work, but only for these, the “carrot and stick” approach might still be valid.
In other words, Pink is articulating that what often seems like common sense does not really make sense. He is also showing that in order to know how to act, managers often have to pay attention to contingencies and to think critically about how to respond. Evidence based approaches do not take the place of serious consideration, and conventional wisdom does not always include contingencies. It should be noted that not everyone agrees with Pink’s theorizing as he presents it on the TED video (S. L. Rynes, personal communication, August 8, 2010). Nevertheless, this video does represent a way to go beyond data as given and to attempt to understand its implications more deeply.

The TED video series is just one outlet for both scholars and practitioners to share and disseminate knowledge. Digital technology has spawned several new ways of teaching and training that enable and enrich the more traditional approaches found in classrooms. The following are just a few examples of the various possibilities that have been developed in the recent past.

Managerial Simulation

Dunham’s (2004) “The Manager’s Workshop 3.0” CD-ROM, (also discussed by Goodman & O’Brien, in press, in this volume and available on Amazon.com or through Pearson Higher Education) is an interactive simulation that puts the user in the position of managing five different employees. The home page is a picture of an office with various hyperlinks that take users to the simulation, the employees’ personnel files, videos of case studies and explanations of motivation theories, and self-assessment tests. The CD-ROM can be used by individuals or in a classroom or training context.
Individually, managers can take themselves through the scenarios of managing each of the five problem employees. The personnel files give the simulation some realism by giving the manager more information with which to make decisions on how to proceed with each employee. The motivation theory videos can either inform or remind the manager of what the theories were and explain why each decision was more “correct” than others. After each decision is made in the simulation, the next video clip includes feedback on the consequences of that decision. This helps managers see the effects of their decisions.

In the classroom or in training programs, the CD-ROM can be used in a group exercise where each group talks about the possible courses of action after each video clip in the simulation and have discussions about which choice is the best. Afterwards, the instructor can show the theoretical foundations and evidence that support each decision. Again, students and training participants can see the potential consequences of their choices in each situation. The advantage of the classroom or group setting would be that the consequences could potentially spark an inter-group discussion of how the situation might or might not be generalizable to other situations or organizations, after each group has their own discussion of which choice would be most appropriate. This kind of discussion is made richer when the participants come from different backgrounds and organizations.

In the spirit of EBM, the videos explaining each motivation theory could be used after the group successfully manages each problem employee. This would enable participants to see that the choices made in the simulation were based on evidence and not just other people’s experiences. When combined with the
experiences of classroom participants, the motivation theory videos could be powerful learning experiences because participants may be able to clearly see how theory and practice can complement one another.

**Short Video Cases**

Video cases produced by the Stanford ([http://www.leadershipinfocus.net; accessed 9/16/2010](http://www.leadershipinfocus.net)) and Harvard ([http://harvardbusiness.org/; accessed 9/16/2010](http://harvardbusiness.org)) business schools supplement the written cases produced by faculty at each school. Some of the video cases include interviews with key actors in the cases while others include video clips that illustrate the topic of the case. Additionally, some of the cases are presented entirely on video.

These means of presenting cases can be more engaging than a written case, especially for visual learners. However, the cases need to be presented with a specific learning point that shows how evidence has informed the solution. Otherwise, the case is just another “war story” told by the authors and the protagonist of the case. In other words, the “moral of the story” needs to be made clear and the theories and evidence that support the decisions made by the protagonists in each case need to be discussed in order to illustrate EBM principles in action.

In addition to classroom venues, video cases can be presented to employees at professional development sessions. It is very easy to develop tunnel vision when one has worked in an organization for a long period of time. Watching and discussing a video case about a different setting could inspire people to look beyond their standard boundaries and think about improvements in
efficiency or practices. These sessions may be conducted by an outside consultant but they could also be presented by someone in the HR department who has had experience teaching. If organizations hired a Staff Scholar (described in a later section in this paper), who understood the idiosyncrasies of the organization and the current academic research, that person would also be in a good position to present the video cases and help make clear how the case applies to the organization.

Field Guides and Websites for Developing Skills

Kotter and Cohen and Senge have supplemented their books, The Heart of Change (Kotter & Cohen, 2002) and The Fifth Discipline (Senge, 1990), respectively, with field guides in an attempt to help people in organizations apply their principles. Field guides are companion books that help practitioners to apply the principles in the original books. They typically contain activities and concrete steps for the readers to follow and use in their organizations. Kotter’s works, Leading Change (1996) and (with Cohen) The Heart of Change (2002), put forth a model of eight steps for enacting organizational change. The Heart of Change is comprised of stories about how organizations have followed the steps and succeeded in enacting change. The Heart of Change Field Guide (Cohen, 2005) is user-friendly and helps practitioners by giving them frameworks and tools to use in their organizations, including a number of diagnostic tools. There is also a website, theheartofchange.com (accessed 9/16/2010) that supplements The Heart of Change.
Similarly, Senge’s work, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), which introduces systems thinking along with other managerial disciplines, has been supplemented with several Field Books, which help practitioners apply the principles of the five disciplines in their organizations. In addition to *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994), *Schools that Learn* (Senge et al., 2000), is a field book that is directed at educators and other practitioners who work in the education field. *The Dance of Change* (Senge et al., 1999) is a field book aimed at practitioners embarking on organizational change. All of these field books and field guides take the abstract concepts from the books and offer concrete and practical steps that people in organizations can take. The Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) has online resources and networking tools on their website that help scholars and practitioners exchange ideas. SoL’s journal, Reflections, is also distributed in pdf format to members who wish to learn more about organizational learning and how other organizations have used organizational learning principles.

**How Messages about Evidence and Practice are Communicated**

Evidence can be presented in a way that is more or less attractive and memorable. Most academic writing, as we have noted above, is neither attractive nor memorable. However, there are ways that it could be made more so. Relationships and communication between academics and practitioners include multiple other components as well.
Sticky Evidence

Heath and Heath (2007) suggested that ideas that “stick” are those that are simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, and likely to be told in stories, a style of writing that moves readers to feel as the author does (Bartunek, 2007). “Sticky findings” describe “research results that grab attention, gain credibility, and are readily shared” (Rousseau & Boudreau, 2011). The sticky findings can come from many sources, including observing the activities of competing firms, management periodicals, research findings, and popular books.

It is important to note that not all sticky findings are constructive, because theories often depend on assumptions, which may or may not be remembered after the sticky findings spread. For example, the idea of including stock options in management compensation packages is very sticky, but not necessarily good for business (Ghoshal, 2005). The rewarding of stock options is based on the assumption that the shareholder is making a bigger risk than employees, who can leave one job for another if they think that they are not being paid what they are worth. In other words, a perfectly efficient labor market is assumed. However, as Ghoshal (2005) points out, shareholders can sell their shares more easily than an employee can make a job transition. Thus, it is important for academics to develop ways to make sound evidence sticky. Rousseau & Boudreau (in press) offer concrete suggestions on how scholars might do this. The steps academics might take include presenting findings in ways that appear relevant to practice, expressing clear core principles in plain language and familiar analogies, describing the causal processes and mechanisms through which a principle works.
in plain language and familiar analogies, framing research to the end-users’ interests, embedding findings within practitioner decision frameworks, explicating conditions of use, giving users easy access to the research findings and making sure that (local) opinion leaders advocate or attest to use.

**Building Relationships**

For multiple reasons, as noted above, scholars and practitioners often do not interact face to face. But as we have stated above, practitioner understanding of scholarly findings may not be easy, even when findings are presented in a sticky manner. Thus, it is necessary to create other ways for academics and practitioners to create communities of practice that enable opportunities for ongoing information exchange.

**Joint Forums**

One means might be forums such as those suggested by Bartunek (2007) to flesh out journal articles’ implications for practice from both scholarly and practitioner perspectives. Most implications for practice in academic journals are left as more or less free-standing elements, rarely referenced by later work. But it might be possible for joint researcher/practitioner gatherings (e.g. Academy of Management or SoL conferences) to consider implications for practice from both scholarly and practitioner perspectives. Another might be forums to discuss topics in which there are shared interests between academics and managers, such as the types of metrics for indicating success. As Bartunek (2007) notes, such efforts extend the types of venues in which managers and academics get to
know each other and each others’ concerns. Two examples of such forums are management cafes and online communities.

Management cafes would be similar to the grassroots movement, Science Cafes, to bring science to the public (http://www.sciencecafes.org/what.html; accessed 9/16/2010). In Boston, Liz Bromley started a free lecture series called “Science in the News” (SITN) (https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/; accessed 9/16/2010) at Harvard Medical School when she was a PhD student there. The lectures were aimed at the general public. SITN has now grown to be a more than just a free lecture series held in the fall. Their new offerings also include “Science by the Pint,” which is an informal gathering based on the Science Café idea. Typically, a scientist gives a short presentation on a topic at an informal venue, such as a coffee shop or bar, where everyone can have a drink and talk to the scientist about science and technology. The purpose of these gatherings and of everything SITN does is to help people “better distinguish scientific fact from pure speculation” (https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/aboutus.html; accessed 9/16/2010). A similar idea can be found in “theology on tap” sessions (http://www.renewtot.org/; accessed 9/16/2010), which aim to help people learn about their religious faith while connecting with friends.

Management scholars could do something similar to the Science Cafes and call them “Management Cafes” or, perhaps, “Managing -- 100 Proof”. This would give management scholars a chance to showcase their work in informal settings. Managers of any level, students, or anyone from the general public could gather together in a coffee shop or bar to discuss particular scholars’ work.
Online Communities

Joint forums are not necessarily in person; they can take place online. Indeed, there are also established practitioner online communities in which academics might participate. One example is www.changeosp.com; accessed 9/16/2010, short for the “change management open source project”. It includes, among other components, a discussion forum in which practitioners can explore questions with each other and, if they wish, with academics. The second author, for example, participated in a podcast posted on the site on how to measure the success of OD interventions and how vibrant (or not) Organization Development is. Such online communities also offer opportunities for academics to communicate evidence with practitioners, or, at the very least, to hear practitioners’ concerns pertinent to evidence and its application.

Websites and Blogs

Currently, there is an expanding EBM website hosted by Carnegie Mellon University (http://evidence-basedmanagement.com; accessed 9/16/2010) that includes blogs, articles, links to other websites, suggested books, and other materials for anyone interested in learning more about using EBM. Richard Puyt (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) has recently created a new website with more materials at: www.evidencebased-management.com (accessed 9/16/2010). The Research and Practice section of this website lists books and websites that give the curious EBM practitioner a place to start learning about EBM and how people in various disciplines have used it. For applications of EBM in specific fields, there are links to EBM movement resources in multiple areas, including

Educators can also find useful resources on the EBM website. In the Teaching Resources section, there are several course syllabi that are either centered on EBM or that have integrated EBM principles into the course. For example, Rousseau’s course on Organizational Behavior follows Robbins & Judge’s textbook, “Essentials of Organizational Behavior,” (2009) but there is a clear emphasis on gathering and using evidence. Instructors can use the posted syllabi as a starting point for including EBM in their own syllabi. If they need more information, there are links to the syllabi creators’ web pages.

A Staff Scholar

Organizations could hire a “staff scholar.” This position would be somewhere between an academic and a Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO), a senior level executive position that started to gain in popularity after the term, “knowledge management” became popular in the late 1980’s (Dalkir, 2005). The role of a CKO is to “drive and co-ordinate knowledge management programs” (Earl, 2001) and add to knowledge as an important organizational resource (Alavi, 2001). The purpose of a staff scholar would not be to manage the mountains of knowledge in organizations, but to understand and diagnose the (apparently) idiosyncratic issues within an organization, using findings from academic research to inform practice.

The role of staff scholar would also be somewhat like an ombudsperson, who is responsible for resolving conflicts in organizations by being an impartial officer who listens to employee grievances and has the power to investigate them.
But the staff scholar’s job would be to diagnose systemic issues in addition to offering evidence-based solutions to address them.

Sometimes scholars who engage in consulting activities on the side serve in such a capacity in an informal way. For example, due to links that John Zanardelli (In Press) created with Carnegie Mellon University, CMU Professors Laurie Weingart and Denise Rousseau serve in occasional scholarly roles at the Methodist home for the Aged in Asbury Heights in Pittsburgh. Laurie introduced perspective taking to senior managers there in a way that lead to senior managers shadowing each other for a (half) day to get a sense of each others’ job demands. Denise helped the managers there use psychological contracts as a basis for determining the value of rolling out increased co-pay for insurance.

There is also the possibility of a formal staff scholar role. Such a role was enacted by Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar when he directed the Human Resources lab at Sun Microsystems (Woolcock, 2002). Under the leadership of Crawford Beveridge, Executive Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer at Sun, and Dee Alcott Rodriguez, director of HR strategy and planning, Moldenhauer-Salazar helped to create and direct an HR lab whose purpose was to find answers to the people-related questions at Sun for which there were no clear answers. He invited academic researchers whose work addressed these issues to come to Sun to collect data and feed them back to Sun and then to publish their findings. For example, Sun conducted a work-from-home pilot program, and wanted to be aware of the implications of working from home, especially in terms of work
relationships. Sun’s HR lab engaged three external academic researchers to study this, and Beveridge presented the results to senior management. (An executive summary the academics’ report is shown in Corporate Executive Board, 2004). This study and others that were carried out (Woolcock, 2002) were found to be very helpful to Sun, providing very positive returns on investment.

In addition, some university faculty members such as John Boudreau and Morgan McCall served as resident scholars at Sun while on sabbatical from their universities (Boudreau served as a visiting director). Proposals for research were solicited from senior management, in order that the research would meet strategic aims. Multiple HR volunteers aided in data collection for the research, and the scope of the research expanded over time (Woolcock, 2002). HR labs remained an integral part of Sun Microsystems until the company was acquired by Oracle and clearly proved its worth.

**Conclusion**

It is one thing for academics to gather and present evidence in ways consistent with common academic communication. It is another thing for practitioners to make use of it successfully. Straightforward presentations of evidence will not accomplish this, no matter how academically convincing the scholarly findings underpinning it are.

In this chapter, we have suggested some important barriers to the adequate communication of academic-based evidence to practitioners. Based in part on insights from scholars who study persuasion, we have tried to suggest means that may reduce these barriers, making it more feasible for evidence to be
communicated well and for practitioners to develop skill in carrying out evidence-based practice. We include all of this in our summary of recommendations that we present in Table 1.

What we have suggested is not comprehensive. It is, however, a start, one that might lead, with practice, to more effective methods.

--------- Insert Figure 1 about here ---------

Regardless of which means for communicating evidence are adopted, it is clear to us that effective communication will require considerable attention to trustworthiness, to skill training, to creative presentations of findings, and to the use of a variety of modes of communication, including online ones, that practitioners may be more skilled in than academics are. Their use offers academics the possibility not only of conveying evidence, but of learning skills in communication as they do so.
References


