A STICKY, LEVERAGING, AND SCALABLE STRATEGY FOR HIGH-QUALITY CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE AND SCIENCE

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Can you imagine, three people walking in singin’ a bar of Alice’s Restaurant and walking out. They may think it’s an organization.

-Arlo Guthrie

As Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007) make all too clear in their “separate worlds” study, there is a gap between research and practice. Factoring in the other commentaries accompanying that study, readers must wonder whether “gap” is a tad understated. Since there is almost no evidence-informed management or management-informed evidence, more accurate terms are probably “chasm” and “fault line.” 

Chasm captures the vast distance in perspectives, interests, incentives, and priorities between organizational scientists and practitioners. Practitioners want their questions answered (now). The best evidence does not necessarily provide answers, and academics prefer to ask their own questions (in their own time). 

Fault line conveys the divisive tensions often moving practice and science in opposing directions. Consider, for instance, that mergers and acquisitions may be good for Wall Street and CEOs, but research indicates (Hitt, Hoskisson, Johnson, & Moesel, 1996) that they are not so great for many companies. Clearly, there’s a general absence of healthy connections between organizational science and practice—that’s the bad news.

The good news is that it is a solvable problem, if the research-practice connection is approached more systematically. It’s a change problem, dear colleagues. Let’s use what we know about managing change effectively to solve it.

DEVELOPING A CHANGE STRATEGY

We need a goal. (Gary Latham told me not to steal from him, but some things can’t be helped.) Let’s begin by reframing our chasm-shrinking task into a positive goal: building quality connections (i.e., respectful and mutually informative) between organizational science and practice. The “separate worlds” study and the commentaries on it illustrate a variety of forms such quality connections already take. We surely can and should form more scholar-practitioner research collaborations, conduct critical experiments in classes that practitioner-learners can confirm on the job (Latham, 2007), use indicators practitioners care about (e.g., cost/benefit analyses of service quality gains or severity-adjusted length-of-stay measures in hospital studies of improved caregiver communication, etc. [Cascio, 2007; Kazdin, 2006]), and cooperate with practitioner-oriented associations like the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) to build information channels and better-quality ties between individual practitioners and scientists (Cohen, 2007).

Encouraging many flowers to bloom, including more of the above varieties, makes good sense, given the infinite potential combinations of problem areas, research topics, organizational decisions, courses to be taught, and researchers, practitioners, and educators to engage them. OK, but the research-practice disconnect is sustained by a vast array of entrenched institutions—Wall Street, tenure committees, trade publications producing 35,000 plus business books in English (some of which are authored by erstwhile executives with first names like Neutron or Chainsaw), to name a few. Although ramping up the incidence of these research-practice collaborations would create some new connections, it is all still piecemeal. Let’s not forget, life is short. If we want to see these plants bloom, how about fertilizing them, too?

This is where change strategy comes in: What positive steps can we take to accelerate high-quality connections between practice and research and researchers and practitioners? We need interventions that can be leveraged to make existing efforts more effective and sufficiently “sticky” (Gladwell, 2000) to get past the fad stage, and scalable enough to engage sizeable numbers of scientists and practitioners over the array of research and practice domains. Cohen said it well: “We can’t keep nibbling at the corners of the problem or la-
menting that transfer is not taking place and pointing to one small contributing factor” (2007: 1018).

I propose an intervention that can act as a keystone to support other change-promoting efforts: building a long-term collaboration between practitioners and researchers focused upon a task that would feed other research-practice connections, identifying and disseminating evidence-based management knowledge. This intervention, taking its cue from but innovating beyond the Cochrane Collaboration (http://www.cochrane.org/index0.htm.) in health care, would be the task of our community’s own evidence-based management collaboration, a partnership (or one of many) among practitioners and scholars to promote effective knowledge transfer and further the development of quality ties. For now, let’s call it the Evidence-Based Management Collaboration (EBMC). I believe that this collaboration can become sticky (attracting more and more participants [Gladwell, 2000]), leveraging (feeding many other related initiatives including research-practitioner collaborations, practice-informed research, and new channels, formats, and devices to transfer knowledge between scholars and practitioners), and scalable (useful for numerous subdisciplines from human resources to supply change management, and contexts from health care to small business).

Think about this as a way of building scholar-practitioner relationships around a task. The purpose of building relationships around tasks is to create opportunities for people to accomplish something they value, bring them together with other diversely skilled folks motivated to do something that none can accomplish by themselves, and you just might get an energized community with the drive and staying power to get important stuff done. The task I propose to rally this community around would be to provide, maintain, and update online, user-friendly, plain language summaries of the practice principles that the best available research supports, while sharing information regarding their effective use as well as their limitations. A practitioner-scholar community built around the task of framing key questions of practical significance, identifying what we can confidently know, and developing effective ways to transfer that knowledge could be a powerful venue for change. This community would be a change in itself as well as a growth medium for higher-quality connections. (Note that one such collaborative, the Cochrane Collaboration in health care, operates in 90 countries and engages thousands of researchers and practitioners in developing, informing, and critiquing the information it provides.) Let’s provide large numbers of thoughtful practitioners and reflective scholars a way to convene around a stimulating and useful task.

The challenge that convenes an EBM community would be to develop and implement a readily accessible (online with user-friendly language, illustrations, pictures, and interactive capabilities), up-to-date source of the best available evidence suitably formulated for its particular end users (managers, consultants, trainers, educators, students, researchers, etc.). With knowledge interpretation and transfer as this community’s core tasks, both practitioner and academic perspectives must be respected and listened to carefully—perhaps a novel experience for us all. High-quality connections would be the community’s mission as well as its process. The product would be a highly visible, first-search site, accessible to the broad public, providing clear, up-to-date evidence to inform recurrent decisions in organizations.

WHAT WOULD AN EBM COLLABORATION DO?

In a nutshell, an EBMC would bring together researchers, educators, and practitioners to identify critical practice questions, ascertain what scientific research tells us about each question, and then deliver this information in ways that support its use. With its sights set on creating a sustainable, online access portal for organizational research that is relevant to practice, one of the Collaboration’s initial tasks in its design phase would be to work toward some consensus regarding how to interpret research findings. This consensus would address such matters as how studies differing in research methods (e.g., quantitative and qualitative data; cross-sectional and case studies, and field and lab experiments) can be combined to identify their points of convergence (strength and pattern of effects), scope of generalizability (locales or populations of observed effects), boundary conditions and limitations (understudied locales or populations), and counterindications (e.g., political issues compromising implementation). The Collaboration would then commission and/or conduct systematic reviews of bodies of organizational research relevant to practice. In time, corporations, consulting firms, and foundations might even sponsor systematic reviews on questions of special interest, subject to the Collaboration’s agreed-upon rules of evidence.

A systematic review summarizes scientific evidence relevant to a single critical question important to practice. Its purpose is to identify, appraise, select, and synthesize research findings in order to answer that question. This critical appraisal of pub-
lished and unpublished organizational and management research would draw from the full spectrum of methods, publications, outlets, and sources. Focused on organizational and management research from an array of fields, these reviews clearly would differ from those produced by other collaborations (e.g., Cochrane’s reviews emphasizing controlled medical trials). Instead, a management-oriented collaborative would formulate a problem statement to cut through the proliferation of constructs used to label similar phenomena. What are the effects of bonus pay? Leadership training? Mergers? Downsizing? A question would then be addressed by triangulating across the array of relevant research. Those domains with the strongest evidence and practical impact would then be subject to a knowledge transfer process to vet the evidence in ways that help users make well-informed decisions. For example, in the matter of bonus pay, knowledge transfer would address an array of questions users are likely to have, including these: When does bonus pay have positive effects? When is it ineffective? What forms might bonus pay take? How can this I put this information to use?

The Collaboration’s next critical task would be to develop effective ways to present evidence to end users. The “separate worlds” study makes the compelling case that practitioners aren’t getting the kinds of information that guide effective practice. It points out that the problem in some cases is not that scholars don’t agree on the evidence but that somehow current ways of presenting it aren’t sticky. Some of those who learn about GMA (general mental ability) in class or read about it in a textbook or article aren’t persuaded to act on it. Furthermore, as Cascio (2007) and Cohen (2007) made clear, those who do act may not find sufficient support to do so effectively. Where evidence implies actions that are unsupported politically (e.g., intelligence testing can lead to a knee-jerk “No!” from a company’s legal department, regardless of the actual legality of the practice), insights from case studies and user experiences can be incorporated to help identify alternative ways to act on the evidence. Useful practical knowledge accompanying the evidence might guide end users toward developing their own job-related interview questions or problem sets that tap relevant mental abilities. High-quality information, however well presented, is not enough. To translate information into action, procedural knowledge is needed. For some types of evidence-based principles, explicit how-to information can be provided (e.g., ways to develop job-related problem sets that tap mental abilities). Often, however, procedural knowledge cannot be conveyed explicitly, entailing instead process, guiding would-be users toward learning by doing, something that electronic and online knowledge systems often do poorly.

Facilitating procedural knowledge is the real knowledge transfer challenge. People may not understand or accept declarative knowledge (facts, such as the impact of intelligence on job performance) until they recognize how they might act on it. Helping people imagine how evidence actually can be used makes its applicability and appropriateness far more credible. The critical issue is to figure out how best to disseminate research evidence so that users learn what they can actually do to get the results they’re looking for. As Rynes and her colleagues suggested, if one goal of EBM is to help professionalize practitioners, we need to target their behavior, not just their knowledge.

Undertaking knowledge transfer in this fashion is a design task and needs to be approached as such (Boland & Collop, 2004). The knowledge transfer problem faced by organizational scientists and practitioners has long been an unrecognized stumbling block (Latham, 2007), and we need expert guidance in identifying how best to convey evidence-based management principles and practices.

Ideally, the search process itself should enable the active learning of users, providing them an actual experience with evidence-based practice (e.g., Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007; Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000). This would include prompts for diagnosis, problem formulation, consideration of alternatives, decision making, and evaluation of outcomes. This active practice of EBM is a step in the direction of making users more fad-resistant, better able to evaluate claims and evidence (cf. Abrahamson & Eisemann, 2001).

Active learning, as described by Langer (1989), involves being mindful of how real-world conditions affect the appropriateness of practices by cueing users to the conditional nature of all findings. For instance, setting specific challenging goals is generally appropriate, but in novel or highly uncertain situations, learning goals or general goals of the “do your best” variety may actually work better (Seijts & Latham, 2005; Wood, Mento, & Locke, 1987). Mindful awareness of how context matters is a critical aspect of acquiring expertise. (Check out Julia Child’s Mastering the Art of French Cooking for cues to the conditions that make for souffle success or failure, and you will see how experts impart procedural information in conditional ways.) Guidelines and cues that readily translate into action inevitably come with advice regarding preparation, timing, monitoring, and follow-up,
helping the user better anticipate what he or she might need to do to make a new practice work well. Lots of behaviors are simple in themselves (setting goals, communicating in the user’s own language). It is the context of their use that makes them difficult to execute. Importantly, guiding users to reflect on how evidence is applied can help in overcoming the “old news” problem, moving users’ thinking from “But we already set goals!” to “But we might not have done it right.”

WHAT WOULD THIS COLLABORATION ACCOMPLISH?

First and foremost, there would be a warranted source of real evidence that people could trust. The equivalent of a “Good Housekeeping guarantee” would come from the transparent process the community would use, the public presentation of the information relied upon, and the legitimacy extended by the associations supporting this enterprise (e.g., AOM and/or some of its divisions, SHRM).

A collaboration that bonds practice with science is itself a high-quality connection, reducing the separation between those conducting research and those positioned to implement it. Over time, as new areas for synthesis were added and previous ones updated, ongoing tasks and growing insight into how to transfer knowledge better could sustain this collaboration.

People from a variety of backgrounds can understand plain language summaries with special features designed to support their effective use (e.g., tips for and exemplars of success). (We might learn over time, of course, that users need to be segmented in some fashion to route them to content suited to their particular needs.) A related problem, no time to read, diminishes with access to more efficient, online information and search capabilities. Users can read when they know they need to and when they are confident that what they’ll find will be worthwhile: an online first page opening with a nugget-sized summary, and later pages, if search continues, offering depth and practical advice. The most useful information is quality information appearing exactly at the time it will be used. Online access provides information at the time users see a need for it, without requiring them to drop everything, wait for somebody to return their call, or read a book.

WHY WE WILL MAKE LITTLE PROGRESS UNLESS WE FORM AN EBM C

Effective knowledge transfer requires having a clear idea of what we know in the first place. A valuable by-product of an EBM C would be to bring the matter of what we do agree upon into our collective conversations. At present the incentives overwhelmingly encourage scholars to diverge. Rynes and her colleagues pointed out that the Harvard Business Review prizes novelty in what it publishes to the point of promoting construct proliferation (e.g., distinguishing “deep smarts” from “high general mental ability”). In fairness, the Academy of Management Review and Academy of Management Journal display some of the same problems, prizing new theory and concepts over systematic assessment of what existing research shows (cf. Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Rousseau, 2006). Scholars aren’t particularly experienced in consensus building. Collaboration is important to move our scholarship toward greater convergence with regard to what constitutes accumulated, clear, and useful scientific evidence in organizational science. Relatedly, we need to develop criteria for evaluating what we know in a manner appropriate to the various forms micro and macro organizational research takes.

Right now, it is just really difficult to figure out what the body of evidence says, even on many well-researched topics. Let’s say you are a staff person or manager interested in finding out whether it is more motivating to raise somebody’s salary or give that person a bonus. Even for a zealot with a passionate appreciation for the value of quality evidence, it’s going to be tough finding it. The relative motivational potential of salaries and bonuses isn’t a question most HR textbooks address, if such a book happens to be lying around. If you are computerinclined, a Google search will pull up lots of opinion essays in trade journals, but rarely a peer-reviewed study. Anyway, seldom have peer-reviewed studies pitted one form of compensation against another (see Kuvaa [2006] for an exception). Moreover, if any review articles actually exist on the topic, you won’t be able to find them easily or cheaply online unless you happen to have access to a university library and its links to peer-reviewed journals. You’d be better off calling up a former professor, hoping that person knows something about compensation. If you are lucky enough to call Barry Gerhart, Rob Heneman, Patrice Rousseau, or Sara Rynes, they can tell you what the evidence says. Get somebody else, and you might get a false or misleading answer (not all psychologists know the same literature, and not all HRM professors are experts in compensation). In truth, knowing what the evidence says isn’t difficult only for practitioners; scholars have a tough time, too. Using myself as an example, for years I have taught about two kinds of conflict observed in groups: task
conflict, dealing with how to solve a problem or what decision to make, and relational conflict, dealing with disputes based on communication style, values, and other individual differences. Until De Dreu and Weingart (2003) came along, I told my students that task conflict was constructive but relational conflict was dysfunctional. The De Dreu and Weingart meta-analysis challenged my take on the literature, demonstrating that both conflicts are dysfunctional. (But note, though this finding is clear from a scientific perspective and widely generalizable, translating it into evidence-based practices is no simple matter. To get a sense of the array of procedural knowledge that might be applied, try presenting this finding to experienced managers, group facilitators, consultants, or students and asking how they might go about using it.)

Now that the concept of evidence-based management has found its way into the popular press, scholars themselves might be advised to become a little less sanguine regarding what they assume the science says. One book, Pfeffer and Sutton’s (2006) *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense,* has done a lot to bring EBM to public attention. But anyone trying to quote scientific evidence without conducting a systematic review is risking embarrassment when the facts are assembled systematically. *Hard Facts* repeatedly asserts that the evidence says that pay is not a motivator. However, the body of research evidence on compensation seems to say otherwise (Rynes, Gerhart, & Park, 2005). Although people often say that pay is less important to them than other things (Rynes, Gerhart, & Minnette, 2004), research conducted largely outside of organizational psychology indicates that employees do indeed perform differently depending upon how they are compensated. If scholars have a tough time figuring out what the evidence says in the absence of systematic reviews, how much more difficult is it for textbook writers and educators who depend on researchers to tell them what the science says? Cohen (2007) advocated that practitioner education be more evidence-based. I hope that it is now apparent how daunting the task is for educators attempting to teach what organizational science finds, let alone keep themselves updated as the research base grows.

Organizational science competes in the marketplace for ideas against consultants whose job it is to sell solutions. Can science compete effectively? My answer is, yes, but... Yes, but only when the quality of our research evidence is made more evident to practitioners. I am sure that readers will agree that the evils of selling snake oil are in no way mitigated by the customer’s desire for it. Consultants provide a very effective conduit for ideas and their implementation. But without channels to the best available evidence, consultants will continue to be a baffle and not a conduit between organizational science and practice. Consultants are a channel to practitioners that organizational science doesn’t use or access well. One way of promoting consultants’ use of organizational science is to invite them into our collaborative community. An online source of EBM information could help to snake-oil-proof users as well as to underscore the qualifications of those evidence-based consultants aiding users seeking to implement EBM practices.

As a field, organizational science sees forces emerge periodically that redistribute research efforts; for instance, we saw such a force in concerns over lagging productivity gains in the late 1980s (Rousseau, 1997). Greater attention to synthesis can help our bottom-up efforts to gauge whether it is time to redirect research into more productive directions. Syntheses can be a way of monitoring research progress. They can help reduce unproductive construct proliferation by highlighting redundancy as well as revealing where discrete particular phenomena are being ignored or understudied. Still, I resonate with Chuck Hulin’s notion (cited in Latham [2007]) that it can take a while before truly powerful research evidence is recognized and acted upon. EBM initiatives are not intended to act as the science police, regulating what research is done. But many researchers, especially doctoral students and young scholars, struggle to find interesting and important research questions. The syntheses EBM promotes can help them make better-informed decisions.

CONCLUSION

In its foundational role of transferring knowledge between science and practice, the EBM Collaboration can function as a keystone, not only in the architectural sense of supporting other parts, but also as an essential element that in turn creates new functioning and structures promoting a more integrated system of organizational science and practice. Let’s bring the players to the table in sufficient numbers and meaningful enough ways to realize the potential Arlo Guthrie sang about: “Can you imagine, three people walking in singin’ a bar of ‘Alice’s Restaurant’ and walking out? They may think it’s an organization.” Can YOU imagine 50 people a day, I said 50 people a day, walking in singin’ a bar of EBM and walking out? Friends, they may think it’s a movement.
REFERENCES


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