International Public Management Journal

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To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/10967490903094087

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10967490903094087

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INVITED ESSAY

ALL ABOARD? EVIDENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT AND THE FUTURE OF MANAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP

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ABSTRACT: The research-practice gap has emerged as an acute problem in management scholars’ internal professional debates. Evidence-based management (EBM) has been proposed as a remedy, and it is gaining adherents. This article offers a critical examination of the EBM proposal and its justification. The proposal is found to be poorly conceived and justified. Therefore, a search for a different response to the same concerns is in order. The direction of search is to understand how existing scholarly practices offer advice to actors in managerial roles. While advice-giving scholarly practices are diverse and disconnected, a commonality is that they define design issues and offer value- and knowledge-based argumentation schemes for resolving them. An alternative to EBM can be envisioned: to strengthen the management field’s network of design-oriented approaches to advice-giving. By employing the unorthodox style of a dialogue, this article shows how common ground about EBM and its alternatives can be established among management scholars who identify with conflicting intellectual traditions.

ALL ABOARD THE EVIDENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT BANDWAGON? EBM AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO BRIDGING THE RESEARCH-PRACTICE GAP

There are several reasons why organization theorists, even scholars who believe that they have a duty to help managers bring sound theory into play, should think twice about joining the evidence-based management movement. First, its proponents
fundamentally misdiagnose the nature of the research-practice gap. Second, their prescription is little more than a loose analogy to evidence-based medicine, although like a lot of analogies it raises issues that are well worth considering. Nevertheless, it makes more sense to adopt and pursue existing scholarly practices, which try to deal with the management research-practice gap directly, if such an alternative can be found. Third, there is an alternative approach—a coherent network of design sciences—offering reasoned-based advice. Each of these points is pursued in this dialogue.

The leading business-school accrediting agency, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), issued a report in February 2008 recommending that schools be required to demonstrate the value of their faculties’ research by demonstrating its consequences in terms of practice improvements (AACSB 2008a). “Research is now reflected in nearly everything business schools do, so we must find better ways to demonstrate the impact of our contributions,” argued task-force chair Joseph A. Alutto of Ohio State University (AACSB 2008b). So far, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, its public administration counterpart, has not followed suit because, perhaps, research is less central to its members’ activities or, perhaps, the research-practice gap is smaller in public administration than in business-school based organization studies. Nevertheless, the administrators of the Research Excellence Framework in the U.K. have suggested that fields such as engineering, architecture, management, accounting, information technology, and public administration, which are supposed to solve practical problems (i.e., convert existing conditions into preferred ones), should be required to report on how the research they do influences practice.

Evidence-based management (EBM) has emerged as the leading mechanism for closing the research-practice gap and, indeed, as the master narrative for the study, teaching, and practice of management (Rousseau 2006; Pfeffer and Sutton 2006). This narrative goes more or less as follows:

Much managerial practice is, regrettably, guided by fads. Some is informed by casual benchmarking. Much is based on arbitrary attitudes of powerful people. In all these respects, the practice of management is far from evidence-based—and also frequently faulty. Meanwhile, back on campus, many hundreds, even thousands of academic researchers are generating mountains of knowledge about the interplay of markets, organizational practices, and managerial action. Hence, there is a knowledge-practice gap. In closing this gap, organization studies should imitate more advanced professionalization projects, including, foremost, evidence-based medicine. In advancing evidence-based management, academics and practitioners should translate social science evidence into practices. Doing so requires, among other things, changing management education, so that students come to appreciate and scrutinize social science evidence about human behavior in organizations—and see its direct implications for principles of practice. Beyond this, communication barriers need to be overcome, using any number of techniques, so that managerial decision-making becomes less arbitrary, more reflective, and more effective.
Momentum behind EBM is building rapidly. Since we believe that the ends sought by EBM movement are eminently worthwhile, even if the means are not nearly so clear, it makes good sense to consider this argument. Public management scholars will gain insight, if only into their own views, by giving the EBM position a close look and a hard think.

Having studied the recent statements and exchanges on EBM, we find ourselves less than fully swayed by the position’s diagnosis and proposed remedy. Nevertheless, this article is not meant as a definitive critical examination of EBM. Rather, it introduces a range of responses to the EBM position, which might be considered along the way towards crafting a delimiting argument. As the range of responses would be tedious to present in the form of an essay, we have decided to perform the communicative function by employing the literary device of a play involving three characters engaged in an informal dialogue.

**Time and Place:** Early spring 2009 at the close of an academic workshop on evidence-based management held somewhere on the Mediterranean. The action takes place during the late afternoon at the conference hotel on a terrace overlooking the water.

**Scene:** The stage is bare, the set abstract. The characters, Pat, Sandy, and Michel, sit at around a small table, overlooking the sea.

Sandy: Nice place. Here’s to the leisure of the theory class (lifts glass, others chuckle and do likewise).

Pat: I’m glad we came here: of course, the main benefit is to learn why we should adopt evidence-based management.

Sandy: I agree! I like the question of how can we accelerate the growth of high-quality relations “between research and practice and between researchers and practitioners?” (Rousseau 2007, 1037) These questions are plainly worth serious discussion.

Michel: Absolutely. So let’s have a serious conversation.

Pat: I am somewhat confused here. “Evidence-based management” is one thing; reducing the gap between management theory and the world of practice or developing “useful knowledge” seems like something else. Please clarify.

Michel: I quite agree. Indeed, isn’t that really the crux of the issue? The proponents of EBM argue that by imitating more advanced professionalization projects, including, foremost, evidence-based medicine, we can close the knowledge-practice gap. While we can agree that scholars have a duty to help managers bring sound theory into play, I think students of public management would be ill-advised to join the evidence-based management movement, not only because the research-practice gap is arguably smaller in public administration than in
organization studies, but also because EBM’s proponents fundamentally misdiagnose the nature of this gap, which derives from the hypothesis-driven, quantitative, and reductionist nature of most organizational studies. These qualities almost necessarily render it irrelevant, in part because research on variables that are amenable to quantitative research—organizational architecture, routines, culture, values, etc.—are not easily shaped, and research on them produces little or nothing in the way of useful advice for the workaday world, which requires a focus on interpretation, sensemaking, and doing. I don’t see how pursuing EBM would lead to useful heuristic arguments about the conduct of public enterprise.

Moreover, EBM’s prescription is little more than a loose analogy to evidence-based medicine. Most disciplinary social science research is like biology or physiology—it is concerned with how things work. Management is like medicine in that it is concerned with making things work better. The problem with the analogy is that management academics, unlike medical researchers, are not practitioners. We don’t make things better. We give advice. So I think the question is how do we make the advice we give helpful? Arguably, there are two research paths that will allow us to give more helpful advice. Both require us to understand better what it is that public managers do and how. Consequently, both look a lot like reverse engineering, both require a lot of creative extrapolation, and both require us to get out more.

First, we can look for intellectual artifacts in other practical disciplines that have been found useful and show how they would work in government. That was the main thrust of NPM—ransacking the business disciplines to find useful artifacts that could be applied in government. The problem with this approach is that the most useful artifacts found in the business disciplines are from financial economics, accounting and managerial control, and marketing. One reason for the academic disenchantment with NPM is that these disciplines address concerns that are relatively unimportant to students of public management. Second, we can look for intellectual artifacts in practice. Careful extrapolation from practice would help our students and reflective practitioners to make sense of the situations they face, to understand how events
shape conditions, and individual and collective actions influence outcomes.

Pat: What? Are you nuts? Hypothesis-driven, quantitative research is precisely what we need more of. The problem with most public management research is that its evidentiary base is far too weak. Much of it is insufficiently rigorous and even the best of it is rarely cumulative (Kelman 2005).

Sandy: Michel, it sounds to me like your image of useful advice for the workaday world is about conduct, a sort of Harvard Business School or Mark Moore casuistical, professional ethics approach to engaged scholarship. Pat, you are advocating more of a scientific management approach. My own position has more in common with the latter than with the former. Besides, I certainly don’t agree with the statement that the research-practice gap derives from the hypothesis-driven, quantitative nature of most organizational research. The research-practice gap is equally large in, for example, the sensemaking literature, which uses narrative methods.

The advice we give must be evidence based, but it must also be useful. It seems to me that Rousseau (2007, 1038) is on the right track when she says that we need to build a “practitioner-scholar community . . . around the task of framing the key questions of practical significance, identifying what we can confidently know, and developing effective ways to transfer that knowledge.” This needs to be “an energized community with the drive and staying power to get important stuff done” (Rousseau 2007, 1038). She further argues (2006, 267) that management scholars have in the past underestimated “the investment in collective capabilities” needed to learn how to design and enact effective organizational practices, treating it as if it were merely a training issue. What we really need, she argues, are “knowledge-sharing networks composed of educators, researchers, and manager/practitioners to help create and disseminate management-oriented research summaries and practices that best evidence supports.”

Pat: That answers the “what to do” question, but it doesn’t say “how to do it.” I don’t see how academics could build such a community? Can they?

Sandy: Elsewhere, Rousseau and a colleague, Sharon McCarthy (2007, 91), acknowledge that they do not have an answer to what you call the “how to do it” question. Instead, they offer what they call a roadmap:

Creating communities committed to translating evidence into its implications for practice is critical to building consensus on what constitutes best evidence and its effective application. Thoughtful use of design processes is required to create a truly
effective community out of management education’s disparate constituencies.

Nevertheless, she offers some reasonable suggestions in her presidential address to the Academy of Management. The first of these is showing practitioners “how they can get the results they’re looking for” (Rousseau 2007, 1038). This means providing them with procedural, contextual information, which, she says is something that management researchers do not do enough of now. Her second suggestion is sponsoring “face-to-face meetings to promote community building, commitment, and learning” (2006, 267).

Pat: Sounds like building castles in the air to me. We are implicitly asked to set aside our reservations about the practicability and workability of building knowledge-sharing networks composed of educators, researchers, and manager/practitioners because one can cite cases in which managers, who knew some theory, did something smart. It is ironic that a movement that calls itself evidence-based would settle for such weak evidence.

Michel: I like your sense of irony, Pat. But if we look into her argument more deeply, we can see a bigger problem. More precisely, her illustrative example has to do with the link between the germ theory of disease and the practice of asepsis. This is an interesting case, because evidence that antiseptic practices worked actually preceded the development of germ theory. Physicians didn’t adopt them widely, however, until the scientific community accepted germ theory. Nevertheless, people are not bacteria, and organizations are not autoclaves. Given the differences between physical/biological and behavioral/social processes and their analysis, I would claim that this is at best an imperfect analogy.

Sandy: Yes, but autoclaves didn’t make the decision to adopt these practices, people did. So isn’t the analogy OK?

Michel: There is also a question about the social organization of knowledge, as Rousseau aptly points out: actors in clinical medicine receive their certification in large part by their professions, whereas professionalization is muted when it comes to public managers.

Pat: There’s another problem. Remember the three values by which Rousseau defines good managerial decision making—non-arbitrary, reflective, and effective. These qualities are not entirely consistent. Consider the value of making decisions less arbitrary. The most prevalent social machinery for making decisions less arbitrary is machine bureaucracy, which operates by having one part of an organization promulgate procedural and substantive norms for application by those charged with doing administrative
or managerial work (Mintzberg 1979). Under bureaucracy, administrators cannot be entirely reflective, since they are explicitly disempowered from making a decision on an “all things considered” basis. Therefore, we should not think it likely that arbitrariness can be eliminated without sacrificing some reflectiveness. The problem with managerial decision making isn’t simply a matter of ignorance, but rather the inherent difficulty of satisfying multiple, somewhat contradictory conceptions of the features of good decision making (Mashaw 1983). As academics, our first responsibility is to good research; our job is to understand the world, not to change it.

Michel: No, our job is to change the world—for the better. Nevertheless, I concur with your claim that the real problem isn’t ignorance, but in a different way. Organizations are colonized by groups of functional experts—operators, financial managers, and personnel specialists—each with their own collective practices, including argumentation schemes, canons of relevance regarding information as evidence, and deeply embedded values and other premises. Each thinks it is practicing evidence-based management. It’s somewhat naive to think that all of these functional perspectives can be easily reconciled or even integrated. The problem for general management, if perhaps not for bureaucratic administration, is, therefore, the plurality of schemes for EBM. The problem for managers—though not necessarily for functional specialists—is to summon the wisdom needed to make sense of the varied and conflicting advice they encounter, a point made with great clarity by some advocates of EBM (e.g., Pfeffer and Sutton 2006).

Sandy: I wondered about that, too. All right, let’s go forward tonight with reservations about the analogy from evidence-based medicine. But does her argument seem to make sense anyway? Surely she is on about something important: management research is weakly linked to practice—as Rousseau (2006, 257) says, “Research findings don’t appear to have transferred well to the workplace. Managers continue to rely largely on personal experience, to the exclusion of more systematic knowledge.”

Pat: That is what I like about EBM. Its proponents propose the following premise: the primary cause of deficient management practice is practitioners’ ignorance of well-founded principles of good practice. This implies that the way to improve practice is to increase practitioner knowledge of good theories. Increasing practitioner knowledge of good theories is something management theorists are disposed to do. Indeed, that’s what I like to think we are doing now.

Michel: Beware of seductive theories, Pat. It’s fine for managers to acquire more theory, but I doubt that this is a sensible frame
for the issue. The problem is that evidence-based management conveys a faulty image of reason in human affairs. It commits
the elementary error of conflating theoretical and practical reason! (Tsoukas 1996; Tsoukas and Cummings 1997) Where
are Aristotle or Kant when you really need them?

Sandy: I think we need them now. What are you talking about?

Michel: Glad that you asked. Theoretical reason tries to assess the way
things are. Practical reason decides how the world should be
and what individuals should do. Theoretical reasoning and prac-
tical reasoning are different intellectual practices, with their own
purposes, standards, and skills. Theoretical reasoning offers rea-
sions for action, but such reasons are never conclusive: for one
thing, resolving a practical question requires choosing a goal or
accepting norms that can be used to discern appropriate action.
Rousseau’s depiction of EBM glosses over this distinction.

Pat: But isn’t the normative criterion relatively straightforward?
Maximizing organizational performance?

Michel: You aren’t really that naïve? I doubt they read much Aristotle at
Carnegie Mellon, where Rousseau teaches: the early Herbert
Simon might have had him banned. But I expect better of you two.

Sandy: I see where you’re coming from. I can appreciate the distinction
between practical and theoretical reasoning. Granted it’s not as
simple as Pat makes it out to be. You need to note that normative
criteria are more complicated, particularly in government organiza-
tions, where process is as important as results and so are the identities
of winners and losers. But I don’t think you are being fair to
Rousseau; perhaps you’re just set off by the name “evidence-based
management” and by the analogy to evidence-based medicine.
Michel, are you sure you’re not simply allergic to her language?

Michel: Fair question, Sandy. But look at Rousseau’s opening example in
her presidential address to the Academy of Management. She
said: “In this example, a principle (human beings can process only
a limited amount of information) is translated into a practice
(provide feedback on a small set of critical performance indica-
tors using terms people readily understand).” When she proposes
that researchers, educators, and managers translate principles
governing human behavior and organizational processes into
more effective management practice, she is, in my opinion, mak-
ing the word “translation” do rather too much work. She is not
alerting people to the need to practice good judgment about prac-
tical questions. She is also desensitizing readers about the need to
regard any practice-principle as insufficient as a basis for action in
particular circumstances. In this regard, by the way, her position
is wildly different from Pfeffer and Sutton’s book (2006), which
also seeks, it seems, to put the EBM gas pedal to the floor.
Sandy: I hadn’t realized there were such different views within EBM. What does Pfeffer say?

Pat: Michel has already ruled out Pfeffer’s argument as irrelevant to this conversation, since it is addressed more to practitioners than to researchers and teachers. For him, the question isn’t whether or not social science theory has been crafted in a way to provide useful advice, but whether and to what extent anyone is actually implementing that advice. Evidently, he thinks things would be OK if practitioners just paid more attention to the evidence. This is a position with which I am inclined to agree.

Sandy: Getting back to Rousseau, then, what’s wrong with her translation story about performance feedback? Can you explain a bit better what you mean, Michel, by good judgment? Are you saying that it is more than understanding that there are contingencies when the general principle may or may not apply? I doubt that any of us have trouble with that notion.

Michel: As presented, her discussion suggests that managers should follow the practice-principle of providing feedback on a small set of indicators without reservation, because it follows directly from the descriptive theory-principle about limited individual information processing capacity. Indeed, its context implies that the case for a practice-principle is open and shut, provided one recognizes the validity of the factual-principle. However, it is not in the nature of practical syllogisms that conclusions are beyond questioning (unless they become so conventional that they become part of culture). This practical syllogism, in particular, should not be regarded as compelling. One issue is whether the premise is precise enough to be accepted as true for purposes of this discussion. It isn’t, which is the point Pat was getting at. I would merely add that the principle of the practice builds in an altogether too convenient assumption: that a small set of “critical performance indicators” exists. That certain indicators can be objectively identified as critical is a built-in premise. The EBM approach is philosophically naïve. It ignores the “tricks of the trade” involved in deciding how to use advice directed at actors facing “typical” situations, when one is actually situated within a particular situation (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988).

Pat: I get the uneasy sense that you think that making practical judgments is all that we should be doing as management researchers. As Hulin (2001, cited in Latham 2007, 1027) eloquently argues, the value of our research does not depend only or perhaps even primarily upon its immediate, practical utility. Beauty, elegance, and surprise all matter. Truth matters most of all, but truths are often unwelcome to academics and practitioners alike. In any case, it is ultimately up to the practitioner, not the researcher, to
translate good theory into interventions that solve concrete problems. That is not really something we can do for them. Let me give you an example of what I think is important. The hottest topic in public administration is performance measurement and management. Most of what I see in public administration does little more than report on who is doing what, occasionally how. In contrast, Locke and Latham (2002) carefully summarize what is known about goal setting. They explain the mechanisms through which goals influence people’s actions and organizational outcomes. They also show the limits of goal-setting theory, as well as its evidentiary basis and practical utility. This is research, which is both evidence-based and relevant to the practice of performance measurement and management. That is what we ought to be doing.

Sandy: Both of you are right in thinking that the moral agents for managerial decision making are managers, and that they have to take responsibility for their own conduct. You’re also right that practical reasoning should take account of what can be known to be true about the causal sources of events. I agree that much research effort should be given over to theoretical reasoning.

Pat: So now I am somewhat unclear why you are attracted to Rousseau’s position on EBM. Why aren’t you more of a research purist?

Sandy: We three all teach in professional schools, so to a degree we are morally obligated to help our students achieve intellectual control over the crafting of practice. It would be nice, too, if managers practiced more what we preach.

Michel: I think these are points of common ground among us. Anyone want to order another bottle of wine?

Sandy: We agree that Rousseau’s topic concerns us. So why are we not making much headway in our conversation here? We’ve seen that Michel wants to bring management back towards humanistic roots in practical reasoning, where theoretical reason plays a very specific kind of supporting role. This makes Pat uncomfortable. Michel, why don’t you try to make your points in a way that attracts rather than repels him?

Pat: For the sake of dialogue, please do!

Michel: Glad to see you’re catching on, Pat. Perhaps it is the wine and the semi-tropical environs.

Sandy: Is that in the spirit of dialogue, Michel?

Michel: I guess not. I take it back, Sandy. Can we agree that propositions such as “The human brain’s short term memory is limited” are theoretical in nature? Remember the distinction between theoretical reason, which tries to assess the way things are, and practical reason, which decides how the world should be and what individuals should do. So what should we call propositions such as, “A performance management system should report on critical
performance indicators”? How about if we call the latter “advice.” It is not specific advice; it is what legal theorists call prescriptive generalizations or rules of thumb. Still, it is advice, not truth. The field of management, including in professional school sites, involves constructing, proposing, communicating, and assessing advice. We have reason to think that advice is better when it is warranted by, or at least not contradicted by, theoretical knowledge. Consequently, we need to engage in a form of generalized advice giving, while recognizing that any advice can be annulled: the rules should be given limited normative force; advice should rest on argument based, in part, on a theoretical understanding.

Pat: That works a bit better for me than the course on Aristotle 101. But what would such an approach to management actually look like?

Michel: I see it in my mind’s eye, but I can’t readily point to an exemplar.

Sandy: That’s because your prejudices are getting the best of you, Michel. A striking exemplar is Porter’s book, *Competitive Advantage* (1985). The text offers advice on a number of nested topics related to setting business strategy. The advice is organized in a cascading way. For instance, advice about how to specify the desired functionality of the value chain is contingent on prior resolution of what “generic strategy” (e.g., price leadership and differentiation) is to be implemented.

Michel: Of course I know what Porter wrote. But what makes it an exemplar of reason-based management? I never had thought of Porter in that light before; I always considered him an anti-humanist.

Sandy: No, that makes him an exemplar of evidence-based management. You are using “humanist” in a different way from how you used it earlier, in the practical reasoning sense. That’s what I meant when I said your prejudices are getting the best of you.

Michel: Sorry. My bad.

Pat: What you’re saying, Sandy, is consistent with the way Porter talks about his work. He says it is not an economic theory, it’s a framework. I suppose Michel would call it advice, but that means something similar to a framework in Porter’s sense. You are right; this example helps me understand the concept. Persuade me that it is a good example.

Sandy: I think it serves as a good example, because a manager can fairly confidently construct an exegesis of Porter’s argument (Walton 2006), which includes his advice and the different sorts of reasons on which it is based. One kind of reason is knowledge about how an organization’s position within its industry governs its economic performance. Apart from knowledge, Porter bases his argument on normative reasons. For instance, Porter’s advice is explicitly predicated on the view that managers should aim to achieve
profitability, as distinct from, say, revenue growth. In addition, the advice is predicated on the normative view that managers are responsible for how the business performs economically over the course of an indefinite number of years. Because the text is explicit about both the knowledge and normative claims that warrant the advice provided, Porter’s text is a particularly good example of an evidence-based approach to advice-giving.

Pat: Sandy, of course, you realize that Porter’s advice has been roundly criticized by economists and business strategists? Some say the advice is ill-suited to conditions of Schumpeterian competition. Some say that one should assess the unique properties of a business’s value chain configuration before addressing the issue of positioning. Organizational researchers complain that it is unrealistic to think that the value chain can readily be reconfigured to achieve the performance characteristics that the strategy demands. Why should I accept it as a good example of advice?

Michel: Let me come to Sandy’s defense. The example works well precisely because the criticisms are so extensive and to-the-point. This record of criticism would seem to indicate the accessibility of the advice and argumentation to exegesis, which is a marker of being reason-based.

Pat: Maybe I missed something earlier, but suddenly this expression “reason-based” is appearing in every other sentence. I don’t recall it having been discussed earlier.

Sandy: That’s just Michel’s unwillingness to accept the term evidence-based.

Michel: Now you aren’t playing fair. Let’s say we are concerned with attaining intellectual mastery of the functionality and design of situated organizational practices. Situated organizational practices should be reason-based; that can mean evidence-based, but reason-based is more of an Aristotelian concept. Reason-based organizational practices must be negotiated within organizations located in larger ecosystems of practice. I would observe in passing that there are well-developed argumentation schemes (Walton 1996; Hood and Jackson 1991) that should inform the process of achieving reason-based organizational practice.

Pat: Did you just make that up?

Michel: Pretty much, but it was inspired by reading parts of Etienne Wenger’s Communities of Practice book (1998), the one he wrote before becoming a McKinsey consultant. “Reason-based” comprehends both theoretical reasoning and practical reasoning. It is both broader and different.

Pat: Okay, Michel, I accept that. Sandy, go ahead and use Porter as an example. Is there anything else you’d like to say about how it is an example of advice-giving to managers?
Sandy: Yes, I’d like to say something more about what Porter envisions as the nature and demands of managerial practice, at least when managers set strategy, and how such conception of practice shapes the way Porter gives advice. The demands of practice include conceiving the organization’s logic.

Pat: By “logic” do you mean goal or goals? Explain.

Sandy: Yes. In this instance, I was thinking of the organization’s value proposition, the logic of achieving a sustainable competitive advantage and specifying a set of policies and practices to implement that logic.

Pat: So this is part of what you mean about giving advice, the idea that practical reasoning involves normative premises? I can certainly accept that.

Sandy: Yes, the advice that Porter gives is about how to design a competitive strategy, including its implementing elements. Porter’s advice is geared to helping managers design business strategy in a more deliberate and reasoned way than might otherwise occur.

Michel: Advice helps people to deliberate about design issues. I like that. Are you suggesting that Porter is an example of this kind of advice-giving? This suggestion isn’t immediately obvious. Porter’s voice seems rather strenuously didactic, doesn’t it?

Sandy: It’s a fair statement about the tone. Remember, he is a Harvard professor. But don’t let the didactic tone get in the way of seeing the attractive conceptual form of the advice.

Michel: All right—carry on, then.

Pat: Why design issues? Where did that come from, Michel?

Michel: Oh, that comes from the later Simon in his Sciences of the Artificial (1996), where he described problem solving as designing assemblies of actions, including the development and utilization of artifacts or artifices, which would transform existing conditions into preferred conditions. The nub of Simon’s proposal was that research and pedagogy should provide intellectual control over the challenge of designing change mechanisms and artifacts. The production and teaching of this kind of knowing would help human agents (including practitioners) make the most of their cognitive capabilities when facing practical challenges. Such would be the purpose of a plurality of “design sciences” or, equivalently, “sciences of the artificial.” Simon assigned primary responsibility for cultivating these several design sciences to professional schools. According to Simon: “Design . . . is the core of all professional training; it is the principal mark that distinguishes the professions from the sciences. Schools of engineering, as well as schools of architecture, business, education, law, and medicine, are all centrally concerned with the process of design” (Simon 1996, 111). This line of reasoning seems...
particularly relevant to the topic at hand. Anyway, I like the term “design issue.”

Pat: Then in your terms, Michel, we might say that for each design issue, such as what generic strategy to choose, Porter offers a reason-based argumentation scheme (Walton 1996). Such schemes help with the creation and especially the justification of answers to design issues, but they do not prescribe any single resolution. His case-based examples show how the argumentation schemes work in relation to specific choices on given issues. In all of these respects, Porter’s book represents a form of advice-giving matched to the image of strategy setting as a design activity.

Michel: Very good, Pat.

Pat: Thanks, Sandy. I’m not as dumb as I look.

Sandy: I think we may be losing track of our discussion of Rousseau. Where are we?

Pat: One thing we can say is that EBM seems to be a problematic point of departure for dealing with the issues that rightly concern our field. Here are some reasons why.

Sandy: I’m all ears.

Pat: First of all, let’s say what we agree with. I am persuaded that the use of the concept of advice—its formulation and use—is quite helpful. Academic management talk can include giving advice. In a way, advice—defined as prescriptive generalizations, backed up by justificatory argument—is some of what needs to be taught in management education. I can buy that too. Students need to be able to assess advice. That requires practical reasoning skills. Justificatory argument about prescriptive generalizations in management should include presumptions about the causes of events. Would-be managers therefore need to acquire some of the knowledge and intellectual culture they will need to assess theoretical claims about the causes of events. But the main reason for doing so is that they can critically assess—reject or go beyond—the torrent of advice that they will encounter on the job (not to mention in the airport bookstore). This is a different story than that told by Rousseau. Perhaps it is just a different version of the same story. Or something in between.

Sandy: Not sure I could repeat what you just said, but I don’t have any specific reservation about it. Continue, then.

Pat: OK, one of my problems with Rousseau is that the speech provides an inadequate analytic structure to grapple with the topic you identified at the outset: reducing the gap between management theory and the world of practice. Any analytic structure for a discussion of the relation between management research and practice should take the ramifications of the division of labor into account, even if we go no further than research and teaching,
learning, and managing. Accordingly, a better analytic structure would confront at least three related but distinct issues: (1) How should experts inside and outside the academy achieve analytic (cause-effect) insight into the processes relevant to management? (2) How should experts give advice to managers? (3) How should managers utilize expert advice when they are engaged in practice? Those are discrete questions and Rousseau doesn’t begin to answer them.

Sandy: I’m sure the discussion will get more complicated when people express their point of view on what forms advice should take, but putting it that way does provide a nice point of departure. Is there anything else to mention about your problems with EBM?

Michel: The term is problematic. Perhaps “reasoning-based managerial practice” is a better term than EBM. This formulation will perhaps appeal to a wide audience. It also leaves aside the analogy to evidence-based medicine. Think about how clinical training works in medicine. It’s based on the principle of show the student how to do something, have them do it, and then have them teach someone else how to do it. The difference between our pedagogy and theirs illustrates the fundamental weakness of the analogy. Pat and I agree that we must take the distinction between research and teaching, learning, and managing into account in any discussion of the relation between management research and practice, although we see the issue differently.

Sandy: We know how you feel about the analogy and the term. Do we have to debate that point further? It’s getting late—and I don’t want my dinner to be these nuts we’ve been eating.

Pat: We can worry about the name later. Another problem with Rousseau is that she seems ignorant of the recent history of managerial scholarship, at least outside OB/HRM. You persuade me that Porter is a good example of effective advice giving. Moreover, his advice reflects sound analytic (cause-effect) insight into the processes relevant to management. It properly reflects the division of labor between researching and doing. If I understand correctly what you are saying, it occurs to me that the work on negotiation (e.g. Lax and Sebenius 1986) is an equally good example.

Sandy: Okay, Pat, you seem to be hoisting me on my own petard. Go ahead, run up the score.

Pat: The negotiation literature gives advice on how to design the conduct of actors who recognize that the satisfaction of their own interests depends on the conduct of other actors who cannot, as a practical matter, be commanded to act in a certain way. Much of the advice is predicated on the prudent assumption that negotiating counterparts will be looking for opportunities
to act to satisfy and protect their own interests. These reasons for the advice are well rooted in business (and political) culture. The advice also—and crucially—reflects a body of knowledge about social psychology, such as the effects of anchored beliefs about the interactional field in which the action of negotiation takes place. This knowledge plays the role of reasons for the advice given about negotiating. I might add that the form of advice is, to use Michel’s term, design-oriented. That is, it provides argumentation schemes to structure thinking about a variety of issues that require actors to create made-to-measure, possibly ingenious ways to shape events through which they could attain their goals. The argumentation schemes sometimes include trade-offs or dilemmas—for instance, between conduct that might lead to agreement on an integrated solution but that could also provide counterpart negotiators with information that could be used to exploit their bargaining position (Lax and Sebenius 1986).

Sandy: I hear what you are you’re saying, Pat. You are saying that Rousseau ignores a lot of the thought on how we ought to give advice to managers. I don’t disagree. She ignores the whole field of public management, for example, with its interesting recent discussions of how to provide advice on the basis of close analysis of the development and operation of practices (Bardach 2004). And closer to OB, she ignores Karl Weick’s (2001; 1995) approach to case analysis as a source of understanding and advice about the management of high reliability systems. But that isn’t fundamental criticism of her position, which is that our research should be useful, is it?

Michel: You are missing Pat’s point about the division of labor. I don’t necessarily agree with his conclusions or examples, but he’s saying that she doesn’t appreciate the implications of the division of labor in management studies, perhaps because her focus is excessively narrow. I won’t say anything more about the analogy to evidence-based medicine, but to my mind her failure to respect the difference between what medical researchers do and what organizational researchers do is evidence of that myopia.

Pat: Let me suggest another literature that might serve as a useful point of focus for reflection on scholarly practices that seek to bridge the research-practice gap—namely, the social science end of information systems research. A common topic is how to design automated calculative devices—systems of hardware and software, to put it simply—for organizationally structured human activity. The form of advice is about how to design artifacts and the practices they reflect, so that they operate well with respect to specified performance characteristics (Orlikowski and Barley 2001;
Kallinikos 2002). This point is interesting because it suggests that advice is used to orient how managers think about designing workable systems. The information systems research literature is quite self-conscious about giving advice in a form that is useful for managing design activities within organizational contexts.

Sandy: That’s interesting. I don’t know anything about information systems research. What should I know about it?

Pat: We don’t have time to answer that question in any detail. Let’s just take the example from the informatics/systemics literature cited in the AACSB report on research impact (AACSB 2008a, 19), Malhotra’s research, which the AACSB task force claims has helped many organizations to understand why their knowledge management systems succeed or fail. This article (Malhotra 2004) explicitly identifies a set of enablers and constraints that can be put into practical application, even when contextual differences, communication gaps, and misinterpretations are likely. Further, Malhotra’s advice is given in a form that is readily accessible to practicing managers. This article wouldn’t be out of place in Public Administration Review or Harvard Business Review, were it more elegantly drafted. However, I would stipulate that it wouldn’t be very useful for managing design activities within an organizational context, if it didn’t reflect serious research done by Malhotra and Gelletta (2005) on “the effects of user commitment on volitional systems acceptance and usage behavior.” This research provides the warrants and qualifiers underlying his practitioner oriented argumentation scheme. In Malhotra’s case a single expert achieved analytic (cause-effect) insight into processes relevant to management and effectively translated that analytic insight into useful advice, but not everyone can do that. Most of us have a comparative advantage in doing one thing or the other.

Sandy: Sounds to me like information systems researchers are doing what Rousseau says needs to be done: Build “practitioner-scholar community . . . around the task of framing the key questions of practical significance, identifying what we can confidently know, and developing effective ways to transfer that knowledge.”

Pat: Well, maybe.

Sandy: But I will grant that by examining these scholarly practices, we should be able to sharpen our understanding of advice-giving. What we need to look into is what kinds of reasons different streams of research give for the advice they have on offer.

Pat: I’d buy that.

Michel: This is a point of agreement.

Sandy: Hold that thought. It might even help us find common ground with Rousseau.
Pat: How so?

Sandy: Rousseau argues that using evidence requires learning a “meta-skill”—knowing how to turn good theories into practical solutions. In turn she observes (2006, 266–267) that “a solution-oriented approach to evidence use is comparable to product design, where end users and knowledgeable others... jointly participate in specifying its features and functionality” and where designers experiment with alternative solutions and adapt them to the setting in which the product will be used. Hence, she concludes that this metaskill primarily involves the acquisition of procedural design know-how (266).

Pat: Does she say how we can help our students learn this “metaskill”?

Sandy: Aside from following the roadmap mentioned above to its prescribed destinations? No.

Pat: I am inclined to argue that she is engaging in mystification when she talks about “metaskills.” But that shouldn’t stop us from reflecting on the kind of literature we talked about tonight as a way of finding a way forward on which we, at least, could agree!

Sandy: Absolutely. I would say that learning how to effect practice improvements depends upon engaging researchers and practitioners in analyzing why some academic research influences practice and the rest does not and, then, feeding the product of this process back into the larger pool of knowledge. Further, collective learning from similarities and differences requires benchmarks, structured by a common set of expectations about what constitutes a good result. Absent such benchmarks, we cannot distinguish success from failure, let alone link practice improvements to how we do research or give advice. Finally, these institutional learning efforts must be sustained over time if they are to affect materially what academic researchers do and how they do what they do. I don’t think Rousseau would argue with that.

Michel: I’d like to think that she is getting at something important with her introduction of the concept of design. Maybe the argument is that management should become something of a design science.

Pat: My appetite for dinner is greater than my appetite to know what a design science is, but even so, what are you talking about?

Michel: Design science (Romme 2003) is an intellectual activity that ideally provides usable knowledge and guidance to actors on how to transform existing into preferred conditions. I’d like to propose this as a topic for our next long discussion. Let’s consider whether there’s enough life in the idea of management as a design science so that it can compete with EBM as an approach to closing the research-practice gap. We’ve seen that a number of disparate management literatures operate implicitly as sciences of design. Each one envisons managerial activity as deliberating about
design issues involving policies, practices, artifacts, or actions. Each one provides advice about how to pose and think through those issues. The advice given is more about what argumentation schemes to use in working towards a thoughtful and reasoned solution than about what sorts of specific action or practices are desirable, workable, practical, and the like.

We haven’t said much about your third question: How should managers utilize expert advice when they are engaged in practice? I see advice following as creative action and problem solving, not as alignment of conduct with professional or expert standards.

Therefore, the form advice giving should take is laying out practical arguments about what design issues to recognize as well as what argumentation schemes to use when addressing them. Perhaps, then, the field of management could evolve into a fairly coherent network of sciences of design providing knowledge-and reason-based advice.

I know I’ve got some work to do before the next conference!

Sandy: Yes, I think we’ve got an opportunity to put forward a positive proposal, not just a critique of EBM.

Pat: That was nice, friends. I’ll get the bill, and let’s move on.

REFERENCES


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