A speculative perspective on the transfer of behavioral science findings to the workplace: “The times they are a-changin’”

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The issue of transfer of learning bedeviled the behavioral sciences throughout the 20th century. In light of laboratory experiments, Thorndike and Woodworth (1901) advocated transfer of learning based on identical elements, McGehee and Thayer (1961) proposed transfer on the basis of principles, and Ellis (1965) emphasized the importance of stimulus variability. In their review of this literature, Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) concluded that solutions based primarily on findings from experimental psychology have slowed rather than advanced transfer of training in work settings because they focus only on the period of knowledge and skill acquisition that occurs during the training process itself. In the final decade of the 20th century, Latham and Seijts (1997a) proposed the value of focusing on posttraining interventions to increase the probability of employees applying what they learned during training to their jobs, especially interventions adopted from clinical psychology (e.g., Latham & Heslin, 2003; Morin & Latham, 2000).

At the dawn of the 21st century, the issue of transfer of knowledge has captured the attention of several behavioral scientists. This issue is more complex than the transfer of learning in a laboratory or the transfer of training to a job. The problem of transfer of knowledge involves two populations of employees rather than one, namely, scientists and practitioners. Specifically, the issue of concern to a growing number of behavioral scientists is the transfer of research knowledge by scholars to work settings where it can be applied by managers. Hence, in the lead essay of this forum (Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007), the editor of the Academy of Management Journal and her colleagues have pointed to the necessity of finding ways to weld two worlds, that of the HRM scientist and that of the HRM practitioner. The purpose of the present essay is to offer a perspective on the root cause of the existence of these two worlds and to suggest solutions for welding them together.

ROOT CAUSE: TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

The Human Resource Management (HRM) Division of the Academy of Management was not formed until 1971. Hence, it is a relatively new source of knowledge for organizational decision makers. The scholars who joined this new division were, as their name implies, interested primarily in proving their scholarship. Thus, they pursued scholarly research with scholarly colleagues. They published the results of their research predominantly, if not solely, in scholarly journals. They sought scholarly positions housed in academic settings for their newly minted Ph.D. protégés. The extent to which their research findings were subsequently used in the workplace was of little or no concern to them.

To argue for the reciprocal transfer of learning between journals and practice (Latham, 2001a)—in which published research influences what people do in organizations, and what people do in organizations influences what is studied by scientists in the applied sciences—is likely to lead to a spirited rejoinder, as evidenced by Hulin (2001). Hulin argued that the utility of research is not diminished if practitioners do not read it. He eschewed people’s embracing the scientist-practitioner model in favor of their choosing one vocation versus the other. Solutions to potential problems, he said, should not be a requirement of research. Good research, he argued, may take up to 100 years before its applicability, if any, is known. A belief that research should inform practice, he stated, is misguided at best. It is up to the practitioner, not the researcher, to translate findings into programs and interventions that can solve organizational problems. In short, Hulin concluded that research in the behavioral sciences should be unencumbered by a requirement that it inform practice.

Hulin is hardly alone in his belief in research for its own sake (e.g., Weiss, 2007). Thus, many HRM scholars seldom if ever listen to HRM practitioners,
and HRM practitioners for the most part have not known that the scholars in HRM even exist. Dissatisfaction with this current state of affairs on the part of Rynes and other leading academics suggests that change is “blowing in the wind.”

**THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’**

Kurt Lewin (quoted in Adelman [1997]), a social psychologist, argued against what he perceived to be artificial borders between research and practice with the dictum, “No action without research, no research without action.” Argyris (1991), an admirer of Lewin’s, was among the first in the organizational sciences to call for a change in which science is practiced. He asserted that theory building would become more rather than less rigorous and robust if a theory were judged in terms of providing usable knowledge: “To produce such knowledge, I believe that usability will have to be designed into every research project. Articles will begin with descriptions of how issues of implementation guided research instead of ending with the usual few paragraphs dealing with usability. . . To use applicable knowledge means ultimately to put it into practice; to reproduce in the real world, consistent with the claim made of high external validity; and to do so diligently and persistently” (Argyris, 1991: 338–339).

The necessity for following Argyris’ advice has been underscored by Beer (2001). Few management scholars specify the conditions and processes that managers might use to implement theories, concepts, and methods. Fewer still, Beer noted, consider issues of implementation when choosing a research method. Unless researchers want to be dismissed as irrelevant by organization decision makers, they must take responsibility for specifying how the knowledge they produce and disseminate can be implemented. Beer cited Churchman and Mitroff’s (1995) contention that the distinction between pure and applied science should be ignored because we scientists have an obligation to put science in the service of humanity’s most pressing problems.

Similarly, Bandura too argued that among the criteria for evaluating a theory is social utility. Theories, he said, are operative tools: “In the final analysis, the evaluation of a scientific enterprise in the social sciences will rest heavily on its social utility” (2005: 31).

Rousseau explained that her “great hope” is that through research and evaluation we as scholars can promote effective organizations where managers make well-informed, less arbitrary, and more reflective decisions. “My great disappointment however, has been that research findings don’t appear to have transferred well to the workplace” (2006: 257). The result is a research-practice gap. To close this gap, she advocated initiating “evidence-based practice,” a paradigm for making decisions that integrate the best available research evidence with decision maker expertise and client/customer preferences to guide practice in a way similar to what is currently being done with regard to evidence-based medicine.

**POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, some people see things as they are, and ask, Why? I dream of things that never were and say, Why not? As noted earlier, the genesis of the present paper was to comment on the alarm bells Rynes and her colleagues rang regarding the necessity of merging two solitudes, the science and the practice of human resource management. Because I share their concern (Latham, 2001b; Latham & Latham, 2003), I offer the following speculative solutions for debate:

1. **Lead with Our Strength**

Arguably the key strength of our field is our ability to conduct empirical research. Therefore, let’s conduct research on the adoption and diffusion of human resource research findings in the workplace. For example, Teo, Lim, and Fedric (2007) did just that with regard to human resources information systems (HRIS) in Singapore. Among their findings was that the adopters perceived greater benefits from HRIS for HR departments than did nonadopters, even though both adopters and nonadopters perceived the benefits of HRIS to their organizations in the same manner as a whole. The complexity of HRIS was not found to be a significant factor discriminating between adopters and nonadopters. Compatibility with other systems in an organization did influence the decision to adopt HRIS.

Through myriad laboratory experiments (stimulus variability), simulations (transfer of principles), and field studies (identical elements), ways to transfer HRM knowledge to HRM practice are likely to be discovered. This recommendation is consistent with Lewin’s dictum about research that leads to action.

2. **Develop a Theory of Diffusion**

Through induction, based on studies similar to the one described above, we researchers need to develop a framework that will guide us in taking
the steps necessary for increasing the probability that organizational decision makers will implement our findings. Steps 1 and 2 will enable us to understand where transfer of knowledge occurs and why. As Lewin (1951) emphasized years ago, there is nothing so practical as a good theory.

(3) Include Operational Validity as a Criterion for Evaluating HRM Theory

This recommendation is based on the arguments of Argyris (1991) and Bandura (2005). This step will increase the salience for the research community of the necessity of transferring scientific findings to the world of practice.

(4) Educate Managers and MBA Students by Involving Them in Our Research

As part of their education, I invite managers in our business school’s executive programs and EMBA program, and the other MBA students, to become participants in my research. I present a question to them in the classroom (e.g., Do you think bias can be minimized, if not eliminated, in a performance appraisal?). I encourage strong debate among them regarding the questions I pose. Then I immediately involve them in an experiment to obtain the answer. As I have noted elsewhere (Latham, 2007), the participants love the suspense as much as I do in seeking the answers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the research results are subsequently applied by the managers in their respective work settings. Of further benefit is the participants’ newfound appreciation of how the answers were obtained—through systematic empirical research. Through this process they also see how findings from laboratory experiments generalize to field settings (Locke, 1986). And the result for me and my doctoral students is a journal publication (e.g., Latham & Seijts, 1997b).

In keeping with Rynes et al.’s (2007) finding, few managers or MBA students, if any, are impressed when I introduce the topic of goal setting. At the outset they believe that everyone constantly sets goals. It is not until after I present them with the results of field experiments that I am deluged with questions as to how something so straightforward can increase productivity so quickly and dramatically. This is followed by even more questions as to how they might transfer the principles (recall McGehee & Thayer, 1961) taught in class, extrapolated from the scientific findings, to their workplaces.

(5) Become Bilingual

In addition to learning the language of science, we must master the art of communicating with managers (Latham & Latham, 2003). As the staff psychologist at the American Pulpwood Association and at the Weyerhaeuser Company, and now as a consultant to clients, I don’t “do research”—I do get involved in projects and interventions. Included in the projects and interventions is a “framework” or “strategy” rather than a method or procedure for seeking answers to questions of importance to the clients, not only to me. Ideas are presented to them, rather than hypotheses, along with a rationale that can be assessed rather than tested that, I explain, will likely prove to be worthwhile. I show how we can document the effectiveness of the steps that we will take rather than discussing the proposed procedure and data analysis. Rather than point to the need for a control group, I point to the necessity of being able to show senior management what happened in cases in which we did versus did not implement our proposal. To minimize perceptions of favoritism among employees, I emphasize the advantage of randomly picking who should get training before another group of individuals. I stress and restress the advantage of comparing the performance of the employees who received the benefit of an intervention with the performance of those employees who will receive the intervention at a later date. After analyzing the results, rather than discussing an F-test, let alone structural equation modeling, I show managers one or more graphs that make explicit what happened where we did, versus where we did not, implement our ideas.
Enter the World of Practitioners

Supporting both Tannenbaum and Yukl’s (1992) and Latham and Seijts’s (1997) arguments for focusing on the posttraining period for fostering transfer of training, a related argument can be made to focus on both the pre- and postresearch periods in order to increase the probability that HRM practitioners will implement HRM research findings. I seldom pass up the chance to teach in EMBA or executive education programs. Doing so enables me to hear and respond to the concerns of organizational decision makers as well as to gain opportunities to communicate to them the relevance of extant HRM scholarly articles. Doing so can even lead to a co-authored article of interest to both HRM scientists and practitioners (e.g., Jarnagin & Slocum, 2007).

At the organizational level, scholarly societies such as the Academy of Management (AOM) and the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) should consider establishing formal relationships with practitioner societies such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). It would not take long to articulate reasons for doing so that are mutually beneficial for both parties. It would be a giant step forward in making evidence-based management a reality, and hence the welding of two worlds, science and practice. To accelerate transfer of knowledge, the HRM division and the OB (organizational behavior) division of the Academy, together with SIOP, should hold annual conferences on subject matter of direct interest to practitioners. If we created a category of membership within the Academy and/or SIOP for managers, we could add a day to a scholarly conference that is devoted to the transfer of scientific knowledge to managers. It is highly likely that reporters from HR Management and other similar publications would cover the knowledge presented on this day, furthering the dissemination of scientific knowledge to work settings.

Influence Practitioner Journals

Fred Luthans and John Slocum exemplify the value and relevance of this suggestion in their roles as editors of Organizational Dynamics, a journal not included in Rynes et al.’s (2007) survey. This journal is devoted to informing the community of practitioners about scientific results; it does so using a writing style that is not alien to them. In doing so, this journal communicates to managers that we scientists do exist and that we have useful information for them. Strong support should be given to framing the Academy of Management Perspectives as a source of evidence-based management for business school students and their subsequent employees. We scholars should seek opportunities to serve on the editorial boards of these types of journals and to publish in them.

Reward One’s Influence on Practice

As Mason Haire was fond of saying, that which gets measured gets done. We can fault ourselves for not knowing what is of paramount concern to practitioners, but we cannot fault them for not knowing the usefulness of our research if we do not inform them.

It is unlikely that many of us will present our findings at practitioner conferences, let alone take time away from our research to write articles for their journals, if we are not rewarded for doing so in the academic settings where the majority of us are employed. Deans ignore the recommendations of full professors at their peril. It is we senior faculty who must change our reward structure.

Conduct Research with Practitioners

Research questions become important, as do results, when research is conducted with organization members (e.g., Latham & Latham, 2000, 2003; Wiersma & Latham, 1986). Yet an oxymoron of the Academy of Management is that few of the members are managers and few are behavioral scientists who are employed in government or industry. As noted in step 6, we should look at practitioner organizations, such as SHRM with its 225,000 plus members, as a way to correct this problem.

Encourage Our Protégés to Seek Employment in the Private and Public Sectors

Again, as I have noted elsewhere (Latham, 2007; Latham & Latham, 2003), it is difficult to hear the questions or concerns of managers, see the contextual conditions, offer suggestions, and subsequently receive an invitation to join teams seeking to solve important organizational problems unless you are a member of the organization where the issues arise. It was far easier for me to conduct research that was adopted and applied by an organization when I was employed by the American Pulpwood Association (e.g., Latham & Kinne, 1974) and subsequently the Weyerhaeuser Company (e.g., Latham, Mitchell, & Dossett, 1978) than it is for me to do so as an employee of a university.

DISCUSSION

Through research, Rynes and her colleagues (2007) documented what many HRM academics
have long suspected: We, as applied scientists, exist largely for the purpose of communicating knowledge to one another. One might shudder if this were also true of another applied science, medicine.

The science-practitioner gap is a vexing one. The fault is not in the stars, but in ourselves. HRM practitioners do not apply the research findings obtained by HRM researchers because most HRM researchers do not communicate with them. Many of us who have the desire to do so have yet to acquire the necessary communication skills. We don’t have the opportunity to practice the use of the necessary verbal and written communication skills because we rarely interact with HRM managers. We don’t interact with them because most of us are not rewarded for doing so, and some of us are penalized by our deans for devoting time to doing so.1 A change in the reward structure might lead to research that in turn leads to the development of a theory of diffusion based on empirical research, the bedrock of HRM. In the absence of HRM research, HRM practice is susceptible to what Dunnette (1966) labeled “fads, fashions, and folderol.” Those of us who, as Rousseau (2006) vividly described, have family members who work in organizations where HRM practice is uninformed by HRM science, should shudder.

To paraphrase Robert F. Kennedy, some people see a person staring out a window and say, there is a great thinker. I see the person merely staring out a window. The time has come for HRM scientists to more than shudder while staring at the transfer of knowledge problem. It is time for HRM scientists to see a person staring out a window and say, there is a window. The science-practitioner gap is a vexing one. The fault is not in the stars, but in ourselves. HRM scientists to have family members who work in organizations where HRM practice is uninformed by HRM science, should shudder.

To paraphrase Robert F. Kennedy, some people see a person staring out a window and say, there is a great thinker. I see the person merely staring out a window. The time has come for HRM scientists to more than shudder while staring at the transfer of knowledge problem. It is time for HRM scientists to work with HRM practitioners to take the steps necessary to solve it.

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