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Peer reviewed

Toward an Understanding of What Actionable Research Is

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Clearly we hit a nerve! We do not have the space to address all of the attacks on our methods, and in any case, we would mostly repeat ourselves, or note that we are being denounced for things we neither did nor said (e.g., rated papers based on abstracts alone, opposed critical thinking and nudges). Such tit-for-tat vitriol might be entertaining, but it would not be very useful. There are only two things that matter: Are we wrong about the declining proportion of research that supports our teaching mission, and, if not, what makes research actionable?

As for the first question of whether too little of our management research is useful in our teaching, readers can make up their own minds in two ways. They can reread our article after reading the commentaries and judge for themselves. Alternatively, they could pick up the scholarly journals closest at hand and ask themselves how many of the articles report research that they would use in their classrooms. If their own brief investigations suggest we could do better at publishing research that is useful for teaching, then they may want to join us in exploring how we could do so.

For those who do want to discover how we could produce more actionable research, we found that several of the commentaries reflect on an important question worth debating: "Can we agree on what actionable research is?" Before anyone can call for more actionable research (or, as Martin, 2012, this issue, helpfully notes, call for fewer wasted resources on non-actionable research), we need to have a clear idea of what that means in the various management disciplines—something that does not now appear to be the case. While several commentators sought to clarify or elaborate their understandings of actionable research, others disagreed with our definition and rationales, without providing any alternatives. Stewart and Barrick (2012, this issue) and Aldag (2012, this issue) disagreed with our definition and suggested that the fault lies not in many of the research questions

addressed, but in the underdeveloped implications-for-practice sections.

However, Greve (2012, this issue) makes what we thought were two important advances in our understanding of what may make research actionable. First, he suggests that any individual study must be judged within the context of the larger intellectual tradition to which it contributes, a tradition that, taken as a whole, may have important action implications. This is a valuable insight, and suggests that the weakness of many current implications-for-practice sections in individual research articles (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010) may stem in part from expectations that authors draw those implications from their own single study. These sections might be more useful if authors were encouraged to articulate the actionable implications within the larger tradition to which their study contributes in a meaningful way. Finding more effective ways to communicate the action implications of our research appears to be something on which we, and all the commentators, can agree.

Greve's second valuable contribution to clarifying what may make research actionable is his suggestion that older research may seem more actionable than recent research because recent research has not yet seeped into our conceptual models of management. Perhaps it takes time for the action implications of a line of research to become clear, or for the authors to be spurred to articulate those implications. Only time will tell. This is an idea with several profound implications and thus deserving of further exploration (e.g., how then do editors judge the importance of a paper, a critical evaluation criterion in most journals?).

Martin and Ireland (2012, this issue) help to clarify what might make research actionable by proposing that we looked in the wrong places for evidence of it. Martin (2012, this issue) reported data demonstrating that, with two isolated exceptions, those who publish in our best scholarly journals are not reaching practitioners. We found his table thought provoking. We cannot know if this

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virtually complete split between those who publish in our best scholarly journals and those whose research have had the most influence on practicing managers is caused, in part, by our suggestion that few of the articles published in our best management journals have actionable conclusions, but it is certainly consistent with our results. For those of us who hope to share rigorous scholarly research in our classrooms, his data deserve further analysis and debate.

Ireland (2012, this issue) thought that a fairer assessment of our contribution to actionable knowledge would include the entire portfolio of journals in the management field, many of which focus on research translations for practitioners and teachers. This suggested another way to assess how much of our research is actionable: Practice-focused journals such as the ones listed by Duane Ireland, usually include both research translations and practitioners' experienced-based theorizing and advice. It would be interesting to see whether research translations are more often purchased for course packets or read on-line than are practitioners' ideas. This method would allow the instructors and practitioners to tell us directly which readings they found most useful in their classrooms or practice, and provide valuable data for a more developed understanding of actionable research.

Our little effort generated a variety of different conceptualizations of what makes research actionable, even among this handful of commentaries, and we suspect that their authors have only touched the surface of the different ways management research may be useable in our teaching. We proposed that research was actionable if it produced results on which individuals could take practical actions based on the expectation that the actions could cause the intended effects. We provided examples of such research, examples that stimulated substantial disagreement about what makes research actionable. If there is this degree

of disagreement about what makes research actionable among active researchers, we can only imagine the wide variety of meanings among the adjunct teaching staff who teach so many of our management courses today. We would all benefit from a clearer understanding of what makes research actionable. If we cannot agree, then a typology would help. This could give editors guidance on what to ask of authors in their implications-for-practice statements and would allow instructors looking for classroom-relevant material outside their own research specializations to gather that information efficiently.

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In conclusion, we personally believe that good research should inform our teaching and that scholars benefit from interaction with students and practitioners, but as these commentaries make plain, we do not now agree on what makes research results actionable. We provided one definition of actionable research and several elaborations and alternatives were suggested in the commentaries. A clearer, articulate consensus on what makes research actionable would benefit our students (who could rely more on rigorous research rather than guru pronouncements), our teachers of management (who could more easily find material for classroom use), and would provide better guidance for scholars and editors. A debate on what makes research actionable research is one worth having.

REFERENCE

- Bartunek, J. M., & Rynes, S. L. 2010. The construction and contributions of "implications for practice": What's in them and what might they offer? *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 9: 100-117.