

Making management research useful

Business schools have a peculiar problem. Their research seldom influences practice. And, managers aren't always able to turn their practice into theory. The result: Lack of a robust system of producing new knowledge that is useful and relevant. This isn't a new problem per se. Nor is it restricted to India.

Across the world, the growing gulf between academia and practice is a matter of concern. Faculty across most business schools in the world spend a significant part of their life on research. Almost all the work that is published in management journals ends up addressing arcane topics that are of little significance to the world of practice. They are usually written by *academics for other academics* — and even the language of dissemination takes it straight into the realm of ivory-tower research. By common consensus, research isn't advancing practice or the science of management in any great degree.

In India, we've had another issue: Most business schools haven't done enough to push the research agenda. That's starting to change. Of late, administrators have tried to create a carrot-and-stick model. Faculty that don't step up often don't get promoted. Or, they get higher financial incentives, if they publish more. That has led to more papers being published, but influencing practice will remain an illusion, unless there is much greater engagement with the world of practice.

I know several business leaders who are either keen or have already been going back to school to teach. That's a commendable trend and will help reduce the gap that exists between academia and practice. Except

that these practitioners are not always able to convert their practical wisdom into theory. In some ways, it is a bit like the criticism levelled against the case study method. There is no way that one can generalise the principles from the study of just one enterprise.

The fissures in the academic world itself have been around for a while.

Take for instance, a world renowned management academic such as C K Prahalad who pushed the boundaries of practice with his work around core competence and the bottom-of-pyramid markets. He, too, had a hard time being accepted by his own peers during his early stint at IIM-A, and even later, at the University of Michigan. Except that he was so popular with the students as well as with influential business leaders that the school had to

cling on to him at any cost.

Tarun Gupta, my uncle, had a similar experience at Jammalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies, where he taught as a visiting faculty since its very inception. His class on strategic marketing was much sought after and helped spawn an entire generation of marketing stalwarts, such as Harish Manwani, Vinita Bali, Nitin Paranjpe, Sam Balsara, and the like. Yet, there were moments in his career where both faculty and even some students who would object to his teaching method, which relied not on arcane, bookish knowledge, but on real problem solving.

Interestingly, management consultancies — another key player in the knowledge domain — struggle with a similar challenge. The global institutes they helped set up often churn out books and research

that business leaders find useful. But the very same consultants tend to sniff at such work, because they often struggle to integrate it into their practice and thereby, impacting the quality of advice they are able to offer to clients.

So the moot question is: How does one bring both rigour and relevance to management research so that it shapes and influences practice? It might be instructive to look at the work done by Andrew Van de Ven at the University of Minnesota around engaged scholarship. Mr Van de Ven says: "Many of us address complex problems that exceed our limited individual capabilities. We can understand these problems better when we step outside of ourselves and engage relevant stakeholders in the learning process than when we do it alone."

Mr Van de Ven makes a strong case for discovering the right research questions to ask through a more participative form of inquiry, where researchers involve others and leverage their different perspectives to learn about a problem domain and also take the lead in continuously engaging with practitioners and other stakeholders, as part of a learning community that is based on mutual respect and collaboration.

Clearly, there is a lot at stake here. Today, India is seen as one of the most significant laboratories in the world for business and social innovation and entrepreneurship. And, we also have some of most complex problems in education, health, water, and sanitation that need to be solved. The academic research community will have to step up to this challenge, if they are to make a real difference. After all, as Mr Van de Ven argues, there is plentiful evidence to show that the civic and academic health of any culture is vitally enriched when scholars and practitioners speak and listen carefully to each other.

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