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EDITORIAL ESSAY

Building theory from practice

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The relationship between management research and practice is expanding in response to growing demand for research that is relevant to business and society, contributing in active and visible ways to the generation of wealth and competitiveness. Expectations of relevance come from many different sectors: universities, students, politicians, business leaders and funding agencies, to name a few. These trends signal a shift away from the prominence of science in social science, to a stronger emphasis on the social significance of social science to society. As management researchers, this appeal for social relevance poses challenges for the way we construct our theories and how we conceive their implications. In this essay we suggest one way to strengthen the relevance of management research. It entails shifting from a logic of building management practice from theory to one of building management theory from practice.

Some management researchers are already hard at work redefining the social role of management theory. They converge on a definition of our role as providing practical relevance through theory for those who lead and work in organizations (Argyris, 2003; Tushman, 2003; Hoffman, 2004). In striving not just to balance rigor and relevance, but to maximize their benefits simultaneously, these researchers urge us to move once again into the domain of practical action, Lewin's action research having provided the first such model (Lewin, 1946). Unfortunately, as Argyris (2003) and Hoffman (2004) point out, existing institutional systems and professional expectations often generate more restrictions than incentives to create such relevant or actionable knowledge.

Our proposal for enhancing the relevance of management research suggests a different path: turning the relationship between research and practice upside down. Instead of defining ourselves as researchers who translate our theoretically derived knowledge into practical solutions (e.g. consulting tools, new management practices), we advocate seeing ourselves as tapping into practical knowledge in order to produce better theories. Drawing on Schutz's (1980/1967) idea of the levels of knowledge, we take as our point of departure the first-order theorizing of practitioners. We use corporate branding as an example of a first-order construct from practice that contributes relevance to second-order constructs in strategic organization. Based on and illustrated by our experiences working on corporate branding with practitioners, we offer four interrelated ideas to aid management researchers endeavoring to build theory from practice.

Overcoming resistance to simplicity

Organizations are complex, discontinuous, dynamic and increasingly dispersed. As management researchers, we typically face up to this complexity by breaking initially simple, integrative ideas into more and more fine-grained concepts. In the 1990s, for example, organizational culture researchers disaggregated the concept into subcultures and counter-cultures, ultimately deconstructing the idea of collective culture altogether (Smircich and Calas, 1987; Martin, 1992). Similarly, organizational identity researchers are moving rapidly from a unitary identity construct to one of multiple identities, and now seem poised to abandon notions like 'we' and 'us' as being theoretically uninteresting.

As a consequence of our training and professional standards, we tend to complicate and fragment our theories. We believe exactly the opposite is what is needed to bring rigor and relevance together. We have found that practicing managers are more than aware of the complexity of strategic organization, and look to us in academia not for an account of that complexity but for help to make sense of it all. Acknowledging fragmentation or chaos is not their concern; it is being able to conceptualize the underlying strategic and organizational problems clearly enough to take appropriate and effective action in the situations in which they find themselves.

We first confronted the complexity of the management practitioner's context during a two-year study of the UK-based consulting company Wolff Olins. At the time Wolff Olins was helping clients such as Orange, BT and Credit Suisse with their corporate identity and culture change programs (Olins, 1989, 2000). Having previously worked with the concepts of culture and identity only at a distance to practice, we were surprised to see the ways in which consultants and businesses struggled to enact corporate identities in practice. We became enmeshed in clashes between Wolff Olin's graphic designers and their management consultants who worked in cross-functional teams with clients to deliver identity consulting services; we watched the strategic agendas of large companies change overnight as new acquisitions or business opportunities emerged; and we got a taste of turf wars between the business units of companies that tried to coordinate their activities to support corporate initiatives involving organizational identity.

During this process, we realized the limitations of studying organizational culture without giving any thought to external stakeholders. We likewise realized that academic research on marketing and corporate communication needed to be on our radar screen. At the same time, to cut through this complexity required a very focused approach. As a result of our observations of Wolff

Olins' work, we conceptualized a simple integrative framework depicting the corporate brand as a key symbol of organizational identity, the meaning and value of which are influenced in equal measure by top management vision, organizational culture and stakeholder images (Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2002, 2003; Schultz and Hatch, 2003). This framework was embedded in constructionist and symbolic perspectives rather than functional and positivist perspectives, but claimed to be no less relevant than functionalism to the performance requirements and instrumental needs of business. The branding model itself focused simply on creating alignment between strategic vision, organizational culture and stakeholder images, but its implication was that corporate brand management is a process of creating and sustaining mutually rewarding relationships between a company and its internal and external stakeholders. Thus, in its conceptual simplicity the model embraced all the complexities involved in producing an integrated effort involving all the units of an organization and engaging all the organization's stakeholders.

In our experience the corporate branding framework works well as a rationale for combining common corporate activities such as visioning, culture change, corporate communication and image management, activities that are normally treated as independent and are often forced to compete for the CEO's attention and the corporate budget. However, the politics of breaking down old rivalries between different business functions and creating new reasons to collaborate produced enormous complexity. In our experience, managers needed simple but comprehensive frameworks in order to be able to comprehend and set directions in such a complex and ever shifting reality.

Key point

Managers need simple integrated frameworks that enable them to link internal and external stakeholders and related business functions. This means linkages between key stakeholders as well as between business functions. If we continue to equate higher levels of conceptual disaggregation with more profound knowledge, we face the risk of remaining irrelevant to practitioners.

Opening cross-disciplinary dialogue

The socially constructed organizational realities managers confront emerge from interrelationships between business units and functions, their overlapping competencies and mindsets and the always changing ways in which they interact. In well-branded companies, corporate brands guide the development of new practices in the context of this complexity. For example, corporate communication is joined to the marketing function in companies doing corporate branding well and both are integrated with strategy. Human resources management (HRM) is involved because employees must deliver brand promises to external stakeholders. Also, organizational development and change programs must reflect the corporate brand to enable employees to believe that the company is walking its talk (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Ind, 2002; Schultz and Hatch, 2003; Aaker, 2004).

In practice, working with corporate branding programs that mix marketing, communication, HRM, organization structure and strategy is difficult because these different business units harbor competing competencies, methods and mindsets. Yet they have to collaborate to produce and maintain the value of the brand asset base. Corporate branding practitioners with whom we have worked over the years have found ways to overcome these differences and enable collaborative action. In our theory building we have tried to embrace the many business functions required for corporate branding efforts by involving representatives of the academic disciplines that are related to them. As a result we have had to overcome cross-disciplinary boundaries in academia that rival those faced by managers. We have found it difficult to overcome cross-disciplinary boundaries in management theory, as disciplines have strong traditions that often preclude collaboration among them. For example, marketing is oriented toward developing methods and measurement grounded in empirical data, while organization theory focuses on building conceptual frameworks and juggling multiple perspectives (see also Hambrick, 2004, on the fragmentation of strategic management).

The difficulties of establishing a dialogue between disciplines became clear to us when we edited the book *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation and the Corporate Brand* (www.expressive.organization.com, Schultz et al., 2000). For this project we invited scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds and interests to write about organizational identity, image, culture, reputation and corporate branding. While we experienced high agreement among the members of this group that all these constructs were important and interrelated, it turned out to be an immense struggle to define even basic terms such as identity and image, because the different disciplines on which we drew clung to their own definitions. Although these disciplines overlapped, they were far from compatible (see Hatch and Schultz, 2001 for a discussion of these differences in definitions and disciplinary perspectives). In our struggle to make sense of interrelated conceptual differences we ended up using the Tower of Babel myth to describe the belief the group held that they were looking for a lost – or not yet found – common language. More specifically, we used a spatial metaphor to argue that the meaning of each term depends on where in the conceptual landscape an observer stands, each discipline preferring a different position. This experience gave us firsthand knowledge of the cross-functional difficulties managers face when implementing corporate initiatives.

Corporate branding provides an illustration of the traps that both practitioners and management researchers fall into when they operate within the boundaries of any one discipline while addressing practical problems. For example, in the marketing discipline corporate branding is often conceived as an extension of the product brand and thereby becomes trapped in a perspective that focuses only on consumers. Within organizational behavior a focus on values and culture can lead management researchers and human resource managers to ignore external stakeholders. A single-minded strategic concern with the economic gains of branding underestimates the importance of organizational behavior in making the brand work. In other words, no discipline alone provides the full spectrum of knowledge needed for successful corporate brand management.

Key point

To develop theoretical constructs that reflect everyday managerial concerns, we need to develop frameworks that bring together insights from different theoretical disciplines and accept the necessary loss of conceptual refinement this requires when seen from any single disciplinary perspective.

Working with paradox

Paradoxically, even as management researchers drift toward increasing complexity in their theorizing, we also find reason to accuse them of naive simplicity. This happens when management researchers oversimplify the implications of their findings for managerial action. We find that many management researchers from areas such as institutional theory, resource based theories, networks and identity, often translate profound theoretical ideas and empirical findings into a few straightforward, conflict-free implications for practice, in the mistaken belief that this is what practitioners want. This elimination of conflicts in management implication may originate from researchers' assumptions about the limited time, scope and attention span of managers. The preference for straightforward implications may find further support in the request from many editors of management journals to limit the implications for practice to a few paragraphs at the end of a paper. By reducing implications for management to a few guidelines, researchers risk underestimating the tensions and paradoxes that are basic conditions for managers, particularly when they work across functional boundaries, as is the case with managers involved in corporate branding.

Classic paradoxes described in management theory have influenced the experiences of managers from the different functions involved in corporate branding, such as global brand managers, human resource managers, marketing managers, managers in charge of corporate social responsibility (CSR), investor relations managers (Quinn, 1988). For example, centralization and decentralization (organization theory); global integration and local adaptation (strategy); and organizational heritage and consumer relevance (marketing), have blended and posed managerial challenges that intersect not only at the top management level, but also at lower levels in organizations (Schultz and Hatch, 2003). We find that management research, as opposed to consulting, is much better suited to surface the conflicts and tensions confronting managers, which follow from these classic paradoxes of management theory. By unpacking the different sources of tensions and locating them within relevant integrated framework(s), researchers can help practitioners comprehend and accept the deep paradoxes inherent in managerial action (Quinn, 1988; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Westenholz, 1993). However, the ongoing specialization in theoretical disciplines makes it difficult for researchers to comprehend the tensions facing managers, as they typically reveal themselves when different business functions or practices clash. When each side of such a clash belongs to an independent management discipline, discipline-bound researchers are not well positioned to perceive the tension.

Working with several companies involved in global organization-wide implementations of corporate branding has taught us to acknowledge the paradoxes inherent in branding practices, as they keep reemerging throughout the implementation process. For example, many corporate branding efforts start with a set of identity claims about who 'we' are as an organization, translated into brand values, corporate identity values, vision-mission values, etc. As perceived by managers working in human resources, such values reflect the unique cultural heritage of the organization and should resonate with the perceived identity among organization members. Corporate brand management work often includes historical studies, employee interviews/surveys and internal sensemaking activities such as seminars and workshops. As conceived by marketeers, such values should reflect current consumer preferences and offer sufficient differentiation from competitors. Here, corporate brand management work involves market research, brand tracking and other ways of mapping past and present consumer perceptions of the brand (e.g. the Brand Asset Evaluator offered by Young and Rubicam, or Millward Brown's tracking system).

In most companies, however, a corporate branding process needs to include and balance the suggestions offered by both human resources and marketing. In essence, this implies a paradox between defining the corporate brand from the inside rooted in the company's self-perceptions, versus defining the corporate brand from the outside based on consumer preferences. The resolution of this paradox has huge implications for the brand management process. We have observed this paradox expressed as misunderstandings, power conflicts, the deliberate creation of mutual obstacles and expressions of disrespect about the opposite point of view. In our experience, one of the most crucial managerial tasks is to foresee and address key paradoxes, as they reemerge in all stages of the brand implementation process. Furthermore, following the advice of proponents of paradox management (Quinn, 1988; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Westenholz, 1993), we believe such tensions should be acknowledged and kept alive as part of the corporate brand. In the words of a former global brand manager, Francesco Ciccolella (LEGO Group), the complete dominance of any of the two approaches may create a branding practice which is either an 'arrogant bastard' (enmeshed in an inwardly focused mindset) or a 'headless chicken' (enslaved by consumer trends and preferences) (Schultz and Hatch, 2003).

Key point

When discussing the implications of our findings, we should remain open to the paradoxes embedded in managerial practices when elaborating the implications of their findings. If we begin to accept the need for comprehensive, integrated frameworks while opening up to multiple disciplines, more realistic and actionable guidelines are likely to emerge.

Maintaining dynamic engagement

Had we only visited Wolff Olins for a month or two instead of observing them for over two years, we would never have witnessed the shift in their deliverable from corporate identity to corporate branding. It was this shift and our discussions with them concerning it that led us to understand that organizational identity underpins corporate branding. Likewise, had we not observed and analyzed companies over many years, we would not have been able to describe the cycles of branding at the LEGO Group (Schultz and Hatch, 2003) or convince companies that we had enough grasp of their realities to partner with us in a learning community.

Using our publication in the *Harvard Business Review* as a calling card, we invited corporate brand management executives to join us in a mutual learning network (we called it the Corporate Branding Initiative or CBI, see www.brandstudies.com). The companies involved included the LEGO Group, ING Group, Johnson and Johnson, Boeing, Nissan, Novo Nordisk, Sony and Telefonica. CBI meetings were held biannually over a period of three years, during which it became apparent that corporate branding is a highly dynamic undertaking. Maintaining interaction with the CBI executives as they developed and executed their company's corporate brand strategies was crucial to understanding and theorizing these dynamics. Had we only interviewed the members of our CBI group instead of bringing them together repeatedly to share experiences and to critique one another's practices, we might not have realized how dramatically their theories of action developed along with their corporate brands. For example, we witnessed the LEGO Group's struggle with their shift from conceiving their corporate branding initiative as a market-driven strategic choice to discovering the many implications of corporate branding for organizational change, which involved developing new management practices.

To document our learning, we decided to write descriptive cases focused on one or two stages of each company's development process. In writing the cases, however, we quickly discovered that writing is much slower and necessarily less complex than business practice. As we wrote, the companies would move on and the issue that framed our case write-up passed into corporate history. We learned that the dynamism of business practice is remarkable when compared with our theories of that reality and that our own learning processes are much slower than those demanded by the world of practice. To capture what managers are learning requires engagement by management researchers in long-lasting relationships with practitioners in order to track the many reconfigurations of perceived problems that occur as managers learn what they are up against and enact solutions. It is in this context that researchers will observe how first-order constructs go through changes and reconfigurations in their conceptualization and application. Management researchers must expose themselves to these shifts in order to understand the scope and depth of the constructs they study, such as figuring out whether corporate branding is a temporary hype or expresses a more profound shift in corporate strategy.

If we do not expose ourselves to these developments we cannot hope to understand the complexity of the issues to which our theories refer. As organizations move toward a multiple stakeholder model, we too must experience the dynamics of engaging multiple stakeholders whose networks are interdependent and whose perspectives constantly influence the definition of both the problems and solutions confronting managers in practice.

Key point

Fruitful interaction between research and practice requires a longitudinal relationship to experience first-hand the shifts and ongoing dynamics embedded in practical first order constructs. We need to develop research frameworks that invite mutual interaction and network exchanges.

Implications for academic practice

One way to maximize both rigor and relevance in management research is to begin with an aspiration for mutual knowledge building rather than maintaining separation between researchers and practitioners. Interaction between academics and practicing managers produces certain requirements for how we engage in theorizing, some of which we have outlined here as four mutually supportive propositions.

The first is that simple integrative theoretical frameworks – not the fine-grained theories we tend to favor – are needed to help managers navigate the complexities of the practical world. The second is that interdisciplinary theorizing is required to understand the practitioner’s need to coordinate action across multiple organizational units, functions and business areas. Third, we need to incorporate – not ignore – management and organizational paradoxes into our theories to move beyond research implications that appear naive and unhelpful to practicing managers. Finally, we need to study organizations and their management processes dynamically; through ongoing relationships with practitioners we can create the trust needed to build theory from practice, and gain experiences that will motivate us to create actionable frameworks.

Together we hope that our proposals will contribute to redefining the social role of the management researcher and the institutional context of research work. Building theory from practice is an invitation to a research approach that counterbalances the tunnel vision of highly fragmented management theorizing. No matter how rewarding you find being relevant, however, engaging with practice will also create dilemmas for sustaining your academic identity.

Embarking on a relationship with practitioners requires that you be willing and able to become known to them outside the executive classroom. This entails, among other things, giving priority to writing for practitioner journals, becoming involved in practitioner conferences and networks, and engaging in informal interactions with managers. The academic reward system clearly pushes scholars in the opposite direction; several of our academic colleagues, for example, expressed horror that we had published an article in the *Harvard Business Review*. Academic institutions do not routinely support and reward interactions with practitioners. We were lucky to be employed by institutions that encourage and reward this kind of activity, but we also acknowledge that we established our academic reputations before getting involved in corporate branding and were careful to explain the theory behind the management practices we were investigating at every step of the way. As the pressure for management research relevance increases, we anticipate academic institutions will become more supportive of these interactions.

Longitudinal interaction with practice requires a research design that ensures mutual rewards and allows enough flexibility to adapt to the turbulent circumstances of business. For example, academic projects with a 2–4-year time horizon will undoubtedly be challenged by managerial job changes, businesses and projects being spun-off, and acquisitions, all of which are likely to occur during long periods of engagement. Academics need to balance their involvement with a necessarily limited number of companies with the need to ensure enough research findings to justify the effort required.

Ongoing interactions with companies whose competitive strategies are necessarily confidential raise the further dilemma of how academics can use their deep knowledge of specific companies in their publications. As academics engage with individual companies over long periods of time, it often becomes impossible to keep their corporate identity anonymous. This requires a careful discussion with managers at the start of a relationship. Managers need to understand the 'publish or perish' aspect of academic life and, for their part, academics must be sensitive to managers' needs for secrecy about competitive moves. This becomes particularly problematic in situations where companies get into trouble, and the researcher's knowledge can be exploited by stakeholders who do not have the researcher's or the company's best interests at heart, such as the media. During our years of engagement with companies we have experienced all kinds of turbulence, crisis and change. In the short term we have lost valuable publication opportunities as events and experiences either became old news or remained too sensitive to publish. Within a longer time horizon, however, we have found that one set of interactions usually facilitated the next and that our previous experiences always proved valuable insight for creating other substantive forms of engagement.

Clearly, the methodological backdrop of our suggestions derives from our experiences as qualitative researchers, engaging in fieldwork and on-site data collection at specific companies. The move towards more collaborative forms of interaction with practice builds on recognizing the importance of personal involvement between researchers and practitioners. However, creating learning networks or other kinds of regular interaction between practitioners and management researchers can easily facilitate theory building based in quantitative and/or archival data collected by the management researchers or the companies themselves. For example, we always combined multiple data sources in our work with the CBI group, using for example brand tracking data, comparative reputation measurements and survey data on corporate citizenship. In our minds, building theory with practice is not restricted to specific research methods. Instead, our overall research designs facilitate regular interaction between management researchers and practitioners and our method involves working together with a mindset of shared exploration rather than an us-telling-them mindset.

We are convinced that building theory with practice creates substantial benefits not only for the involved parties, but for the ways in which social science can contribute to the development of global knowledge societies. A stronger appreciation of the interaction between management research and practice opens the way to a new and more multi-faceted role for management researchers in society – and perhaps even a revitalization of the social sciences.

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