I propose that the future vitality and success of our profession depends on making sure our research-based knowledge is relevant and useful. This will require the Academy of Management, as the professional embodiment of our field, to be far more engaged with the real world than has traditionally been the case. I identify ways that an engaged Academy can facilitate a closer partnership between researchers and practitioners to produce knowledge that is both scientifically valid and practical. I explore how the Academy’s approach to knowledge transfer can be more visible, assertive, and persuasive.

Something’s happening; something’s in the air: Jane Dutton, Kathy Eisenhardt, Syd Finkelstein, Ranjay Gulati, and Jeff Pfeffer all hitting the pages of Harvard Business Review (e.g., Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Eisenhardt & Brown, 1999; Gulati & Oldroyd, 2005; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006a; Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1996), all writing books relevant to practitioners (e.g., Dutton, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1998; Finkelstein, 2003; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006b; Sawhney, Gulati, Paoni, & The Kellogg TechVenture Team, 2001). Bob Sutton creating a popular blog highlighted in BusinessWeek. Bill Ouchi leading a revolution in public school reform (e.g., Ouchi & Segal, 2003). C. K. Prahalad (2005) showing how corporations can help to eradicate poverty in the world. Michael Porter redefining how health care should be administered in the United States (e.g., Porter & Olmsted Tiesberg, 2006).

Something’s happening, something’s in the air: The New Orleans conference dedicated to “actionable knowledge,” Atlanta to “knowledge, action, and the public concern,” and Philadelphia to “doing well by doing good.” AMJ creating a forum to address whether management research matters to public policy (e.g., Rynes & Shapiro, 2005).

Yes, something’s happening in the big tent, all right. Academy members are no longer willing to take a back seat to the management gurus and big-time consultants who have the ear of top executives and administrators. Our research-based knowledge is finding its way into practitioner outlets and the popular media. Someday it may even sweep clean the management fads and freeze-dried solutions cluttering the nooks and crannies of organizations.

Yes, something’s happening. Academy members are no longer happy sitting at the kiddies’ table. They want to be with the big folks who make the policies and implement the decisions. Our sisters and brothers in the discipline-based professions have long enjoyed this privilege; the big folks listen when they have something to say. We want the same.

Mattering to the real world has been a long-held value of the Academy from its inception in 1936. We’ve devoted a fair amount of conference time and journal pages to it. Academy presidents have persistently addressed the drive for relevance. One president, in commenting on how large and diverse the Academy had become amid the growing complexity, globalization, and change in business and society, proposed that the time was right to create a coherent approach to linking research to practice. This was the late Harold Smiddy in 1962, when the Academy had about 500 members and the reference was to organizational conditions occurring in the 1950s. As an aside, Harold was an executive at GE; the place seems to attract Academy presidents. And, of course, who can forget back in 1993, in Atlanta, in one of the most misinterpreted Academy presidential addresses on record, when Don Hambrick (1994) asked,
“What if the Academy actually mattered?” What he meant was that our research has a lot to say about practical issues, yet, at the time, the Academy had done little to bring it to the public’s attention. Don called for action, and many of his successors—Mike Hitt, Rick Mowday, Anne Huff, Andy Van de Ven, Jean Bartunek, and Denise Rousseau—have echoed similar sentiments from the luncheon podium.

And things have gotten better. Today, our research speaks increasingly to important practical matters. With the dedicated help of the PR firm Hurley & Haimowitz, our knowledge gets mentioned more and more in the popular media. And, yes, there is a growing revelation among members that “something’s happening; something’s in the air” when it comes to the relevance of our research.

All of which brings me to the fundamental question of whether we have gone far enough as a collective voice in making sure our research matters. How engaged should the Academy be with the wider society? Is it simply a service organization for its members, with a few journals, a web page, and an annual conference? Is the Academy in the business of dispensing information to practitioners? Is it an advocate for specific policies and practices?

Some of us would like to see the Academy stay pretty much to itself: members do research, communicate with each other about it, and leave the practical matters to those on the far side. Others would like the Academy to play a more active role: to account for practitioners’ interests up front in the design and conduct of our research and, later, to help them learn how to apply the results. Still others would like us to speak out and take public positions on important social issues having to do with management ethics, environmental responsibility, and a host of “isms” that plague modern organizations.

Proponents of all of these positions seek voice in what the Academy does, how it is run, and where it should be heading. As your sixty-first president and someone who has trekked around the Academy for a few years, I would like to share my views on all of this.

First and foremost, doing research to create scientific knowledge is what we do best. It is our core competence and main claim to legitimacy as a professional society. We must never lose sight of this, no matter what. Without research-based knowledge, our teaching and practice would be largely rooted in fantasy, mysticism, and conventional wisdom—certainly not the best foundation on which to build a scholarly profession.

Second, the Academy of Management is not an advocate for specific causes or policies. Rather, the Academy is a strong proponent of scientific knowledge as the basis for managerial and policy decision making—what is called today “evidence-based management.” This is what we believe; this is what we advocate.

Third, we’ve made headway in the practical arena; we’ve gained a larger public audience for our knowledge. Yet few of us truly believe that practitioners really listen to us, and, if they do, they sure don’t seem to be doing much with what they’ve heard. So, the “relevance ghost” continues to haunt us from one conference to another, from one presidential address to the next.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that our research has not been influential in the real world. One need only look at the work of Richard Hackman, Ed Lawler, Ed Locke and Gary Latham, and Michael Porter, to name a few (e.g., Hackman, 2002; Lawler, 2000; Locke & Latham, 1984; Porter, 1980). However, such practical successes are highly individualized and few and far between. I am also not saying that all Academy members are disengaged from the real world as individual scholars and citizens.

What I am saying, and saying loudly, is that the Academy of Management, as the institutional embodiment of our profession, should be a powerful force for the application of scientific knowledge to management and organizations, not to mention society. It should make a profound and lasting contribution to how organizations are designed and managed and to how executives are trained and developed. The Academy’s expertise and knowledge should greatly expand the choices that policy makers consider. It should help them understand how their reforms work, what results can be expected, and in what situations those outcomes are likely to occur.

Let’s reflect for a moment on the natural evolution of our field as a scholarly profession. During its initial growth stages, over the past sixty years or so, we’ve worked hard to establish credibility for management research in the scientific community, doing what James Thompson (1956) referred to in the first issue of Administrative
Science Quarterly as “building an administrative science.” This required an almost singleminded focus on theory and research, on the skillful interplay of inductive and deductive methods. It meant that our research questions were largely theory driven and our data gathering and analytical methods mainly quantitative. All of this has advanced our field scientifically and has succeeded beyond most expectations. We have now gained enormous legitimacy in the academic world, and the Academy should be commended for providing a supportive home for the development of our profession.

Today, we have gained scientific legitimacy and can afford, at this stage of our profession’s growth, to devote more attention to making sure our knowledge is relevant and useful. I believe it is the right time for the Academy as a professional society to make significant strides in the practice of management. Indeed, you can even make a compelling argument that the future vitality and success of our profession depends on it. Forging closer links between research and practice is a key part of our mission and values, and unless we become much better at it, we risk being seen as moral hypocrites. Moreover, management knowledge is rapidly becoming a highly sought after and valued commodity, and the market for practical ideas is highly competitive and filled with aggressive sellers. Unless we get moving and put forth useful knowledge assertively and convincingly, we may get pushed aside by other scholarly societies, think tanks, and commercial purveyors of knowledge. We then risk being seen as a bunch of monastic fuddy-duddies who pass sacred wisdom among ourselves while holding a tenuous grip on what goes on around us. Last, perhaps like many of you, I am getting fed up with the perennial grumbling about mattering more and feel the time has come for us to put up or shut up.

Making our knowledge more relevant and useful to practitioners will take far more engagement with them than the Academy is accustomed to or may be comfortable with. It will involve a closer collaboration with practitioners in generating new knowledge. It will take bolder, more vigorous approaches to transferring knowledge so practitioners see its relevance, understand how to apply it, and are motivated to do so.

Let’s start with knowledge production. To be “actionable,” research-based knowledge must transcend purely scientific concerns and address specific problems facing practitioners, the actions they can take to solve them, and the change process for making all this happen. This is apt to occur when the relationship between researchers and practitioners is collaborative rather than divided, active rather than passive. Ongoing dialogue, listening, and appreciation between researchers and practitioners need to occur so that both sides’ interests are mutually considered throughout the knowledge generation process, not just later, after the research is completed and ready to be transferred.

As a professional society, an engaged Academy can serve an important enabling function in forming those relationships. It can help us relate to practitioners on a scale far greater than most of us can do acting alone. It can provide a highly visible and credible voice for the application of our research that few of us can achieve individually. Perhaps most important, the Academy can bring its enormous expertise and knowledge to bear on complex, messy issues that demand collective action. It can help us achieve an impact far greater than we do now.

For example, the Academy can partner with organized groups of practitioners to explore particular domains, problems, or phenomena in which researchers and practitioners share common interests, as we are now doing with the United Nations Global Compact. This past October, Academy members met with representatives of the Global Compact’s 3,000 corporations at Case Western Reserve University to explore what we know (and do not know) about business as an agent of world benefit. The conference was designed to promote mutual understanding and appreciation for each other’s views and expertise. One possible future outcome is a research agenda that accounts for both researchers’ and practitioners’ interests, one advancing scientific knowledge while helping to solve world problems.

Imagine the Academy forming similar partnerships with the Aspen Institute, the Business Roundtable, or the World Economic Forum to jointly explore issues having to do with corporate governance, international trade, bribery and corruption, emergency preparedness, and global outsourcing. These issues would all benefit from the rigorous assessment and the broad international and interdisciplinary perspectives the Academy has to offer. Allying with influen-
tial policy makers to tackle these issues would directly involve us with those having the most interest and power to make things happen. It would challenge us to broaden our research questions and methods and to engage with practitioners in new and exciting ways.

Or envision the Academy partnering with the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business or the Graduate Management Admission Council to bring evidence-based management to how we select and educate future business leaders. Working more closely with these educational gatekeepers might lead to better, more comprehensive measures for selecting people likely to thrive in the business world. It might help us identify and measure the essential outcomes of business education and discover empirically which curricula and pedagogies produce them and under what conditions. Think of how unique yet valuable it would be to turn our research expertise on our own teaching methods and the institutions that employ us.

Or picture us working with the National Academies in the United States and their counterparts in other nations to bring management knowledge to bear on important public policies. These influential bodies of eminent scholars advise national governments on significant public matters, many of which involve thorny managerial and organizational issues. Our research and perspective could add great value to the more discipline-based inputs that currently inform policy making. Today, for example, we are in the preliminary stages of exploring with the Institute of Medicine how the Academy of Management’s research might contribute to national policies on public health in the United States. Our affiliated and associated partners in the United Kingdom, Europe, and South America are already making headway in the public arena, and we need to quicken our pace.

Engaging with practitioners who share our interests in particular issues or problem domains can both enhance the practical relevance of our research and contribute to the fundamental base of knowledge in our profession. It can enrich our research and enable us to study organizational phenomena not easily observed or readily accessible to outsiders. Engaged research might help us identify important variables and explanations not previously considered, discover entirely new organizational forms and practices, or tap into the tacit knowledge that underlies so much practice. It might even help us make the world a better place. Of course, we will need to be constantly vigilant not to confuse enthusiasm with impact or vigor with rigor.

Now let’s explore knowledge transfer. To date, the Academy’s approach has been fairly laid back, letting our research pretty much speak for itself to practitioners. We assume that good research and ideas will be recognized and used. Yes, we do some PR and informal huckstering, but whether an Academy journal article or conference presentation is mentioned in the media, appears in the classroom, or informs organizational decisions is still pretty much hit or miss. For our research to be used, practitioners must first recognize and appreciate its quality and relevance. Getting practitioners’ attention is not easy in today’s information society, where they are bombarded with an enormous amount of practical wisdom, some based on research and a lot not. This “knowledge market” demands a far more visible, assertive, and persuasive approach to knowledge transfer than we have used so far.

Take our cousin associations in anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology, for example. They are all better than we at promoting their scientific knowledge to policy makers. Shortly after Katrina’s devastation, for example, the American Sociological Association was briefing policy makers on how sociological research could help the recovery efforts. We were still debating whether we should acknowledge the catastrophe on our web site. At the turn of the new millennium, the American Anthropological Association launched the “Decade of Behavior,” a multidisciplinary initiative aimed at focusing the talents, energy, and creativity of the social sciences on meeting many of society’s most significant challenges. This program involves scholarly associations from all over the world. The Academy was not even aware of this bold undertaking, no less joining it. I find this incredible. Here we have scholars who study primates, exotic cultures, and ancient bones and artifacts able to organize a worldwide effort to apply social science to societal problems, while we sit asleep at the wheel. Now tell me who is likely to be listened to more in the halls of policy making—they or we?

Clearly, the Academy must be far more engaged in knowledge transfer than it is today or
risk being left in the dust of knowledge application. The possibilities are almost endless and must take advantage of multiple communication channels, not just the printed word. For example, the Academy is currently exploring web-based collections of existing Academy journal articles organized around particular themes. These can be useful for researchers and have practical relevance to educators and practitioners as well. We are actively considering an edited book or monograph series of original contributions aimed at telling policy makers and executives in plain words what management scholars know about solving organization and societal problems. A bit more far out, the Academy is weighing the possibility of an email-based newsletter, something like “knowledge@aom,” that regularly informs subscribers what we know about important management issues. We are mulling over a RSS newsfeed that would push the latest management knowledge to the desktops of practitioners, news reporters, and consultants. The Academy has even made initial inquiries about a radio or television show featuring Academy members addressing newsworthy management issues. I envision a TV program along the lines of Mr. Rogers, where we invite practitioners to “have a lovely time in the neighborhood” with Mr. Slocum. Seriously, though, these are just a few of the possibilities for getting our knowledge into the minds, hearts, and actions of practitioners. I am sure you can think of a lot more.

In closing, let me put in a nutshell what I’ve been trying to say here. For me, personally, the quest for an engaged Academy is a noble cause. It is the right thing to do. As scientists, we have a privileged place in society, and it is our duty and responsibility to make sure that our knowledge makes the world a better place. As a professional association, the Academy of Management can no longer sit back and hope that its research somehow gets applied. We must actively engage with practitioners to make sure this happens. I have great confidence we will move ahead strategically to make sure the quest for an engaged Academy persists and prospers. You, our profession, and society deserve nothing less.

REFERENCES


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