2007 Presidential Address

FIGHTING THE ORTHODOXY: LEARNING TO BE PRAGMATIC

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Preparing this speech was a challenge. The challenge was finding something important to say—something meaningful and something that hadn’t been said before. I considered a number of alternatives, but, in the end, I decided to talk about my personal experience as both a manager and an academic. I want to tell you something about my life, and I hope I can relate it to you and your work in a meaningful way. Let me start by sharing with you some of my experiences as an entrepreneur.

When I was a twenty-three-year-old, newly minted MBA, I had the opportunity to own my own business. It was a small, six-employee machine tool company. The company had been much larger and, at one point, quite successful. But by the time it came into my hands, it had lost its management, was losing money, and had a negative net worth. The business rented space in a dirty, decrepit building that was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. The jobs involved machining steel parts to customer specification. It was monotonous, repetitive work. All the employees were more than twice my age.

I had no management experience, but I had a whole lot of ideas about how to run a company. When I was an MBA student, I was enamored with what I learned about modern management, particularly with what I call “The Bright Side of Management.” I thought that when I was a manager, I would practice modern management concepts. For example, my employees would be motivated by the intrinsic worth of their jobs, or I would enrich their jobs to make them meaningful. When I was a manager, my organization would be a bright and happy place.

So I took my enthusiasm, my shiny new ideas, and my textbook knowledge and went into my organization determined to introduce the modern management concepts that I had found so inspiring as a student. Can you guess what happened next? You’re exactly right. My idealism had to adapt to reality. It was a slow process for me, and not without a lot of pain.

Coffee breaks were one of my first introductions to this painful reality. We had two fifteen-minute breaks scheduled in each eight-hour shift. However, in practice, the breaks would stretch to thirty to forty-five minutes, simply because workers would extend the time. I would often sit with employees to take a break. After fifteen minutes I would get up and, automatically, the employees would all go back to their machines. If I didn’t get up, no one else did. I wondered how much time they took in my absence. As we grew the business and the number of employees, this lost time was becoming more expensive.

So I put some of my textbook knowledge of management to work. I tried profit sharing: breaking down the time in the value of a lost minute and what it would mean in terms of lost profits. I produced elaborate graphs and posted them in the lunchroom. Since we hadn’t made any money, that strategy was challenging, but if we made our goals, the money would add up. Unfortunately, this did not inspire much in the way of changes. The problem was that the work was not particularly motivating. It was dirty. It was boring. The company had no slack resources. After a long time and a number of different bright-side ideas, my solution to the problem was a loud bell that sounded to signal the
end of the coffee break. When the bell rang, they
went back to work! This was not The Bright Side
of Management I had envisioned. But it worked!
This was not the only time my ideals had to
bend and adapt to what worked. My company
specialized in producing drive shafts for pumps
and motors. Eddy was a skilled finish grinder
who performed the final operation by grinding
the shaft to a precise tolerance—a very intricate
operation that was affected by the temperature
of the room. Ed was the only one who could
provide the finish operation on each shaft, and
as we grew, Ed’s backlog of shafts was building.
We started falling behind on delivery. I had the
equipment to increase capacity, but I couldn’t
find the skilled labor to match Ed’s expertise.
Trying new people was also very expensive be-
cause of the scrap they created. I asked Ed if he
would help train others so we could expand
capacity. Ed looked at me and said, “If I train
others, you won’t need me. No.”

Aha! Surely this was a management problem
that I, with my enthusiasm, my shiny new ideas,
and my textbook knowledge, could handle. Ed
was already making the highest salary in the
company. I tried to convince him that we were
all in this together and that training someone
would benefit us all. I presented the potential
numbers—but all to no avail. Ed was not ame-
nable to graphs or talks about profit margins. So
I finally just set out to make Ed my buddy. I
didn’t befriend him for any idealistic or high-
minded reason. I did it because I needed him to
train people, and I figured that if I gained his
trust, I could convince him that I wasn’t trying to
do him out of his job. It went against my values
to be friendly with someone for ulterior reasons.
It didn’t seem honest to me. It didn’t mesh with
my ideals. But it did work. Ed eventually real-
ized that I didn’t want to take away his job, and
he consented to train new finish grinders. In
fact, Ed became my most loyal employee.

Eddy wasn’t the only employee to demon-
strate the limits of my management ideals to
me. Walt was another skilled craftsman who
had been with the company since its beginning.
However, he was lazy and would do anything
except his work. I talked with Walt a number of
times, indicating that he needed to be more pro-
ductive and focused. I attempted to motivate
him with various incentives. Nothing had any
effect. Finally, I did the math, and I decided that
Walt needed to go and that I would fire him.

Simple enough, right? I had certainly learned
the ideal way to let someone go. No problem.
Except once again my ideals crashed into pain-
ful reality. Walt talked me out of firing him, not
once or twice but three times. When I finally
managed to fire him a year and a half later, I
had to do it without a conversation so he
wouldn’t have the opportunity to talk me out of it
a fourth time.

All this time I was learning. I was learning
that there were limits to the power of my ideal-
ism. My company grew, and I invested in new
technology called computer numerical con-
trolled machines. I thought the investment
would be worth it because the technology would
dramatically increase productivity, but, to a cer-
tain extent, it also made the work even more
boring and challenging to stay with because it
was so automated. It was also expensive—so
expensive we needed to operate the equipment
two or three shifts a day to make it pay for itself.

Because of that, we could not afford to have
the equipment down. It was very painful to
watch it stand idle because an employee was
busy chatting with some other employee or had
found something else to do. Once again I pulled
out my shiny new ideas—though they were
starting to look a bit less shiny and a bit more
worn to me—and tried to produce that happy,
enriching workplace. I tried giving out produc-
tivity awards and incentives for quality piece-
work, but that process led to more waste than
profits, so I eventually gave up on it. What was
the solution that ended up working? It was a big
red light that flashed whenever the machine
down. Somehow that flashing red light
encouraged more productivity than any of my
wonderful, idealistic management concepts.
Imagine that!

Somewhere in those first few years of manag-
ing, I was changing. I didn’t see it happening—I
didn’t even really realize it was happening—but
as I worked and managed in the real world, I
lost interest in The Bright Side of Management.

Looking back at myself, I can now clearly see
that when my ideals ran up against reality, I lost
faith in them to such an extent that I began to
veer too much in the opposite direction. When I
graduated from business school, I truly wanted
to create an organization and a workplace that
reflected my bright-side ideals. Imagine my dis-
illusionment when what I ended up with was
sounding bells and flashing red lights. What
happened to my bright-side ideas? I had lost them. And I didn’t even realize that it had happened. I was caught up in making money and growing the business.

And when making money and growing the business became my sole goals, I changed, and not for the better. I became the kind of boss who could replace an employee on a dime. I became the kind of manager who placed work before family and profits before everything. When I finally sold the business ten years later, I felt as though I had sold my damaged soul.

I went back to school, and it was liberating to be free of the “real world.” This new environment focused on learning and the creation of new knowledge, and I found it entirely invigorating. There was no need to be practical. I could pursue an idea for the sake of that idea. I thought only about learning and scholarship.

My first and only academic job was at the University of Maryland. At last, I had a second chance to put my ideals into practice. But this time they were academic ideals—the ideals of management and organization scholarship.

Unfortunately, I quickly found that I was up against the threat of failure again! My first few years at Maryland were reminiscent of my first years in business. I had very noble ideals and goals. But my first few papers mostly met with disastrous results. Feedback from annual meetings and journals was disheartening. I am not talking about the technical merits of my research but comments like the following:

“Why would you think this is a good idea?”
“What is new about this contribution?”
“Why am I reading this paper?”

As a newly minted professor, I was just as naive as when I started as a manager. Indeed, it was crushing to hear that my ideas were not seen as worthwhile. Again, just as in my business career, I began to adapt my ideals to the reality in which I lived and worked. But unlike my business career, where I gradually lost sight of my ideals altogether and became a person I’m not particularly proud of, in my academic career I had the benefit of both more years and wisdom under my belt. The school of hard knocks had taught me to be pragmatic.

This time I was able to achieve what hadn’t been possible for me as a young businessman: a balance between pursuing my ideals and adapting them to achieve success in the realities of the world in which I found myself. This time I was able to work within my environment and the existing orthodoxy. And this time I wasn’t heartbroken about it. I was pragmatic and happier too.

Okay, so where is this speech going? I have two bits of advice rooted in my own experiences.

First, be passionate about your ideas but be creative and pragmatic in presenting them to the market. I think about those passionate scholars, young and old, who completely believe in their ideas. To you I say that I have been in your shoes. I appreciate your struggles and I admire your conviction. But I want to encourage you to be more realistic and pragmatic as you consider how your ideas are situated within the established orthodoxy of our profession.

Yet in some sense I worry about this message. How important is orthodoxy and fitting in? How can you be pragmatic? Pragmatic to what point? How do you achieve balance? Chester Barnard warned that “conformance to the one code and violation of another results in guilt, discomfort and dissatisfaction or a loss of self respect” (1938: 264). That sounds exactly like my business experience. Completely conforming would be detrimental to our passionate scholars.

But let me suggest that it would also be detrimental to our profession. Mike Hitt and I edited a book a few years ago that examined the lifelong scholarship of some of the field’s great contributors. Many of those authors struggled to get their ideas accepted by gatekeepers—peer reviewers and journal editors. Some of those ideas set the stage for new and profitable research streams or changed the way we thought about our world. For example, Jay Barney’s 1991 paper, “Firm Resources and Sustained Competitive Advantage,” was rejected twice by the Academy of Management Review and once by the Strategic Management Journal. Jay accepted his own paper for a special issue of the Journal of Management that he was editing. As of July 2007, this one paper had 1,961 citations.

What would have happened to our field had passionate scholars like Jay not persisted? How many other scholars gave up on their ideas because the market for ideas would not accept them? And what fantastic new ideas are we losing because of it?

Now if I may address the gatekeepers for a moment. I view a gatekeeper’s job as very important. I praise our reviewers, division leaders,
and editors for the very valuable job they do and their important desire to provide developmental feedback. I have been an editor, and I know the difficulty of this job. Our gatekeepers’ goals are to accept and publish the very best scholarship. This is, of course, the way it should be. I note also that I am not talking about the technical merits of good research but, instead, the focus on the contribution, since I believe this is the determining factor of individual success. Think about the criteria we use for promotion in our profession. It seems to me that it is always about the contribution.

But here is an important consideration. Right between scholars trying to get their ideas accepted and gatekeepers making judgments on their scholarship stands the painful truth that what constitutes a contribution or adequate contribution can be determined only over time. And here is another painful truth: it is not always easy to judge what contributions will prove to be the piece of knowledge we need to move our field forward, as we can see from Jay Barney’s experience in publishing his influential paper on firm resources.

Numerous scholars have talked about the problems of our weak paradigm. A key contention is that there is little agreement among reviewers in our field on what is an acceptable contribution. If this is true, it creates a real problem for authors trying to define how to fit in and for gatekeepers attempting to make judgments on contributions.

This brings me to my second piece of advice. Let’s be open to a diversity of viewpoints and compassionate toward those who are laboring to build our body of knowledge. New material must be grounded on the old. Authors need to be pragmatic in that way. Yet reviewers—the gatekeepers of orthodoxy—need to be open to the new, the unconventional, and the difficult.

There is a challenge here for us who are established in our careers, our successes, and our points of view. Leo Tolstoy famously said:

I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept even the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have delighted in explaining to colleagues, which they have proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabric of their lives (from WorldofQuotes.com).

Our responsibility as gatekeepers is to publish the best and most useful new scholarship, but at the same time we need to be open to the notion that some of those new ideas will challenge some of our own deeply held beliefs.

So what is my message today? In my life I learned that there was a balance to be achieved between pursuing my ideals and achieving success within the orthodoxy of my world. If you are a passionate scholar with noble ideals struggling to make your mark and achieve your goal, I urge you to be more pragmatic and persistent. Work creatively to find the balance between pursuing your ideas and presenting them in terms that can be accepted—and published—by the gatekeepers. However, please do not lose your sense of fulfillment; that will make you unhappy in life.

And for us gatekeepers, who judge the worthiness of a contribution, let’s not take our opinions quite so seriously. Let’s keep high standards for scholarship, encouraging passionate scholars to do their best work while maintaining an open mind about their unique contributions. Let’s demonstrate more perspective, compassion, and empathy. It seems to me that what we desire in this great struggle for academic achievement is the debate and discourse. It would be good if we could all relax and bend a bit.

Finally, let’s all remember that different people will view someone’s contributions in different ways. The membership in the Academy is diverse. Most say this diversity is strength. But it also creates significant challenges in judging what is a worthwhile contribution to our field of knowledge. That creative tension can be a healthy and even positive intellectual exercise.

In music, tension is a technical term that refers to a temporary discordance on the path to the eventual resolution of a chord. The discord is unpleasant and unsettling. Despite this, tension in music is valued and even loved because it is simply a passing note on the way to a beautiful chord. In the Academy, let’s use the tension that arises from our diversity and differing viewpoints to create a rich, robust, and beautiful resolution.

A year or so after I sold my business, I was recognized by the local Chamber of Commerce for my contribution to the business community. It came as a surprise, because I didn’t really think of my years in business as a real success. After all, I didn’t achieve my bright-side man-
agement dreams. And in adapting my ideals to reality, I veered too far from my ideals, often in ways I felt guilty about. But now, looking back, and with a little more perspective, it seems that perhaps I was too hard on myself. Maybe I couldn’t truly judge my own contribution until far after the fact.

Years ago I had a very narrow view of success, and I wasn’t open to other people’s ideas of what success might look like. But with the perspective of years and wisdom, I realized that even though I didn’t completely achieve my personal goals, I had accomplished some things that had genuine worth. There is no doubt that I created employment. I made my employees’ lives better, even if I couldn’t make their jobs any less repetitive and boring. I created value for the community, paid taxes, earned a profit, and supported my family. In those senses and from that perspective, my contribution had worth after all.

Much like my business experiences, only over time will the worth of most contributions be fully recognized. Let’s be passionate about our ideas but creative and somewhat pragmatic in presenting them to the market. Let’s also continue to publish the very best scholarship but be open to a diversity of viewpoints and compassionate toward those who are laboring to build our body of knowledge. Let’s acknowledge and even celebrate our academic tension, loosen the stranglehold of orthodoxy a bit, and move just a little closer to consensus as an academy.

REFERENCES