"I SHALL NOT REMAIN INSIGNIFICANT": ADDING A SECOND LOOP TO MATTER MORE

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I know what I want, I have a goal, an opinion. If God lets me live, I shall not remain insignificant, I shall work in the world and for mankind! And now I know that first and foremost I shall require courage and cheerfulness!

-Anne Frank, April 11, 1944

My first-ever academic conference, when I was a naive doctoral student from the Netherlands, completely oblivious about the (American) academic system, was a meeting of the Academy of International Business in Banff (Canada) in 1996. Betokening my ignorance of this system, I found myself participating in a junior faculty consortium (not knowing exactly what "faculty" meant, or what a "consortium" was). As you can imagine, the conversation quickly turned to tenure and how to get it. Some time later, well into the second day of the consortium, during yet another one of those discussions, a fellow participant (a German lecturer and one of the few other non-Americans in the room) leaned over to me and whispered in my ear, "Do you know what that is? That thing they keep talking about, called 'tenure'?"

I have to admit, as I did to her, that I had no idea. Both of us had grasped that it was this mythical thing that everybody was aspiring to—the holy grail of academia. We had hoped to figure out what it was during the sessions (because it was obviously beyond discussion that it was something one should aspire to and aim for), but both of us had been unable to figure it out. By then, we felt, it was too late to ask. . . .

I remember those days with fondness. I had already chosen to be an academic, while my friends went off to have well-paid jobs in banking, consulting, and industry. I was going to be a poor yet noble academic, not driven by money, job status, or security, but dedicated to a quest for knowledge and understanding that would enable me to help others understand and improve the workings of their organizations.

I think many management scholars start out with this feeling. Over time, however, the system and culture in which we are placed starts to turn us toward thoughts of getting a job, getting tenure, getting a chair, getting recognition from others in the field, and so on (Deci, 1971; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Over time, our research ideas may not be framed anymore in terms of organizational problems and a question that we want to understand and answer. Instead, we have learned that the legitimate way to frame our academic identity is in terms of a theoretical tradition and a stream of research. And there is nothing wrong with that, unless these goals have completely replaced our desire and quest for true knowledge and understanding.

Yet, over the years, many people within our field have lamented the fact that much of our research seems to have little relevance to reality (e.g., Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Staw, 1995; Vermeulen, 2005). It has been argued that our academic system needs to change, journals need to change, deans and colleagues need to change, and with all these things needing to change, we might be better off not bothering at all. Notwithstanding all of this, in this essay, I reflect on what I believe an *individual,* working within the system, might be able to do, to gain a little bit of relevance. Most of us, in our research and writing, have a first, closed "loop" of communication (Hambrick, 1994): we read the work of other academics, and write in academic journals to reach that same audience. I argue here that each academic researcher in the field of management would do well to add a "second loop"; one that engages practitioners directly, as a source of insight to inform research at its inception, but also as a group of recipients of the research when it is completed.

RELEVANCE, RIGOR, AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Let me first define what I mean by "relevance" in research. To me, relevance is not necessarily about immediate prescription. It is not advice for some sort of managerial action that companies can undertake that will increase their profits next term by

TABLE 1
Academic Papers and Features of Relevance[a]

Factors Enabling Relevance	Academic Work in My Classroom
Effectively labels a novel theoretical construct	Cohen & Levinthal, 1989; Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Levitt & March, 1988; March, 1991
Reveals concrete and measurable consequences of the variables	Hayward & Hambrick, 1997; McNamara, Vaalers, & Devers, 2003; Vermeulen & Barkema, 2002
Reveals a clear trade-off among variables	Nohria & Gulati, 1996; Szulanski & Jensen, 2006; Vermeulen & Barkema, 2002;
Addresses variables under managers' control	Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Nohria & Gulati, 1996; Szulanski & Jensen, 2006; Vermeulen & Barkema, 2002
Enables combination with other quantitative or qualitative materials	Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Burgelman, 1994; 2002; Szulanski & Jensen, 2006; Vermeulen & Barkema, 2002

[a] Obviously this list is biased toward my personal preferences and research and teaching interests. Many other papers have potential relevance. Moreover, the list of factors is by no means intended to be exhaustive.

X percent. Relevance is found in generating insight practitioners find useful for understanding their own organizations and situations better than before. As James March said,

> No organization works if the toilets don't work, but I don't believe that finding solutions to business problems is my job. If a manager asks an academic consultant what to do and that consultant answers, then the consultant should be fired. No academic has the experience to know the context of a managerial problem well enough to give specific advice about a specific situation. What an academic consultant can do is say some things that, in combination with the manager's knowledge of the context, may lead to a better solution. It is the combination of academic and experiential knowledge, not the substitution of one for the other that yields improvement. (2006: 85)

Hence, personally, if I tell practitioners about my research and as a result some of these people feel they have gained an insight they did not yet have, one that enables them to make better decisions regarding their own specific company situations, I feel I have done my job and my research has been relevant.

Will our standards of academic rigor[1] automatically ensure relevance? Unfortunately, I am not so sure. Rigor means that the various elements of a theory are consistent, that potential propositions or hypotheses are logically derived, that data collec-

tion is unbiased, measures are representative and reliable, and so on. Yet it seems perfectly possible for a research work to have all this without providing any insight into the workings of real organizational life. Even empirical research can be quite detached from real organizational life, as percentages of variance explained are often notoriously low, dependent variables of little importance or not under anyone's control, or the generalizability of a case unclear. Rigor might be a necessary condition for building theory that provides true insight into reality, but it seems not to be a sufficient one.

In the remainder of this essay, I explore how a researcher might attempt to enhance the practical insight generated through his or her rigorous work. I argue that only if theory is developed with reality in mind will it reveal true insight. Without a deep understanding of organizations and the problems they face, academics may study the wrong things, interpret results incorrectly, and generate findings that may be rigorous but too detached from reality to be relevant. Adding a second loop, with practitioners as informants as well as consumers of one's academic research, might help people to advance the relevance of their work.

FEATURES OF RELEVANCE

One exercise I put myself through to explore what to me might make an academic article "relevant" was to examine the set of academic papers that I use in my executive education classes. I collected these articles and asked myself, "What enables me to use this article for communicating to practitioners?" Table 1 lists the reasons I arrived at. I realize this list is quite idiosyncratic (cf. McGa-

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[1] Let me make the bold assumption that academics generally agree on what determines rigor—namely, the criteria we pay attention to when reviewing papers for academic journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal*.

han, 2007), since it is biased toward the topics I teach and also toward my personal tastes and preferences.

The first element that I believe enables me to use a paper regularly in a classroom setting is that it introduces or labels *a novel theoretical construct,* such as Dierickx and Cool's (1989) "time compression diseconomies," March's (1991) "exploration versus exploitation," Levitt and March's (1988), "competency traps," or Cohen and Levinthal's (1989) "absorptive capacity." Furthermore, I find myself using articles that have indicated some *concrete consequences* associated with such a novel yet rather abstract academic construct. For example, I use my own article on multinational growth (Vermeulen & Barkema, 2002) to illustrate and apply time compression diseconomies (Dierickx & Cool, 1989). Another article that I often use in teaching, including executive education, is Hayward and Hambrick (1997), which discusses the issue of managerial hubris. The construct itself is insightful, but it is the concrete effects of hubris on acquisition premiums paid that really gets the message across. Similarly, McNamara, Vaalers, and Devers (2003) debunk the myth of "hypercompetition" by developing some concrete measures to examine the construct.

Another element that enables me to use an article in the classroom is that it reveals *a clear trade-off.* The world of organizations is complex. A managerial decision made for one reason may well have contrary or unintended consequences in other domains, of which the decision maker may not be immediately aware. One work I often use in this light when speaking to executives is the article by Nohria and Gulati (1996), which discusses the potentially positive and negative influences of organizational slack on innovation, highlighting the need to find a balance. Pointing out such trade-offs, especially alongside ways to potentially mitigate them, may help managers to better interpret their own situations and think through the trade-offs they may face when trying to manage a particular organizational process. Their insight into the potential consequences of their decisions is widened. Thus, what also enables me to use an article when speaking to managers is that the processes it addresses represent *variables that are under managers' control,* in the sense that they can influence them at least to some extent (cf. Coleman, 1993). Nohria and Gulati's study on slack addresses such variables; another example is Szulanski and Jensen's (2006) study of managers' choices between replicating subsidiaries exactly versus immediately adapting them to existing local circumstances.

Finally, another element that allows me to use an academic article to communicate with managers is that it enables me to place it in a rich context. That is, it has the potential for *combination with other materials,* such as qualitative evidence. For example, an article I regularly use in executive teaching is Brown and Eisenhardt (1997), which addresses several processes under managers' control, identifies trade-offs making choices regarding these processes, and indicates concrete consequences. Moreover, a book (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998) and a series of articles in the *Harvard Business Review* (Eisenhardt & Brown, 1998, 1999) by the same authors help me translate the insights to managers and provide a rich, qualitative context. Burgelman's academic papers (1994, 2002) and teaching cases on Intel, and Szulanski's (Szulanski & Jensen, 2006) teaching cases and managerial article on replication (Szulanski & Winter, 2002) are similarly fruitful combinations. For me, a tight fit between research work and other materials is another characteristic and enabler of practical relevance.

Other people may develop different lists of "relevance characteristics" when examining the research work they use in their classes. I hope this exercise provides some guidance for thinking about relevance in one's own research. As a next step in preparing this essay, I thought through what it would take for an individual academic working within the system to start producing research with some of the aforementioned characteristics.

REQUIREMENTS FOR RESEARCH RELEVANCE

Smell the Beast

Often, nonacademics who learn that I work at a business school ask me whether I should not gain real work experience myself (immediately assuming that I don't have any!). My answer is usually that I study managers like a zoologist might study mountain gorillas: you do not have to have been a gorilla yourself to understand them. Similarly, you can be a perfectly good criminologist without ever having stabbed someone, or even without doing any shoplifting on the side! Yet what you can learn about mountain gorillas by sitting in an office is limited. Surely, you can learn something about gorilla behavior by running regressions based on secondary data about populations, habitat, climate changes, etc., but to really interpret the results and truly comprehend the animals' behavior, you need to understand them at a much more intimate level, which can only be gained through close observation or interaction. Hence, in order to truly understand my subject, I believe that every now and then,

I have to force myself to go into the mountains and smell the beast.

This is what I see as the first element of the second loop: regular, direct interaction with practitioners intended to enrich understanding of my research subject. My own way of doing this is to conduct interviews and write teaching cases, although I am sure there are other and perhaps better ways. At this stage, I listen rather than talk.

In addition, however, I try to force myself to communicate with managers about my research and the insights it provides—for instance, through executive education and managerial articles. This communication, to me, represents the second element of the second loop. I try to inform managers about my research, first of all because I am afraid that if I don't communicate the findings of my research, no one else will. I do not believe in a natural "division of labor" whereby I produce the research that someone else (a consultant, journalist, or fellow academic) will pick up and communicate to managers (cf. Markides, 2007); I simply do not see much of that happening. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, I hope that having a practitioner audience (at least in the back of my mind) will stimulate me to examine issues that are also of interest to them and to ask more relevant questions about those issues (cf. Tushman & O'Reilly, 2007). Figure 1 graphically depicts the two loops I envision.

Steer Clear of the Dark Side

Yet, when communicating to managers, let's not forget that in our research we apply rigor for a reason. Although management academics may be concerned with the fact that we do rigor pretty well but often struggle with relevance (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Hambrick, 1994; Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2007), practitioner journals and the business press seem to have the opposite problem. Specifically, they do "relevance" quite well (i.e. they capture the attention of practitioners) but don't pay much attention to the rigor of the underlying "evidence." Hence, they seem to deal with many of the same issues as we do, but they face the other side of the coin. Yet, in contrast to us, I do not sense much inclination among those publishing for practitioners to acknowledge that they, too, have a problem. For example, even after the irony of publishing hundreds of articles and books glorifying Enron before its fall, practitioner-oriented business publications still seem mostly concerned with writing and publishing what managers want to hear and buy—mostly simple formulae for quick and easy success (Furnham, 2000)—without paying much attention to its evidentiary basis.

Therefore, I believe that when speaking to managers, it is up to each of us to uphold our standards of rigor while addressing issues of broader relevance to managers, organizations, and society. Much like Goethe's (1832/1987) character, Faust, we as scholars can easily be seduced and make recommendations and claims that sell well and grab managers' and journalists' interest and attention, but that are quite unsupported by thorough research. The purpose of the first loop of academic research is to counteract this tendency—to assure rigor. While the second one fosters relevance, the two loops of communication complement and inform each other.

Pay the Price

In my view, producing management research that matters in reality requires multiple commitments: commitment to ongoing interaction with the subjects of study (e.g., managers or employees) and

FIGURE 1
Loops of Communication
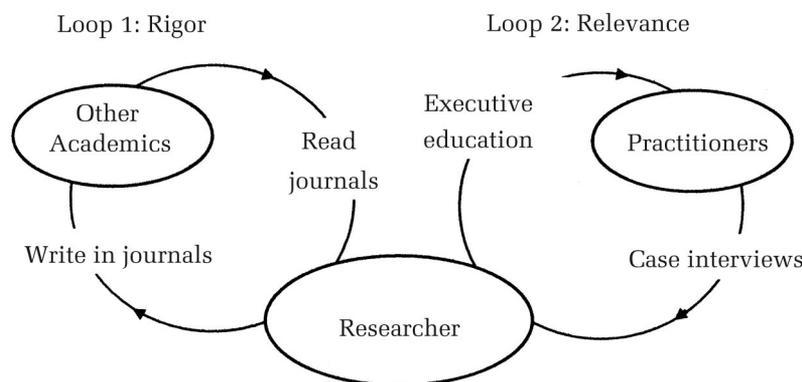
unremitting commitment to rigorous scientific standards. These commitments imply sacrifices. Speaking to managers—whether through managerial articles, books, speeches, or executive education—is a skill in itself. Just like academic papers, practitioner-oriented communications require careful framing, logical argumentation, and clear definition of the problems and guidance toward a possible answer. Hence, such work requires true dedication, which implies putting in ample time and effort and going far beyond merely translating one's academic work. This time and effort will be diverted away from writing and publishing more academic papers. For example, although I realize others may have different experiences, publishing six academic papers seems to come easier than publishing four academic and two managerial ones, or producing four academic papers while delivering executive education sessions. Writing for managers and speaking to them in a classroom both require carefully crafted sets of skills, just as writing academic papers does. Developing such a diverse set of skills is a challenge (Markides, 2007).

As most would probably agree, the academic system does not generally value managerial relevance, particularly when it comes to tenure decisions. Hence, rewards for relevance are, at least within the system, largely absent. Moreover, there is a potential social cost that goes beyond lowered "academic output." As Palmer asserted, an apparent "silent majority" of scholars in organization studies "advocate disinterest in practical matters as a means to achieve objectivity, scientific or otherwise" (2006: 548). Trying to "speak to practitioners" and receiving recognition from them may carry the risk of stain and stigma, and potential disdain and removal from the in-group of "serious academics" (Gulati, 2007; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). Therefore, the final thing needed to attempt to matter more through one's research is a willingness to swim against the tide.

FIRST STEPS ON THE ROAD TO RELEVANCE

Given these deliberations, what might a management academic interested in creating a second loop do to increase the relevance of his or her research? First, the researcher could write one (teaching) case based on an organization and topic very close to the person's academic research agenda and area of expertise. The case should probably not be based solely on public and archival sources, but should draw the researcher into talking and listening to the people within an organization, to understand their view on the issues that he or she might want to examine in academic research. Note that, especially with the appropriate use of research and writing assistance, this commitment does not have to be greatly time-consuming. Moreover, it will likely have positive spin-offs, such as making teaching easier and more enjoyable once the case is used in a class. Most importantly, time spent in organizations will enrich understanding of one's research subject, which, in due course, will facilitate research design, execution, and interpretation of results.

Next, the researcher could develop one session in one course that deals directly with his or her research interests and use both the teaching case and his or her knowledge of the literature on the topic to present a good overview of what is and is not known about the subject. As one experienced educator told me recently, "You have to understand a topic so much better to be able to teach it." Designing such a session, whether for MBA or executive teaching, will reveal gaps in knowledge of the subject.

Then, before choosing his or her next academic research project, the researcher could ask, "Would a manager in my case company, or my [executive] students be interested in this research question?" or, "Would they be eager to understand the relationship between these variables?" If the answer is not an unequivocal yes, a different project may be in order! Often my colleagues feel they have too many ideas for their next projects and papers and regret that they can only pursue a few of them. Given the inevitable necessity of choice, one might as well pursue those ideas one is confident practitioners will be interested in, too. These ideas will also be usable in a classroom once the project and paper are completed (Tushman & O'Reilly, 2007). The researcher could update the aforementioned teaching session with inclusion of his or her new paper. It might not be necessary to have students read the actual article; rather, the researcher could discuss its findings and main message and possibly even ask students to relate these to their own work experiences. Perhaps people will find that their research works warrant only a five-minute discussion or so, but that should be sufficient; if research captures the attention of students or executives for just a few minutes, something has worked.

My final recommended step—arguably more costly and time-consuming than the previous steps—is writing a managerial article. As Figure 2 illustrates, such an article could be (partly) based on the aforementioned (and already written) academic paper, the work of others in the same field (which one reads anyway), and specific examples or qualitative information from the aforementioned interviews and already developed teaching case.

FIGURE 2

Relationships between Academic and Managerial Outlets
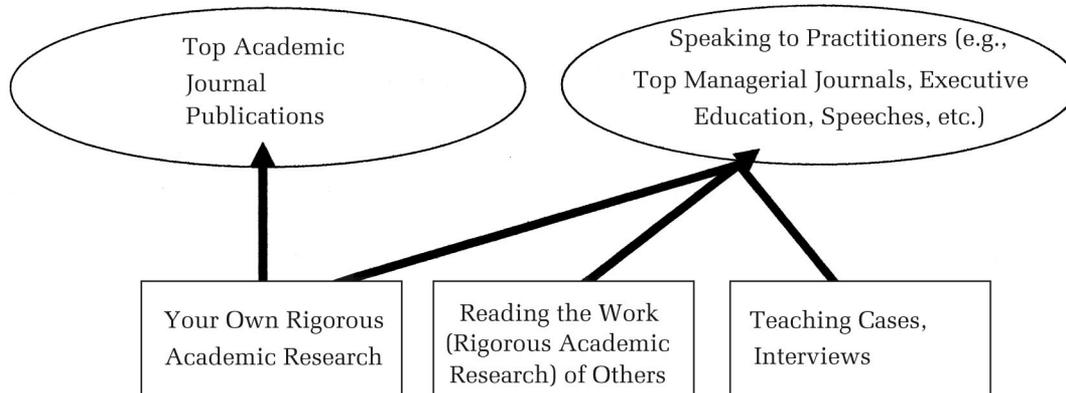
This mix will likely require some careful framing and writing and will definitely take some time and effort. A researcher might distribute a draft in an executive education classroom and get a sense of what is and is not working. Introducing the aforementioned measures in a stepwise fashion effectively constructs the second loop, without too much disruption to the first one.

CONCLUSION

The average Castalian[2] may regard the man of the outside world, the man who is not a scholar, without contempt, envy, or malice, but he does not regard him as a brother, does not see him as his employer, does not in the least feel that he shares responsibility for what is going on outside in the world. The purpose of his life seems to him to be cultivation of the scholarly disciplines for their own sake, or perhaps even to be taking pleasurable strolls in the garden of a culture that pretends to be a universal culture without ever being quite that. In brief, this Castalian culture of ours, sublime and aristocratic though it certainly is, and to which I am profoundly grateful is for most of those associated with it not an instrument they play on like a great organ, not active and directed toward goals, not consciously serving something greater or profounder than itself. Rather, it tends somewhat toward smugness and self-praise, toward the cultivation and elaboration of intellectual specialism (Hesse, 1943/2000: 329).

An increasing number of people within our field seem to feel that the academic system hampers our research from fulfilling its potential in terms of relevance for practitioners. An individual academic who has grown up and is working within the system may feel it is too difficult to change it, break the mold, and use research to help practitioners learn. The best one can do, or so it seems, is to hope that someone else (some journalist, consultant, or lecturer) will pick up the *Academy of Management Journal* or some other rigorous academic journal and use and translate its contents for practitioners. Yet I sense that some of us would like to do more than hope for translation. Moreover, I think the buck stops with us. If we cannot explain to practitioners how our research is relevant to them, how can we expect others to be able to do it? Making sure *we* worry about translating our research to managers may be the best way to assure that there is something worthy of translation in the first place.

Therefore, I aspired to argue in this essay that I hope some of us will set ourselves the goal of mattering more, working within the constraints of the system. We all have a loop of communication with fellow academics. In my view, gaining relevance requires adding a second loop involving ongoing engagement with people in organizations intended to develop real understanding of their circumstances, matched with continuous attempts to bring our research to them. Only a taste for such genuine engagement will enable our academic research to be of use to the people at the helms of organizations, individuals endeavoring to steer the groups of people we call firms through a complex and messy reality, in order to create wealth and, at the end of the day, a better world. Sure, this will require some personal effort and sacrifice. "Relevant

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[2] In Hermann Hesse's novel, *The Glass Bead Game*, the intellectual elite in the kingdom of Castalia play the game identified in the title; it is a creative, complex, artistic, and prestigious activity, but also one that serves no purpose other than itself.

research" is not something a scholar does on the side. It takes courage to step onto the thorny road to relevance, and it takes cheerfulness to truly enjoy and sustain the journey and the laborious interaction with the real world of organizations. Yet if you commit to speaking with people in practice about your work and force yourself to formulate and undertake research that also matters to them, at the end of the day, who knows, they might even listen. As a consequence, although no one might notice, you just might help those managers change our world for the better, even if just a little.

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