

An infinite loop

Management and research-in-action

It is time for a new, co-ordinated and collaborative approach to management research say **Andrea Cuomo, Yves Doz, Mikko Kosonen, Christophe Midler** and **José Santos**

Michael Porter and Nitin Nohria, respectively University Professor and Dean of the Harvard Business School, after years of survey research into the role of CEOs, state unequivocally: “surprisingly little is known about this unique role”.

We could not agree more. But it is anything but surprising. General management as a field for study was first hacked by “Strategy” and then by “Leadership”. It has still not recovered. Current prescriptions point to CEOs being a hybrid between formulators and cheerleaders, a sort of attractive alchemist.

Management research, not just on CEOs but also on managers in general, has been scant of late, to say the least. Furthermore, whatever management research is published it is rarely focused on managers in action. One century later, we now witness a revival of classicism and a longing for “scientific management” – now with the added magic of digital tools.

Management researchers have been data bingers for quite a while so it is only natural that they now prescribe the same for managers. But is this the right way to go? When was the last time you discovered a new piece of academic research that you found both original and relevant to managers in action?

There is an ongoing debate among academics about how tenure-track careers impose tight limits on management research (such as regularly publishing in “A” Journals) and how the canons of received scientific methodologies make such research difficult. CK Prahalad at the University of Michigan and more recently Mats Alvesson of Sweden’s Lund University and a few other academics have greatly contributed to this debate, stressing the widening gap between academic research and management practice and its causes.

We approached the matter keenly, given the opportunity for us to open last June’s EURAM Conference in Reykjavik, Iceland, the theme of which was “Research in Action”.

But we also decided to take a different route into the issues. This is a summary of the contributions of the five members of the opening plenary panel of the EURAM conference (above, in alphabetic order).

Our two major propositions are:

Management itself is research-in-action and therefore;

Research-in-action is required to research management.

Management as research-in-action

Presentism aside, managing in a complex world, crowded with interdependencies and bursting with problematic discontinuities is not a trivial responsibility. For one, using past experience and accumulated knowledge is often the source of failure. Uncertainty looms large.

In such situations, managerial action is tantamount to building and testing a (new) theory in the marketplace. Business strategies and the business models they aim for become unproven theories.

As with academic theories, managers’ theory development under new circumstances requires mastering contextual framing (say understanding boundary conditions and systemic interdependencies around the firm) as well as the domain of a specific new strategic language to make sense of new and often more complex circumstances. (Think traditional telecom equipment suppliers such as Nokia having to master the understanding of digital platform ecosystems). The managers of a previously successful incumbent may lack both.

The implication is that management itself is research-in-action. What this means is that effective management is not about knowing the off-the-shelf managerial solution to a particular problem, but rather about *discovering* a managerial solution.

It therefore follows that in attempting to understand management process researchers should aim to describe and explain how managers discover solutions and not what solutions they apply. In turn managers can then be taught discovery and analysis methods instead of being given mere recipes for a “solution”.

Research-in-action in management

To aspire to analyse, illuminate, theorise and enlighten management practice, research must focus on managers in action in context. This calls for fieldwork, preferably performed while managerial action unfolds. Yet performing management research-in-action faces its own challenges beyond the tyranny of “A” journals and a questionable emphasis on methods borrowed from hard sciences.

The research sites must be chosen in a space defined by the central research question and researching outliers or emblematic situations where the phenomena of interest may find their starkest manifestations often makes sense. In terms of access, it is usually more effective if this is negotiated by an academic institution rather than by an individual.

Research-in-action is time consuming and needs to be performed over time. As it may appear overwhelming for newcomers and so dissuade them from such work, support and guidance by experienced researchers will be helpful.

Researching managers in action calls for an open-ended, adventurous and interactive intellectual journey rather than for rigid pre-set research designs. The research questions must echo managers’ action interrogations not researchers’ abstract questions.

In management research that produces knowledge-for-action, we need to focus on the dynamics of interactions as they unfold over time more than we focus on the elements (people and their cognition and emotions) that interact. The unit of analysis thus is the interactive activities managers undertake and the relationship they develop more than managers themselves.

The “why” and the “how” of action matter as much as the “what” we can more easily observe (and impose our explanatory rationality on). This calls for sufficient closeness and legitimacy



with the managers involved to understand their own learning and evolution and to study collective action as a likely outcome of competing perspectives, conflicting priorities and adversarial positions. Action emerges from a social and political process.

To study action the research needs to follow a phenomenological, systemic approach. With few exceptions (such as Robert Burgelman at Stanford) such research needs to be part of a collective endeavour, by a community of learning, with one or two shared central research questions focusing individual learning efforts toward a collective agenda.

Specific research work may be individual but it requires frequent conversations with other researchers in the community addressing similar questions, before, during, and after performing fieldwork. And not just for the sake of discussing findings or edits to the original research questions but also for bringing differentiated disciplinary perspectives and complementary research experience.





As the research proceeds, regular interactions with managers are required to seek feedback on preliminary findings and alternative paths to follow. Research quality control by academic peers must be assured from the outset, both on method and output and at various milestones in the research project.

Reductionism, simplification, and equilibrium are incompatible with management research. We need to embrace complexity as method, not complexity as solution. If we follow Edgar Morin, a French philosopher and sociologist, we accept his assertion that we learn how to learn by learning; method is the beginning of each of our journeys as researchers but is also the end of each journey.

Research output is as much about the method with which to uncover the solution as it is about answering the research question itself. And we need to embrace the irreversibility of time in the unfolding of action.

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Embracing the infinite loop

Although research in action is relevant to both managers and researchers, this does not mean that the two roles are the same: managers are dedicated to implement such discovery methods, in their various different contexts, with their own action skills; researchers are dedicated to test, validate and formalise such tacit emergent knowledge into transferable theories of generalisable applicability.

We will only improve our research-in-action if we accept promoting and celebrating research about research in management and consider that management itself is about research-in-action.

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