by Laura Empson

A Relational Approach to Impact: Reflections from a Lifetime 'In the Field'

For the first 20 years of my academic career, I was repeatedly discouraged from engaging with practitioners and from doing research that might be relevant to them. When I started at London Business School I was told by my fellow PhD students that I was 'just a consultant'. When I joined the faculty at Oxford I learnt to stay quiet about my 'external work'. When I became Professor at Bayes (then Cass) Business School, my line manager told me to "stop wasting your time" engaging with practitioners, and to focus exclusively on producing publications in top-quality academic journals.

I carried on 'wasting my time'. I have won multiple awards from prestigious research councils, published numerous well-cited and influential articles in highly-ranked academic journals, and made an important contribution to the development of my field. I have also established a research centre that brings together academics and practitioners, produced a series of books and podcasts which have reached tens of thousands of practitioners and academics, advised the leaders of dozens of professional organisations around the world, and served as an independent non-executive director for one of the largest global professional service firms.

About ten years ago the word 'impact' started rising up the agenda of business school deans. Perhaps they had heard the mounting complaints by notable management academics that our universities, journals, accreditation agencies, and research evaluation bodies were privileging the production of pseudo-scientific, theoretically-motivated research over research that makes a difference in the world. Or perhaps deans realised that impact was where the money was, as research councils and research assessment exercises began to re-weight their metrics to incorporate research impact (Kalika and Shenton, 2018; Williams and Grant, 2018).

As I argue below, business schools are still getting it wrong when it comes to impact. In general, they are pursuing a transactional rather than a relational approach to practitioners, much like most instrumental professionals. Instead, they should follow the lead of more highly regarded professionals, the so-called 'trusted advisors', and place a relational approach to impact at the heart of their academic agenda. Below I explain more about the transactional and relational approaches to professional work, present my reflections from a 'lifetime in the field', and explain how I became a trusted advisor to the leaders of global professional service firms. Given the theme of this edited volume, I also consider the influence of gender on the impact agenda. I conclude with some practical advice for business school leaders and scholars who aspire to have impact.

Transactional vs relational

Clients complain when professionals adopt a transactional approach. A professional has a service to sell and tries to persuade a potential client to buy it. If successful, the professional delivers the project and then moves on to the next potential client. By contrast, a professional who adopts a relational approach pursues a longer-term strategy, seeking to position themselves as a 'trusted advisor'. They spend time getting to know a potential client, and discovering their priorities and concerns. Over several meetings both professional and client ask

questions and teach and learn from each other. As the relationship develops, they decide how best to work together, and money and advice start to flow. When the formal engagement ends, they remain in contact. A professional who becomes a trusted advisor and generates regular repeat business from established clients is valued by their organisation as well as their clients.

When business school leaders and research academics talk about impact, they usually adopt a transactional approach. Typically they have a piece of research to disseminate or sell, and only a vague idea of their target market or its specific needs. They engage with practitioners only sporadically and the conversation is essentially one-way. They position themselves as experts and forget that, to be effective at engaging with practitioners, you need to be ready to learn from them. Business schools employ Business Development Managers as go-betweens, to spot opportunities for impact from academics' research and negotiate with potential clients. This arms-length approach is not suitable for most management research, which tends to take the form of knowledge-based 'insights' rather than specific sellable products. As professionals know, the best person to sell intangible knowledge is the person who has developed it - through their embodiment of the knowledge, they render it tangible.

Unfortunately, most academics do not understand how to build relationships with practitioners. It is unrealistic to expect scholars to step out of their ivory towers, constructed from theoretically motivated research, and attempt to repackage their insights for practitioners they neither know nor understand. You cannot sell your insights without insight into the people you are selling to.

By contrast, I have always adopted a relational approach to impact. Over the past 30 years, I have researched a range of organisational themes in the context of professional organisations. Most notably in recent years, I have focused on making a theoretical contribution to the field of collective leadership in a professional context. I have always used a mix of interview-based and ethnographic methods and have spent several thousand hours listening to professionals as they talk about themselves, their work, and their organisations. Like an anthropologist, I have become bilingual from spending a lifetime in the field.

Virtuous circle

This is how my virtuous circle of research and impact works. On completing a phase of academic research (always funded by a research council rather than the organisations I am studying) I present it back to the participants in the study. I use these feedback sessions to sense-check and refine my findings, and to notice which ideas resonate particularly powerfully with practitioners. While my research papers are under review by academic journals, I start disseminating my research through speeches at practitioner conferences, articles in *Harvard Business Review*, and my podcast series, all of which are aimed at leaders of professional organisations. The feedback I receive from practitioners and the questions I am asked (and cannot answer) help me refine my academic papers and provide me with ideas for my next research study. The practitioners who hear my keynotes and read my work grant me research access, and the research councils keep funding my research. So the virtuous circle of theoretically-informed research and practitioner-oriented impact keeps on turning.

My long-term advisory relationships help crystalise the impact of my research. I work with the leaders of organisations over several months, and sometimes years, to develop and apply my own research to their specific context. I draw upon nascent insights from my research and test out and develop them in a new organisational context. My concepts become part of the everyday language of my client organisations. Because the experience

yields appreciable benefits, my clients recommend me to other leaders of professional organisations, and my relationship network grows. I value the personal relationships I have developed with some of my clients. When I have a problem, I turn to them for advice – they become my trusted advisors.

Examples from a lifetime 'in the field'

It is important not to idealise the challenges faced by academics seeking to have sustained impact through their research. Jarzabkowski *et al*. (2024) have written about the problems they encountered during their fifteen-year 'journey for impact'. Elsewhere I have written about my significant challenges, both in terms of my academic identity and career progression, as a result of my commitment to pursuing a research and impact agenda in tandem (Empson, 2013; 2017). Yet impact has been a sustainable source of motivation for my research, whilst contributing immeasurably to its rigour as well as its relevance. Below I present some examples from my own experience to explain how the virtuous circle can work.

Learning while speaking – On completing my PhD, which explored post-merger integration in professional service firms, I published a short article in London Business School's practitioner magazine. The managing partner of an elite professional service firm read my article and asked me to speak to his 500 partners at their upcoming conference. The firm had recently undergone a major merger and discontent among the partners was running deep. My client asked me to travel across Europe to interview his partners so that I could tailor my presentation to their specific concerns. My platform speech effectively became an 'intervention'. I presented quotes from my PhD which reflected partners' confidential interview comments, thus reassuring my audience that their feelings of anxiety and anger were 'normal'. My conceptual frameworks provided the partners with an intellectual scaffolding which enabled them to start to talk honestly with each other about their clashing cultures and problems managing change. My interviews with my client firm made me more confident in the generalisability of my PhD findings. This client set the direction of my future approach to keynote speaking. I prefer not to give generic speeches to practitioners about my research (this may entertain and inform them but limits my impact). Instead, I try to gather data to tailor my material to their specific needs. In this way, even when I am not formally 'doing data collection' for publication, I am continuously refreshing my knowledge and deepening my understanding.

Translating and creating - At Oxford I established an annual conference for scholars of professionals, funded by a major global law firm. During a lunch break, the firm's Chair whispered to me: "They are talking about my world but I can't understand what they are saying." His confusion and exasperation gave me the idea for the book that would become *Managing the Modern Law Firm*, published by Oxford University Press (Empson, 2007). Alongside my chapters, as editor, I invited various management academics who had presented at my conference to develop their research papers into chapters that could be read by lawyers. Some drafts were far too lightweight for lawyers (written in *HBR* style). Others were incomprehensible even to me. I spent several months rewriting my contributors' chapters, trying to find the right language and persuading them to accept my rewrites. Through this process, I developed my 'voice' as a scholar who sought to speak to intelligent and intellectually curious professionals.

'Changing the firm for the better forever' – The success of the book brought me many invitations to work with professionals from a range of sectors. In "My affair with the 'other': Identity journeys across the research practice divide" (Empson, 2013) I write about one such advisory relationship where, over the course of three years, I helped redesign and implement new governance systems and structures, and addressed underlying cultural issues among the leaders of the firm. While the work threw into sharp focus much that troubled me profoundly about academia, in terms of impact it was a very positive experience. Toward the end of the project my client, the firm's managing partner, wrote to me:

"I want to emphasise how important our work with you has been over the last three years. With your assistance I think we have changed the firm for the better forever and you have been a critical part of that process. I couldn't have done it without you and I will be indebted to you forever for having helped me in the way that you have. On a personal note, it has been great fun."

Bringing academics and practitioners together – I moved from Oxford to Cass (now Bayes) Business School in London to take up a professorship and establish a new research centre. I was determined that the Centre for Professional Service Firms would conduct rigorous academic research whilst engaging with professionals at all stages in the research process: from inception, design, and execution, through to dissemination and application. First and foremost our research would be driven by the intellectual interests of the academics conducting it; for that reason, I declined requests to undertake contract research for professional organisations. I recruited several distinguished leaders of elite professional service firms to join the Centre to help us do better research. They were people I had known for many years and respected as intelligent, curious, and thoughtful (i.e. 'reflective practitioners'). At our monthly research meetings, I convened an eclectic group of established faculty, senior professionals, and PhD students, to design research, discuss work-in-progress, and plan dissemination events. Our practitioners also helped train our PhD students in how to negotiate access and speak to senior leaders.

Joining the Board – I studied a Big Four accounting firm as part of my research council-funded study of leadership dynamics in professional organisations. Some time afterward, the new chairman of the firm asked me to join the board as an independent non-executive. Thus I embarked on a new phase of my impact journey. For three years I was deeply immersed in the Big Four firm's highest-level decision-making processes and its power and politics. My work also led me to advise the audit profession's regulator, and ultimately the UK government, on audit firm regulation (see Empson, 2017). I resigned from the Board after three years because the substantial time commitment was hard to reconcile with my ongoing research projects and I was concerned that my responsibilities to the firm were compromising my intellectual independence. Through my hands-on experience on the board I developed a much deeper appreciation of the phenomenon I had been studying for many years and this informed my subsequent research.

Becoming 'a thinker' – *Leading Professionals: Power Politics, and Prima Donnas* (Empson, 2017) was my third book for Oxford University Press, designed to be readable and relevant for both academics and practitioners. It represented a landmark in the development of my contribution to the field of collective leadership research. It enabled me to bring together many nascent ideas about leadership which I had been exploring over the previous two decades and develop them into a coherent study of collective leadership. Some chapters were based on my academic articles currently under review. Others were iterations of my previously published work, translated to be understood by practitioners and non-specialist academics. Some were entirely new ideas I had not yet developed for publication. The book was even more successful than my first and, alongside the accompanying *Harvard Business Review* article, led to me being recognised by the Thinkers' 50 (a global ranking of management 'gurus') for my work in the field of collective leadership. I have gone on to publish several articles about collective leadership in leading academic journals, but it all began with my book for OUP, which gave me the space to integrate my ideas and develop a coherent intellectual framing for my research.

Making a documentary - One of the chapters in *Leading Professionals* was about the phenomenon of 'insecure overachievers', which I had identified through my research. I knew the idea resonated powerfully with the professionals who had read my book so I approached the BBC and pitched the idea of making a documentary about it. I persuaded senior leaders of professional organisations to talk 'on the record' about their insecurities and the role that insecurity played in driving performance in their organisations. Several years after the documentary was first broadcast professionals still write to thank me for my insights into themselves and their organisations. Some write to say they have quit their jobs as a result, determined to free themselves from the unhealthy dynamics within their organisations.

Launching a podcast – The BBC taught me how to become a broadcaster so my next step was to launch my own podcast series, *Leading Professional People*. I joined with the senior partner of an elite professional organisation (a research participant who had become a good friend) and made a podcast series targeted at the leaders and aspiring leaders of professional organisations. We chose topics we knew would resonate with our listeners, and about which we both had something meaningful to say. We interviewed leaders of elite professional organisations whom we knew personally, and who would bring a particularly interesting focus to the issue. About a third of each episode comprised a detailed analysis by my co-host and me (based on his leadership experience and my leadership research). Now in its third series, the podcast has approximately 50,000 listeners in over 100 countries around the world. Increasingly, when professionals get in touch with me, it is because of the podcast.

Speaking 'as a woman'

The basic premise of this edited volume is that women in business schools have been disadvantaged relative to men and that our institutions' systems and structures need to adapt to address the challenges that women face. Until there has been a fundamental reset in the position of women in academia, I would advise women academics to think carefully before pursuing an impact agenda. Women academics already have enough other professional challenges and must contend with multiple pernicious sources of inequality, arising from a range of structural, systemic, and cultural issues within academia. Despite recent advances, we remain very much 'the other' in business schools (Fotaki, 2013) and women risk rendering themselves even more 'other' if they focus on impact, with the attendant difficulties for career progression.

Given all we know about *The Authority Gap* with which women must contend (Sieghart, 2021), I recognise that my gender has presented additional challenges when seeking to develop my reputation as an expert. When I rejected my socialisation into becoming a conventional academic perhaps at some level I understood that, as a woman, I would always be seen as 'other' by the male power brokers in my field, so I might as well pursue my own path. This approach has caused me to move continuously between the worlds of academia and practice, never fully belonging to either, but ultimately successful and content to operate in both. If I had understood the risk I was taking professionally, I would not have had the courage to pursue this path. But following this path has given meaning and purpose to my academic life and has made my research better. In recent years several well-published contemporaries have told to me that they are bored with 'playing the game' and have run out of ideas for new research. That has never happened to me and I think it is because I have never seen academia as a game and always sought to make a difference with my research.

What's to be done?

I have never submitted an impact case study to the UK's research evaluation exercise. The REF's assessment methods are too crude and rigid to evaluate the impact of my research. Elite consulting firms preserve client confidentiality and so must I. My advisory work about leadership dynamics in elite professional organisations is too sensitive and the impact too amorphous to be packaged into a publicly available impact case study. While practitioners are happy to provide references, they will not disclose details of the work I do with them; and unfortunately, the REF demands details. Any attempt by business schools and assessment bodies to 'measure' impact, therefore, automatically excludes some significant forms of impact and excludes the academics like me who do it.

Advice to researchers - Developing close relationships with practitioners can make us better researchers. But we should only do it because we enjoy it. Having impact should not feel like just some other thing we have to achieve within our business schools' audit cultures. So, aim to have impact with your research, not because you have been asked to add impact to your performance goals, and not because a research assessment body has come up with some new way of measuring impact. Do it because it matters, because it helps give purpose and meaning to your research. Do it because the psychic rewards are immediate and significant. Do it because it is fun.

Advice to business school leaders – There needs to be a fundamental reset in how we think about and seek to create impact. Our PhD students are trained to focus on theoretically motivated research. If they start their programme with a desire to have impact, they soon learn to keep quiet about this if they want to be taken seriously. Early career researchers are directed towards more 'efficient' forms of arms-length data collection, rather than engaging in the complex and messy business of negotiating access and gathering data in the field. Scholars who gain a tenure track position are told to stay focused on their publications and wait till their position is secure. By the time they become a tenured professor, their intellectual identity and working practices are fully formed. They are highly skilled at making theoretical contributions but will struggle to develop a relational approach to impact.

As a business school leader, if you are serious about impact, you need to stop thinking about it as an additional goal, alongside research and teaching and recognise that impact is integral to both. It is difficult to have meaningful impact if you adopt a purely transactional perspective, such as engaging in contract research for money with the hope of being able to develop an academic publication out of it. Instead, place impact at the heart of your strategic priorities. Encourage your PhD students to think in terms of impact, and integrate courses on impact into your PhD programme. Recruit and reward faculty who know how to have impact, rather than just scholars with numerous publications in the 'right' journals. Seek out reflective practitioners and bring them together with faculty to explore ways of making research more rigorous and impactful. Stop thinking in terms of the research-practice divide and recognise that research and practice are (or at least should be) part of the same ecosystem.

Ultimately, though we may shudder to admit it, our business schools are trade schools, not seats of esoteric intellectual exploration. After ten years at Oxford, I definitely understand the difference. If we are to continue to occupy our ivory towers, we should start by recognising that our towers are built on practitioners' land. We should at the very least try to understand and respect our neighbours, and offer them a helping hand from time to time.

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