Reply: Nice Try, Bill, but... There You Go Again
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Published by: Academy of Management
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20159254
Accessed: 30/06/2014 17:31
REPLY

NICE TRY, BILL, BUT . . . THERE YOU GO AGAIN

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Bill McKelvey’s commentary is provocative, but four points need correction. (1) The purpose of engaged scholarship is not just to advance practice but to create scientific knowledge. (2) Bill’s food chain metaphor mistakenly views the gap between science and practice as a knowledge transfer problem. (3) Bill ignores the impact of biases of researchers by only focusing on practitioner bias. (4) He considers differing views of researchers and practitioners as antithetical; we view them as complementary.

In his presidential election debates, former President Ronald Reagan often responded, “There you go again,” in reply to claims by opponents that he thought were half-truths, distortions, or misstatements of his position. In like manner, our response to Bill McKelvey’s (2006) comments on our paper (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006) is “Nice try, Bill, but . . . there you go again.”

To his credit, Bill is provocative. His informal, brash, tongue-in-cheek style causes us to take notice, to simplify, and to take sides (in this case) on the so-called gap between management theory and practice. In addition, his lists nicely summarize our three ways of viewing this gap as a knowledge transfer problem, as distinct kinds of knowledge, or as a knowledge production problem. However, we believe Bill also misrepresents our position on several key points.

First, Bill’s statement that our purpose is “to create practitioner-meaningful research” (2006: 822) is only half true. An equally important purpose of engaged scholarship is to create scientifically meaningful research. Bill’s statement that “a key mission of business schools is to produce research that advances practice” (2006: 822) is, we believe, neither an “obvious” nor correct reflection of Herbert Simon’s (1976) view. Simon emphasizes that business schools—like other professional schools—have a DUAL mission of producing knowledge that advances science AND informs practice. This mission is not an “either-or”; it is “both.”

Business schools (and their faculty) would lose their capabilities to exercise intellectual leadership if they pursued a single-minded goal of either advancing practice or theory. Simon cautions that if a business school adopts an exclusively “practical” orientation, “it becomes a slightly out-of-date purveyor of almost-current business practice” (Simon, 1976: 350). Simon sketches an equally undesirable result when faculty members are sealed off from the practitioner’s environment and become dependent on their academic disciplines for goals, values, and approvals.

On the one hand, the members of each discipline in the professional school demand increasing autonomy so that they can pursue the goals defined by their discipline without regard to the “irrelev-ant” professional school goals. On the other hand, the professional school environment loses any special attraction it might have as a locus for research and teaching, and the group becomes less and less able to attract and retain first-class members (Simon, 1976: 350).

Past arguments for business school research have tended to be one sided and focus only on the relevance of academic research for business practice. One goal of our paper is to shift the argument by giving equal attention to the need for basic research. We argue that scholarship that is engaged with practice not only enhances the practical relevance of research but also contributes significantly to advancing fundamental knowledge in a given domain.

Second, Bill uses the metaphor of a knowledge food chain, which we believe is mistaken. Whether mosquitoes are at the left and T. rexes
are at the right is irrelevant, because a food chain metaphor ignores the distinct kinds of knowledge that researchers, teachers, consultants, and managers bring to the task of understanding problems in the world. As Poggie said, “A way of seeing is a way of not seeing.” In this regard, our problem is not one of transferring knowledge among individuals along the food chain but, rather, engaging individuals to collaborate in the knowledge production process in the first place.

Third, Bill concludes that our approach is a nice dream, but not a solution—“bias, disciplines, and particularism remain” (2006: 822). Of course, bias, disciplines, and particularism remain—they are present in any form of inquiry. We believe that engaged scholarship provides a better means of dealing with these issues than the alternative (what we do now). Bill questions whether the particularistic, time-dated interests and proprietary biases of firms form a good platform for scientific truth claims. Let’s be reflexive and ask a similar question of academe. Any notions that science and scientific knowledge are objective, impartial, or value free have been buried along with positivism. We think that openly identifying and negotiating the different interests, biases, and motivations among researchers and between managers and researchers provides a better and more transparent platform for scientific inquiry than the status quo practice of not admitting to or talking about our biases and interests.

Finally, Bill proposes that earthquake science offers a good model for business school research because, as he says, “It is the only legitimate science studying extremes” (2006: 828). But, there you go again, Bill! Actually, “legitimate” study of outliers, extreme values, and unique cases has been long-standing in management and related literature. A variety of methods and models have been used to systematically investigate unique cases of strategy, decision making, and best practice in fields ranging from manufacturing and management (Lewin & Minton, 1986; Sinha, 1996) to health care practice (Johnson et al., 2002). Indeed, N-of-1 studies (Guyatt et al., 1986), methods of frontier analysis (Charnes, Cooper, Lewin, & Seiford, 1997), and ethnographic methods (Van Maanen, 1995) have made significant contributions to the literature in a variety of fields.

More pertinent to this debate, we suggest, is that the methods employed for framing problems as unique or general depend on the phenomena being studied and the purpose of the research. Bill rightly points out that practitioners are typically interested in solving an immediate problem, whereas researchers are interested in generalizable knowledge. But while Bill views these particular and general interests in a given study as being antithetical, we view them as being complementary and providing opportunities to arbitrage or leverage new knowledge. Our point is not simply that the scientist/scholar and the practitioner are motivated to produce solutions to their own problems; they can also contribute to the solution of each other’s problems. The history of science and technology reveals numerous examples in which the framing of a particular problem led to a solution of the more general case, which, in turn, led to solutions for a wide array of practical problems (Ruttan, 2001).

In the end, we must adopt a methodology that is appropriate for the problem being investigated. But before one “bets the ranch” on a given perspective or methodology, it would be well to collaborate with others to ground and explore alternative models for addressing the question at hand. For it is by listening to and engaging with others that we are able to do the kind of work that informs basic understanding and contributes to informed and heedful practice.

REFERENCES


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