

ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT JOURNAL EDITORS' FORUM ON RESEARCH WITH RELEVANCE TO PRACTICE

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

CARRYING SUMANTRA GHOSHAL'S TORCH: CREATING MORE POSITIVE, RELEVANT, AND ECOLOGICALLY VALID RESEARCH

During the first week of May, I was invited to attend a conference at the London Business School honoring the work and the spirit of Sumantra Ghoshal. The conference's title was "Conducting Research with Relevance to Practice," and the speakers were mostly people who had demonstrated a gift for doing just that. Many were also close friends of Ghoshal's.

Having never met him, I was fascinated to hear what the various speakers remembered about Ghoshal and how he had affected not only their work, but also their outlook on life. The longer I sat there, the more I wished that I, too, had known him.

By the end of the opening talk by Christopher Bartlett (Bartlett, 2007), I had learned that Sumantra Ghoshal served as a role model for the following principles:

- A commitment to field research, built on a profound respect for practitioners
- Engagement and ongoing dialog with practitioners via public speaking and consulting
- Teaching and research as interdependent activities, with teaching cases being the first output of field research and later steps involving taking students into the field and case protagonists into the classroom
- Using the classroom as a petri dish for innovation and experimentation
- Maintaining academic respectability by combining rigor with relevance
- Building credibility with practitioners by testing the relevance of theories, developing channels

I would like to thank the Department of Strategic and International Management at the London Business School for organizing the conference upon which this forum is based. Special thanks, too, to Freek Vermeulen, for orchestrating the production of these essays, and to Costas Markides, for educating me on Sumantra Ghoshal's pithy one-liners.

and language for communication over boundaries, and engaging practitioners in the academic agenda

- Being in the front-line trenches in one's own institution by championing field research, guiding and mentoring practice-oriented researchers, and defending good practice-oriented researchers in tenure and other career decisions
- Carrying forward Donald Hambrick's (1994) agenda to make the Academy "really matter"

Because *AMJ* has been actively engaged in trying to facilitate research that is both rigorous and relevant (e.g., Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2007; Shapiro & Rynes, 2005), I asked Freek Vermeulen (a conference organizer and *AMJ* board member) if some of the conference participants might be interested in writing essays on combining rigor and relevance in honor of Ghoshal. The answer was a resounding yes. The five resulting essays follow.

According to his friends, Ghoshal was a master of pithy one-liners. For example, when his colleagues would be trying to discern the best new research topic or angle for a talk or paper, Ghoshal would probe, "Where's the sizzle?" In her essay, "Academic Research That Matters to Managers: On Zebras, Dogs, Lemmings, Hammers, and Turnips," Anita McGahan talks about research projects that sizzle with both academic and practitioner audiences, as well as those that fizzle. Among the sizzlers are studies that generate counterintuitive insights, demonstrate that fundamental practices or environmental conditions are changing in an important way, show that a widely used management practice violates importance principles, suggest a specific theory to explain an interesting current phenomenon, or identify an iconic problem, phenomenon, or activity that opens both new areas of academic inquiry and management practice. In addition to identifying these general types, McGahan

illustrates opportunities for future research in each of these categories, using examples from the research literature on industry change. For example, one of my favorites is, “While many executives are currently embracing a ‘green approach’ to conserve energy, few are dealing seriously with the prospect of the depletion of the planet’s petroleum reserves over forthcoming generations. The list of affected industries is almost endless” (McGahan, 2007: 750).

Another piece of advice Ghoshal used to dispense was that to get to the heart of a matter, a researcher should identify “the smell of a place.” This advice is illustrated in the essay by Freek Vermeulen entitled, “‘I Shall Not Remain Insignificant’: Adding a Second Loop to Matter More.” In this essay, Vermeulen reflects on his own career to suggest ways in which researchers can move out of the “closed incestuous loop” noted by Hambrick (1994) in his Academy of Management presidential address to a “relevance loop” in which practitioners both inform and consume research. He argues that although we researchers can learn some things by analyzing secondary data sets or survey responses, true comprehension requires understanding at a more intimate level that can only be accomplished by close observation or interaction. Vermeulen’s essay also brings to mind Ghoshal’s “sweet and sour model of change,” according to which reaching a higher level of performance requires one not only to develop new growth opportunities (the sweet part), but also to cut some old ones (the sour part). Vermeulen is explicit about the fact that a researcher must give up something of value to pursue more meaningful research, but he finds the sweet part—a sense of mattering more—to be worth the sacrifice.

The essay by Markides, “In Search of Ambidextrous Professors,” brings to mind Ghoshal’s question, “Why does it have to be either-or? Why can’t it be all and all?” Markides argues against overly “radical” solutions to the perceived gap between academia and practice (such as changing the structure of business schools or their academic incentive system) in favor of a combination of four simple ideas: (1) differentiating expectations of academics at different career stages, (2) appreciating that there are different types of managerially relevant research, (3) pursuing “open innovation” by going beyond school boundaries for help, and (4) looking to the research on ambidexterity for clues about how to create ambidextrous mind-sets and integrative mechanisms in business schools. He argues that if these ideas—none of which is, by itself, radical—were taken up by a large number of people, it “could make a big difference” and lead to

what he regards as the optimal outcome: “a major change achieved not by revolution, but by evolution” (Markides, 2007: 767).

The essay by Tushman and O’Reilly, “Research and Relevance: The Implications of Pasteur’s Quadrant for Doctoral Programs and Faculty Development,” is a good illustration of using the classroom as a petri dish of innovation and experimentation. They describe how executive education classes and custom programs “can create contexts where business school faculty and thoughtful practitioners might forge relations that foster virtuous cycles of knowing (faculty and doctoral student research) and doing (linking scholarly research to real-world practice)” (Tushman & O’Reilly, 2007: 770). Further, they argue that “doctoral programs should pivot on the choice of research question,” supported by student training in appropriate theoretical and methodological tools for addressing them.

Finally, the last essay, by Ranjay Gulati, “Tent Poles, Tribalism, and Boundary Spanning: The Rigor-Relevance Debate in Management Research,” brings to mind the following “Ghoshalism”: “Most organizations end up creating the environment of downtown Calcutta in July *inside* themselves.” His point was that the underlying environment of organizations ends up influencing the behaviors of the people inside them, with most developing climates that stifle people. So it is, argues Gulati, with the “tribal divisions” that have emerged within business schools: “Arbiters of rigor and ‘good taste’ have arisen in our field and have had a strong influence on which researchers are celebrated through publications, citations, awards, and other recognition. This covertly tribal behavior may be masked as impartiality. It can be exemplified by those in ostensibly influential roles or by an invisible politburo that builds and just as quickly destroys reputations. The weapon of choice of these arbiters? The granting of a badge of honor or shame (i.e., “rigorous” or “nonrigorous”) to a given body of work, regardless of its impact on research or practice. What is most unfortunate . . . [about these labels] is that they stimulate a debate completely antithetical to a productive dialogue on how management researchers can embark on a more truly synergistic research enterprise” (Gulati, 2007: 778). Gulati goes on to argue that these tribal identities are, for the most part, socially constructed falsehoods that get in the way of useful and innovative research.

Ghoshal himself wrote on the question of how to make research more relevant and, in his view, less destructive. In his last essay, he made a plea for (among other things) not hiding behind a barrage of excuses:

When managers, including CEOs, justify their actions by pleading powerlessness in the face of external forces, it is to the dehumanization of practice that they resort. When they claim that competition or capital markets are relentless in their demands, and that individual companies and managers have no scope for choices, it is on the strength of the false premise of determinism that they free themselves from any sense of moral or ethical responsibility for their actions. (Ghoshal, 2005: 79)

If he were still alive, I'm sure Ghoshal would extend this argument to say that when we, as academics, plead powerlessness in choosing what we research and how we do it because of incentive and reward systems (particularly after achieving tenure), we dehumanize and degrade our careers and our lives. As Ghoshal and the authors of the present essays have noted, change will "not progress unless many scholars, including younger scholars, redirect their work, at considerable risk to their careers. For them to take such risks, much has to be done by many so as to reverse the overall trend of the last 50 years" (Ghoshal, 2005: 86). In this effort, Ghoshal called for senior scholars to "lead the endeavor and provide 'air cover' for the junior faculty who choose to join in" (2005: 89).

As indicated by his various writings, Ghoshal had a bias for action. He believed that what distinguishes truly productive people is not so much their ability to motivate others, but their ability to engage their own willpower (through a powerful combination of energy and focus) to achieve results. It is my hope that after reading the essays in this forum, at least some of you will join Anne Frank, Sumantra Ghoshal, and the authors of these essays in making a pledge to "not remain insignificant," but rather to "work in the world and for mankind" (Frank, 1944/1989).

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