

LEADERSHIP

What If Management Ideas Actually Mattered?

by [Gianpiero Petriglieri](#)

November 05, 2015



Greg Rakozy

In August 1993, Professor Donald Hambrick gave a memorable address to the annual gathering of the Academy of Management. As its president, his question to the thousands of members in the world's largest association of management scholars could hardly be dismissed: What if the Academy actually mattered?

Hambrick's "actually" referred to the men and women, outside the Academy, occupied with actual management in actual organizations. The picture of academic provincialism that he painted was a stark yet familiar one.

More than 20 years later, Hambrick's address has been cited nearly 500 times in publications by fellow academics. An established genre has emerged from critiques that management research lacks relevance and management education lacks impact. And management "gurus" who work within and alongside academia — writing about supposedly relevant matters in accessible fashion — are called into question just as often.

So long have these concerns been raised, and so little has changed as a result, however, that we must consider an alternative, more disturbing view.

This is the argument that Jennifer Petriglieri and I lay out in a forthcoming article in the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* journal, raising a different question than the one Hambrick raised two decades ago.

What if management thinkers of every stripe — our writing, talks, and teaching — have mattered all along? What if the current state of leadership and management is not a result of our inadequacy but an outcome of our work?

In other words, what if for decades now, we have reflected, amplified, and shaped the mindsets, language, and mores of the managers and leaders that most people mistrust? What if under the cover story that we didn't matter much, we have been too complicit with those who benefit from the status quo to raise a fiercer challenge to it?

We might be potent, seen that way, but not quite powerful enough. Or, more precisely, we might be powerful only by association.

This is not new. There has long been a symbiotic relationship between authorities and authors. No Roman emperor would have left for a military campaign without taking historians along. Many a great medieval painter would have starved without the Pope's patronage. There have been jesters in every court.

The greatest among those historians, painters, and jesters, however, were able to honor the system they were part of without colluding with its reigning powers. They rather used their tales, pictures, and quips to shape it. (Imagery only becomes art

when it challenges some establishment.)

These days, however, the strange bedfellowship of authors and authorities has turned into a marriage of convenience, where “big ideas” inspire “bold actions” and vice versa. If not a mutual admiration society, that between “thinkers” and “doers” is often a mutual inspiration one. Inspiration, however, comes at the expense of thinking — and of the questions that thinking rests upon and raises.

Consider common advice for authors who seek the grail of managerial relevance. We are urged to do two things. First, to focus on a problem common in that world that we preface with the adjective “real,” as if to evoke the materiality of management, to chastise the intangibility of academia, and to set them apart. Second, to write in simple, anodyne “business” English, conveying a concrete, uplifting solution possibly broken down into a pre-digested list.

The reason, an editor once told me, is that “managers” are very practical and have short attention spans. Writing for them, I should imagine talking to my six year-old. He knew I loved, and loved talking to, my six year-old. Nevertheless, I would neither want someone in his state of mind in charge of an enterprise nor are the many managers I meet and work with like that.

Portraying managers as impatient, action-oriented, and result-obsessed people with no regard for elegance, depth, and nuance, however, not only insults their intelligence and humanity — and ours. It also signals that we should deploy a minimal amount of both in order to occupy our roles.

By diluting management thinking in the pursuit of relevance and inspiration, in other words, we condemn ourselves to a dangerous irrelevance, putting off anyone who is aware of the actual complexity of real managers’ dilemmas and aspirations.

Concrete, uplifting recipes to lead (or more precisely, become richer and more powerful) might get more clicks and sell more books. If the business literature was more literature and less business, however, it could shake off its instrumental

provincialism — its reluctance to value critiques or reflections that do not offer immediate solutions. Doing so might free us up to ask important questions.

We could ask, for example, whether celebrating success predicated on overwork makes us complicit with a profitable health hazard — in the way that Hollywood, putting cigarettes in movie stars' mouths, bolstered the tobacco industry.

We could ask whether reducing leadership to a set of influencing skills makes it a synonym of selfishly getting one's way, and how to change the meaning of leadership so as to help different leaders emerge.

We could ask whether turning talent development into the acquisition of habits dictated by competency models generates cheerful conformity or cynicism, and how to foster the responsible subversion real leadership requires instead.

We could stop asking, in short, whether we matter and ask instead how the meanings we give to success, leadership and learning matter. What difference they make.

That would be critical, hopeful, and practical. Words shape our worlds. Even, perhaps more so, when they promote illusions under the guise of visions, theory, or advice.

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Joseph McGarry 4 years ago

Management has come down to policies and procedures. Many policies and procedures come about because one person did something wrong, but it was not a violation of current policy. To make sure it doesn't happen again, a new policy is adopted. Leadership is more than that. I can sum it up in one sentence: Do what you know is right, and work with others so they do the same. Everything else comes from that.

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