



Academic-practitioner engaged scholarship RICK section of *Information & Organization*

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There has been an ongoing debate among management scholars about the role and level of engagement with practice in management research (See DRUID17 debate at <https://vimeo.com/224049892>, as well as Walsh, Meyer, & Schoonhoven, 2006; Byington & Felps, 2017). Numerous scholars have asserted that management research lacks relevance and is detached from the real world of managerial decision-making (see essays in Mohrman, Lawler III, and Associates, 2011, Bartunek & McKenzie, 2017). At the same time, others have suggested that adopting a strong practice orientation leads researchers to focus on small and intellectually trivial problems, taking them away from developing critical and broad theory and evidence about managerial action (Huff, 2000; Kilduff & Kelemen, 2001; March, 2003; Donaldson, Qiu, & Nanfeng Luo, 2013; Langley & Klag, 2017).

This paper argues the case for involving practitioners in basic research not only to increase its relevance, but more importantly because we can increase the likelihood of advancing knowledge for science and practice by engaging with practitioners and other stakeholders in our research. After a brief background introduction to engaged scholarship, my argument examines some of the challenges and opportunities associated with involving practitioners (and other stakeholders) in scientific research. Our purpose is to appreciate the forms of engagement with practice that might yield opportunities for scholarly progress, as well as an awareness of the costs and dangers associated with this engagement. Hopefully, the paper enables a richer and more meaningful conversation about the promise and the peril of scholarly engagement with practice than in the past.

1. Background

I (Van de Ven, 2007) proposed a method of *engaged scholarship* for studying complex social problems that often exceed our limited capabilities to study on our own. *Engaged Scholarship* is a participative form of research for obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) to understand a complex problem or phenomenon. Using the diamond model illustrated in Fig. 1, I argue (in Van de Ven, 2007) that researchers can significantly increase the likelihood of producing knowledge that advances theory and practice by engaging others whose perspectives are relevant in each of the four study activities:

1. *Problem formulation*—situate, ground, and diagnose the research problem by determining who, what, where, when, why, and how the problem exists up close and from afar. Answering these journalist's questions requires meeting and talking with people who experience and know the problem, as well as reviewing the literature on the prevalence and boundary conditions of the problem.
2. *Theory building*—develop plausible alternative theories (or propositions) that address the problem as it exists in its particular context. Developing these alternative theories requires conversations with knowledgeable experts from the relevant disciplines and functions that have addressed the problem, as well as a review of relevant literature.
3. *Research design*—gather empirical evidence to compare the plausible alternative models that address the research problem. Doing this well typically requires getting advice from technical experts in research methodology and the people who can provide access to data, and of course, the respondents or informants of information.
4. *Problem solving*—communicate, interpret, and apply the empirical findings on which models better answer the research question

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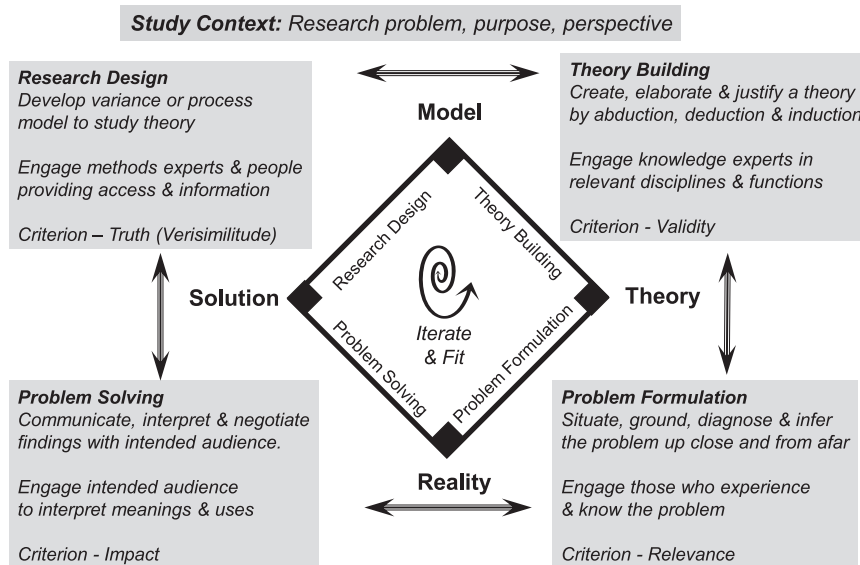


Fig. 1. Engaged scholarship diamond model.

Source: Van de Ven, Engaged Scholarship, Oxford Univ. Press 2007, p. 10.

about the problem. The greater the difference in content-specific knowledge between researchers and stakeholders, the more they need to communicate in order to understand and use the research findings. Communications might begin with written reports and presentations for knowledge transfer, then conversations to interpret different meanings of the report, and then pragmatic and political negotiations to reconcile conflicting interests.

Engaged scholarship can be practiced in many different ways, including (1) basic informed basic research, (2) collaborative research, (3) evaluation research, and (4) action research, as discussed in Van de Ven (2007). These different approaches depend on: (1) whether the purpose of a study is to examine basic questions of description, explanation, and prediction, or applied questions of design, evaluation, or action intervention, and (2) the degree to which a researcher examines the problem domain as an external observer or an internal participant.

1.1. Central claim

My central claim is that we can increase the likelihood of advancing knowledge for science and practice by engaging with practitioners and other stakeholders in the following four steps of any study:

1. Ground problem/question in reality up close & from afar
2. Develop alternative theories to address the question
3. Collect evidence to compare models of theories
4. Communicate & apply findings to address the problem/question

The following sections adopt the Toulmin (1958; 2003) structure of argument by explaining reasons and evidence for my claim as well as anticipate some reservations and qualifications of my claim. See Table 1 for summary of the argument.

1.2. Reasons

Many of us study complex problems that exceed our limited individual capabilities. As discussed in my book, Engaged Scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), we can study these complex problems better when we step outside of ourselves and engage relevant practitioners and other stakeholders in the research process than when we do the research alone. Each of us is myopic on any complex phenomenon due to our discipline, experience, and prior research. We need to step outside of ourselves and engage others to appreciate other views about complex issues.

A central mission of scholars in professional schools is to conduct research that both advances a scientific discipline and enlightens practice in a professional domain (Simon, 1976). Professional schools typically build their *raison d'être* on the mission of conducting research knowledge that advances both science and practice (Kondrat, 1992; Simon, 1976; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). In a private conversation my business school colleague, Aseem Kaul asked a core question, what are we doing this for, if not to inform science and practice? And if that is the goal, then how do we know we are working toward it if we don't engage with practice? Even if we were to

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