

Management Research with Purpose

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Concepts of the Purposeful Business School

Like corporations, business schools have struggled with their sense of purpose. Critics accuse business schools of lacking engagement with practice (Rynes *et al.*, 2001), promoting bad management theory (Ghoshal, 2005), and failing to cultivate an ethos of professionalism in management (Khurana, 2007). Little wonder that leading gurus openly proclaim that management scholarship is troubled (Mintzberg, 2004) and that business schools have lost their way (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005).

Most of the criticisms leveled at business schools derive directly from how we conduct management research. The famous Gordon-Howell Report of 1959 charged business schools with lacking rigorous research and being unscientific (Gordon and Howell, 1959). Today, however, we could as easily argue that business schools are *too* scientific. We produce large volumes of studies that may be statistically significant in a scientific sense, but meaningfully insignificant in a practical sense. Paradoxically, the more scientific our research has become, the less impact it has. Why is this the case? How can we fix it?

The answer to the “why” question rests in the unique knowledge mandate of management as a profession. Professions like medicine or engineering have a scientific knowledge mandate, one that describes the world the way it is. Professions like law, by contrast, have a normative mandate, one that describes the world the way it *ought to be*. Management, however, is a *syncretic profession* (Halliday, 1985), one that occupies an intellectual space between these two ways of knowing. Our research, therefore, should balance both descriptions of the way the world is, and aspirational visions of the way the world ought to be. Yes, our research must be rigorously scientific. However, it must also rest on aspirational values and virtues that define what we study, how it is studied, and why studying it is important. Striking a balance between what is, and what ought to be, is what Thomas Kuhn termed the

‘essential tension’ in science (Kuhn, 1977). As a syncretic profession, a primary function of our scholarship is to mediate and integrate these two different ways of knowing.

The answer to the ‘how’ question suggests that business schools must embrace their status as a syncretic profession in their research. Business schools should build their research strategies around a core set of values that encourage researchers to analyse both judgements of fact – the way the world is – and judgements of value – the way the world ought to be. Business schools excel at analysing judgements of fact. They are, however, much less effective at judgements of value as values are less amenable to scientific study. In place of expertise in empiricism, judgements of value require expertise in morality, ethical virtues and an appreciation of how values and facts tend to interpenetrate each other (Suddaby, 2019). If we want to generate research with purpose, management scholars must pay attention to what other professions have known for a long time, i.e. the interaction of technical facts and moral values generates knowledge that will be persuasive to other professions and will grant management the legitimacy, authority and relevance that critics suggest has been lost (Halliday *op cit*).

To illustrate how values can inform and advance management research we examine the research strategy of the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business at the University of Victoria in Canada. The school has a long-standing commitment to the advancement of research that grants priority to human, social and environmental interests. This sense of purpose informs four aspirational value commitments that characterise the research mission of the school; a commitment to regenerative sustainability, a commitment to basic, applied and community-based research, a commitment to redefining impact, and a commitment to generating wisdom in addition to scientific knowledge.

REGENERATIVE SUSTAINABILITY – CREATING PURPOSEFUL RESEARCH

Most business schools acknowledge a commitment to sustainability, which encourages organisations and individuals to reduce human impact on nature. Regenerative sustainability, by contrast, seeks to go beyond minimising human impact by innovative practices designed to *restore and revitalise* the natural and social environment. This approach to sustainability reflects two core values (or pillars) that define the school's purpose – sustainability and innovation. Gustavson's research strategy states, "we embrace research that advances regenerative sustainability that inspires and enables business to transform economies, strengthen communities and revitalise ecosystems."

The commitment to research on regenerative sustainability occurs largely through the Centre for Social and Sustainable Innovation (CSSI). The centre supports faculty, postdoctoral fellows and PhD students engaged in a broad range of projects that seek to innovate regenerative sustainability in the area of climate change, community resilience, indigenous organising and economic reconciliation, immigrant entrepreneurship, regenerative agriculture, food security, and workplace democracy.

An outstanding example of regenerative sustainability research is CSSI Director Natalie Slawinski's decade-long research project on community resilience at Fogo Island on the East Coast of Canada. Natalie uses an engaged research approach to co-create knowledge and help address a societal problem in partnership with Shorefast, a Canadian social enterprise dedicated to building economic and cultural resilience in the community through a variety of charitable programmes and social businesses. Fogo Island is a community off the coast of Newfoundland that suffered decades of economic decline due to the global collapse of cod fishing. Natalie's partnership with Shorefast has generated a number of impact-driven initiatives, most notably the PLACE Dialogues, a yearly workshop that creates tools, resources, and networks designed to advance their community development work.

Faculty member Simon Pek's research exemplifies the school's commitment to regenerative sustainability. Simon is the recipient of \$450,000 to support his innovative research on workplace voice and democratic and deliberative forms of organisational governance. Simon takes the objective knowledge from his research and enacts it in practice as the Steering Committee Lead of the Ontario Assembly on Workplace Democracy. Simon also co-founded and serves as a member of the board of directors of

Democracy in Practice, a non-profit dedicated to democratic experimentation, innovation, and capacity-building. Simon's research has been recognised by both the University of Victoria, as the inaugural recipient of the UVic President's Chair in Research, and by the Academy of Management as the Western Academy of Management's Ascendant Scholar Award.

Matt Murphy offers a slightly different view of regenerative sustainability in his research. Matt is the principle investigator in a \$2,500,000 collaborative grant to promote sustainable communities. This project is an extension of Matt's commitment to programmatic research focused on improving indigenous communities' efforts to protect their rights and fulfil their own visions of sustainable development. One of the many impactful outcomes of this research is the development of a community impact-assessment tool that helps First Nations evaluate and monitor the degree of socio-cultural fit and impact of proposed economic development models.

These projects build on a core commitment to community-based research, which broadens the traditional view of business research that serves the interest of managers to a view that embraces a broader range of stakeholders and a need to understand the impact of managerial practices on the communities and societies in which they operate. The research usefully applies the technical expertise of management scholars to research that holds a value-based purpose – to improve the plight of citizens, workers and communities.



BASIC AND APPLIED RESEARCH – CREATING RELEVANT RESEARCH

Gustavson commits to research that has impact in academia, in the classroom, the boardroom and in global and local communities. As such, the School seeks to generate research that is rigorous and of high academic quality according to our academic peers, but is also pedagogically meaningful to students and educators, and practically relevant to business, practice regulators and stakeholders in business and society. Such research necessarily requires the creation of collaborative partnerships with industry, government and community partners. Below is an illustrative sample of current projects that captures the breadth and depth of the capacity of Gustavson to create research that goes beyond mere statistical significance and adds value to practice through a commitment to research that stands in the service of society.

Faculty members Elango Elangovan and Rick Cotton collaborate with the British Columbia Ministry of Public Safety and the Solicitor General in an action-research project designed to improve the engagement and retention of correctional officers. Their research begins with the observation that most jobs that people do are not easy ones. The work itself can often be an unusual mix of routine activities and stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, the context uninspiring and a bit depressive, the physical environment quite unpleasant and dangerous, and the rewards limited. However, such jobs are also essential and it is an important but difficult challenge to make this work meaningful. Using an action research framework, Elango and Rick created a framework for enhancing the meaningfulness and fit of such jobs. They have provided the Ministry with a set of actionable recommendations that change the design, structure and operationalisation of these jobs. They have also provided mechanisms by which the Ministry can better assess recruitment, engagement, and retention of officers and, in the second phase of this research, will assist the Ministry in implementation.



Another illustration of Gustavson's commitment to research that combines academic research with practical relevance is Basma Majerbi's research on sustainable finance. Basma is a co-investigator in a \$1,650,000 grant on coastal climate solutions and an \$86,300,000 grant on accelerative community transitions to green energy. This project is part of Basma's ongoing commitment to action-research designed to generate and implement knowledge in projects devoted to positive environmental change. Working with the Centre for Social and Sustainable Innovation, Basma's research was critical in encouraging Gustavson to adopt a carbon offset programme and introduce a carbon neutrality competition in the business school, making Gustavson one of the first carbon neutral business schools in the world.

Notably, both of the projects described above embrace a syncretic model of enacting actionable knowledge. A commitment to syncretic knowledge requires an institutional space for ongoing conversations between the academics who generate foundational knowledge and the varied users or potential users of that knowledge. For most business schools, the institutionalised space for these interactions is often restricted to executive education. While executive education offers a useful starting point for the conversations necessary to create syncretic knowledge, the conversations are often limited to narrow and instrumental topics. This context lacks the opportunity for broad-ranging collaborative discussions on more normative issues that combine academic knowledge and managerial practice to address some of the more challenging problems in society.

STRUCTURE AND MEASUREMENT – CREATING IMPACTFUL RESEARCH

Perhaps the biggest challenge in re-imagining research in a business school is to enact a system that encourages research that goes beyond the academic standard of 'scientific significance'. Gustavson has approached this issue as a tripartite problem of organisational structure, performance measurement, and organisational culture. We address each of these in turn.

Structure

One of the largest impediments to producing knowledge with impact arises from the, often arbitrary, division of managerial issues into the disciplinary subject areas that define most business schools. While the knowledge produced within the departments of finance, marketing, operations, and so on is often impressive, business problems in practice rarely arise as a narrow issue of finance, marketing or operations. Instead, business problems tend to arise as thorny knots of issues that touch on several disciplinary areas. The division of business

schools into discrete subject areas is a challenge to creating knowledge that has relevance to managerial practice or policy. Additionally, the departmental structure of business schools creates a form of internal competition for resources that, depending on the reward structure of the school, may discourage multidisciplinary collaboration within the school.

To address this challenge Gustavson has adopted a very flat organisational structure without formal departments. All faculty report directly to the Dean. Researchers are organised around clusters defined by empirical contexts (i.e. health services, indigenous sustainability, immigrant entrepreneurship, sustainable finance) informed by prevailing theoretical puzzles (how do we create regenerative sustainability, what is the relationship between collective memory and reconciliation, how can efficiency and innovation co-exist).

Gustavson has also created a structural element of the school designed to re-imagine the definition of research impact. The Research Impact Team is a group of research faculty and administrators tasked with the responsibility of facilitating impactful research in the school. The team rests on the philosophy that all foundational research should have demonstrable impact in the academic community, in the classroom, and the community. Community, itself, is broken into sub-communities such as government/policy makers, managers, the communities and the public or broader media. The team facilitates this flow of knowledge in many ways. Like most other business schools the team assists faculty in accessing research grants and related resources required for conducting high quality research. Beyond this, however, the Research Impact Team focuses researchers' attention on what to do with their foundational scholarship after publication in a management journal in order to increase impact in pedagogy and real world applications.

For example, the team helps researchers trace the impact of their scholarship in the classroom, both within Gustavson and beyond, using Altimetric tools to determine which publications appear in the syllabi of instructors in business schools around the world, in government white papers, in media posts and so on. The Impact Team also helps management faculty identify the potential impact of their research in addressing real-world problems by educating faculty about the United Nations Sustainability Goals (SDGs) and encouraging faculty to see how their research might contribute to these categories of potential impact. The team also encourages faculty to supplement the quantitative illustrations of their impact (i.e. number of publications, journal rank, number of citations etc.) with qualitative descriptions and contextual detail of the impact of their research in the classroom and the community. To facilitate the use of qualitative data in the faculty review process, the

Impact Team customised the Faculty Activity Database to incorporate qualitative descriptions of research impact and to provide additional commentary that will contextualise the quantitative data typically used in faculty evaluations. The philosophy of performance measurement is elaborated in the following section.

Performance Measurement

Many business schools have research cultures built on a tournament model (Connelly *et al.*, 2014) in which individual researchers compete for incentives that correlate weakly with relevant or desirable knowledge outcomes. While a bit of competition in research may not be a bad thing, unchecked competition has perverse results particularly when attached to incentives. For example, in research performance reviews many business schools discount papers authored by multiple individuals by dividing the contribution of a single publication by the number of authors. This form of rewarding research discourages collaborative research and provides a serious disincentive to large-scale research projects. Even when business schools allocate a full incentive to multiple authors, the tournament reward structure used by most business schools discourages internal collaboration as two authors from the same institution are effectively competing for resource allocations from the same pot. Because purpose-driven research is complex and requires larger teams of researchers, business schools must build a culture and an incentive system that rewards collaboration, both internally and with external partners.

An extension of the tournament model of performance measurement is the application of highly rigid assessment tools. Often these assessment tools rely exclusively on journal lists that rank journals based on their citation impact. Researchers are, then, assessed on the number of papers published in high-ranking journals and the number of citations they receive in these journals. This creates an incestuous system of academics rewarding themselves for talking to themselves, and provides little or no incentive for researchers to take their research into the classroom or the community (the problems with journal lists in management faculty evaluation are well documented, for excellent summaries see Wilson and Thomas, 2012). More critically, the traditional model of performance measurement encourages faculty evaluation committees to ignore the substantive content of publications and use the rank of the journal, in which the publication occurs as a proxy.

Gustavson has created a performance measurement system designed to counteract the pernicious effects of traditional faculty evaluation processes. Foremost, the formal faculty evaluation policy provides a clear

commitment to evaluation based on the quality of the individual faculty member's publications, rather than the quantity or the placement of the article. While Gustavson still uses a journal list to contextualise evaluations, Gustavson eschews narrowly defined, static, and discipline-based lists that many schools consider 'elite' simply because of the difficulty of the review process (the UT Dallas list is perhaps the best example of this). Instead, Gustavson relies on the Academic Journal Guide (AJG) for its breadth of disciplinary scope and the regularity by which it is updated and revised. Even the AJG, however, has blind spots in its coverage. For example, it does not rank the journal *Nature*, which is widely recognised as the world's leading multidisciplinary science journal and a journal in which Gustavson faculty have published. To address this, the Faculty Evaluation Policy reinforces Gustavson's commitment to using the journal list merely as a source of contextual information – i.e. a guide – rather than a determinant of evaluation.

Most traditional faculty evaluation systems in business schools do not differentiate in the type of research undertaken by faculty. As a result, traditional evaluation systems tend to privilege research that is done quickly over research that takes time. This approach to evaluation explains why management research tends to prefer laboratory work to ethnographic study, pre-existing data sets to customised data sets and quantitative research to qualitative research. As a result, very little management research occurs *in situ*. Even less research in management uses action research or natural experiments. Gustavson, by contrast, is highly committed to community-based research. The University of Victoria is a global leader in community-based research. The collective agreement of the university contains provisions designed to address these issues by ensuring that evaluation committees take into consideration the time and effort involved in establishing research relationships and trust with local communities and requires faculty evaluation committees to account for "the development of long-term relationships with communities" (University of Victoria, 2022). Gustavson follows this commitment and, as can be seen by the examples of research noted above, is deeply engaged in encouraging and properly evaluating community-based research.

Culture

The intent of the structural aspects of Gustavson is to encourage syncretism in research. Structure alone, however, is not enough. To achieve its intended outcomes, Gustavson embeds the structure in a culture that facilitates the intended outcomes – collaborations across subject areas within and beyond the business school, community-engaged research and actionable research. To facilitate fluid conversations across boundaries, all faculty – across disciplinary groups, both research and teaching stream

faculty – are encouraged to attend any formal research presentations or job talks. To encourage innovative collaborations, Gustavson encourages regular informal lunches each week (What's Up Wednesdays) where faculty gather to eat lunch and enjoy free-ranging, unstructured conversations about the progress of their current or prospective research projects. Not only do What's Up Wednesdays nurture potential collaborations, they inspire conversations about additional practices that Gustavson might experiment with to improve the quality and creativity of research. Most critically, these conversations occur in a collegial context and tone, without the formality, structure or unfortunate ego posturing so common to formal paper presentations.

The research culture of Gustavson also encourages innovation in research. Since its founding, Gustavson has pioneered new subject areas of research and pedagogy long before the topics enter the mainstream of research agendas in management schools in North America or Europe. Gustavson was one of the first business schools in North America to adopt formal research and teaching programmes in entrepreneurship, for example. Former Gustavson faculty member Ron K. Mitchell was a pioneer of stakeholder theory with a powerfully impactful model of stakeholder salience published with colleagues in 1997 (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). Gustavson was an early adopter of sustainability research with a focus on managing the impact of climate change and Gustavson faculty member Monika Winn was a founding member of the Organisations and the Natural Environment division of the Academy of Management. Currently, Gustavson is deeply engaged in programmatic research on indigenous entrepreneurship, organisation and practices of economic reconciliation.

To achieve this level of innovation in research requires a culture that encourages risk-taking. What may appear to be risky in terms of research, however, is really just a shift in identifying how business academics should motivate their research. Traditional business schools motivate their research by identifying gaps in existing theory or empirics. Unfortunately, this 'gap-spotting' approach to research encourages a high degree of path dependence in which new researchers lean heavily on prior research in defining legitimate subjects for research (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). Gap spotting encourages academics to talk to each other and ignore phenomena in the world. The syncretic approach to knowledge generation adopted by Gustavson reverses this process and encourages faculty and PhD students to motivate their research not by what prior researchers have said, but rather by an interesting phenomenon with impact on practice. While this may appear to be risky, it actually is not. It simply encourages researchers to follow the phenomenon rather than the crowd.

EMBRACING DIFFERENT WAYS OF KNOWING – CREATING WISDOM IN RESEARCH

A recurrent theme in the varied critiques of business schools is the idea that management research has become so obsessed with scientific rigour that it has lost sight of the relevance and utility of research. Correlations are not always helpful in capturing the complex causality that tends to occur in the real world. Similarly, just because the relationship between two variables is statistically significant, does not mean that the relationship is meaningful in terms of policy or management practice. A growing body of management scholarship acknowledges that our single-minded pursuit of efficiency can be counterproductive. Mass-produced clothing may be cheap and efficient, but it damages the environment and diminishes the soul. Science has advanced the human condition in many ways, but it is not the only way of knowing.

In fact, the ancient Greeks did not see scientific empiricism as the only path to knowledge. The ancients identified five key “virtues” of thought – episteme (science), *technê* (craft or practice), *phronêsis* (practical action), *nous* (common sense) and *sophia* (wisdom). Nor did they see empiricism as the highest form of knowledge. For Aristotle wisdom is a superior form of knowledge because it combines both objective knowledge and normative knowledge. As such, wisdom meets the standard of syncretic knowledge because it uses a standard of knowing that integrates what we know to be true and what we ought to do as a result. This ought to be the standard for business school research. True wisdom provides decision-makers with the ability to make wise decisions exemplified by Solomon’s creative solution to two competing claims of motherhood.

Wisdom also requires a degree of epistemic humility - an understanding of the limits to our claims to knowledge. The idea of epistemic humility comes from Socrates who observed that wisdom occurs in appreciating what we do not know. An extension of epistemic humility is acquiring an awareness of the unintended consequences of rational action in complex systems. There are many examples of the lack of epistemic humility in management knowledge. One prominent example is Donald McKenzie’s analysis of how financial models created the conditions for the 1987 financial crisis in the US. These models, Mackenzie observed, “did more than analyse markets; it altered them” (Mackenzie, 2006).

Another extension of epistemic humility is developing an appreciation for the knowledge of others. In an effort to achieve this form of epistemic humility, and wisdom in their research, Gustavson has initiated a programme designed to explore indigenous ways of knowing. Like many countries, Canada is struggling to acknowledge and come to terms with its history of colonial injustice toward indigenous peoples. One mechanism for accomplishing this is economic reconciliation – the creation of business models and strategies designed to redress the economic injustices suffered by indigenous people caused by colonisation. Indigenous business models employ a logic of understanding that differs from western knowledge in two significant ways. First, it is more oriented to the community or the collective than to the individual (Kumukcham, 2021). Second, it incorporates the notion of the environment as not simply another stakeholder in indigenous business models, but rather as the primary stakeholder (Gordon, 2018). Gustavson has begun the journey toward embracing indigenous management knowledge by recruiting indigenous scholars and initiating a programme of research built around indigenous ways of knowing. While this initiative is in its early stages, it has produced an impressive body of work in a short time (for illustrative examples see Bastien *et al.*, 2023; Suddaby *et al.*, 2023; Salmon *et al.*, 2022).

Purpose-driven management research is a form of syncretic knowledge – knowledge that not only seeks to objectively analyse the present state of the world, but to then use that knowledge to initiate positive change in the world for the future. The objective of purpose-driven research is not merely objective truth, it seeks to achieve normative wisdom. As such, purpose-driven research, ultimately, is also values-driven research. To accomplish this lofty objective business schools must acknowledge that true wisdom comes not just from the integration of objective and subjective ways of knowing, but also from a core understanding of humanistic values and the prioritisation of those values in our research. More critically, purpose-driven



research must place the relevance, impact and value of knowledge above the interests of the researchers or the institutions that perform or fund the research.

This is precisely the form of syncretic knowledge that Gustavson strives to achieve in research. The true secret of embracing syncretic knowledge in management research is that it expands the form of authority that business schools can hold in society. Yes, business school professors have held substantial technical authority on a broad range of subjects. However, too often our technical expertise fails to resonate with those critical outside audiences because it lacks moral expertise (Halliday *op cit*).

Moral authority arises when technical experts go beyond describing the world the way it is, and begin to use their expertise to articulate a better world. In order to accomplish this we must revisit the question of the purpose of our research. Consider how we abandoned the notion of Pareto efficiency when it moved into the business school. We abandoned the ideal of efficiency and replaced it with models designed to subvert it by creating barriers to efficient competition. Management scholarship will acquire the relevance, influence and authority it desires when we embrace a broader understanding of our research purpose and a deeper understanding of our syncretic knowledge mandate.

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