



MEET THE PERSON

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MEET THE PERSON

Editor's Introduction

Partner? Or Adversary? What Role Does Malcolm Gladwell Play in the Arena of Organizational Scholarship?

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The other day, while driving home, I was listening to a discussion about the verdict in a recent court case. Seems 2 jurors had voted for one verdict, 8 for another, and the remaining 2 jurors for a third. One commentator was ardently expressing his amazement at this outcome. The other said, "I was just reading a book that explains this situation perfectly The problem was . . ." and I just knew he was discussing, yeap, Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*. I had to smile knowing the following interview was in the pipeline!

I don't know about you, but over the years I have had particular feelings about the "airport book" industry (so called because so many are sold in, or able to be read through, while in an airport). These feelings have been as diverse as the books themselves. Some are positive, and some are not. In response, some years ago I crafted an assignment for my MBAs whereby they would (as a group) select a popular book and analyze it via concepts discussed in our organizational behavior course, ultimately rendering to the class an evaluation (a la Siskel and Ebert) of the book's contributions. Thrice now Gladwell's books have been selected, and each time the end results were conclusions that the books really made relevant in understandable terms key concepts (perceptual biases, attributional

biases) discussed in class (my own ego-protecting reaction of "What was wrong with my explanation?" notwithstanding)! Such praise has not been common place, and so there is added pleasure in being able to provide a forum here for a discussion of Gladwell's work.

It is notable that Dan closes the interview with a quote from Howard Gardner.

Gardner (1999) describes the critical need for effective leaders to have "a story" that is used to focus and mobilize followers. Notable because this theme emerges constantly throughout the interview. Gladwell sees himself as a storyteller, not a knowledge creator. He sees himself as an interpreter who is able to tell our academic stories in a way that "reaches," that is digestible to a broader audience. I think Malcolm may be discounting himself. He claims that the inspirations come from stories he collects from others, but he then methodically searches for foundation material among academic and practitioner sources. Particularly commendable is his examination of footnotes for those buried nuggets. (How many of us have a good footnote leading to a discovery story?) As you read how he goes about his work, the image of a phenomenologist may come to mind, an organizational Margaret Meade if you will.

What is ironic is that most of us were inspired to do academic research by a story—whether of our own experience or that of significant others. Indeed, in relating the story, our passion for the profession is uncontainable, and observers can get a sense of the rewards we get for what we do. We tell our doctoral students that this is what will sustain them through the long and demanding rigors of the research "vetting" process (see the Sutcliffe & Wintermute commentary). Yet somewhere along the way of becoming scholars, we lose the connection to our intended beneficiaries. I remember proudly giving my parents a copy of my completed dissertation and my father (a career naval officer and accomplished General Electric manager) later commenting, "You know I had a hard time following it, especially with all those names in the parentheses getting in the way." Some (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005) would say it is trained out of us as we seek recognition and inclusion in "the academy." I look back on some of the classics in sociology (Donald Roy's, 1954, discussion of norms regarding quota restriction is a favorite) that provide a rich context and examination of organizational behaviors where the story comes to life, and yet the theory is relevant and clear. And then I look at current material and wonder if my students would find it meaningful.

In fact, how often do we assign our own writings as readings for our courses? Would it be appropriate and relevant to the discussions or too obscure? Many presidential addresses at the academy question our relevance (e.g., Hambrick, 1994; Pearce, 2004). In the interview, Gladwell discusses the potential for a rich partnership whereby scholars and "interpreters" can identify important issues, create rigorous knowledge, and communicate application of that knowledge into practice. Some may say this already happens. Indeed, we often point to forums such as *Organizational Dynamics*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Academy of Management Perspectives* as existing for that purpose. One of the commentaries (Khaurana & Marquis) further cites efforts such as the *Knowledge@Wharton* (a valuable resource I found by accident) and *HBS Working Knowledge* newsletters, and my own institution publishes the online *Graziadio Business Report* as a "translation" specifically for Southern California executives and managers (1 million hits last year). And yet I sense a more confrontational tone in some of the commentaries, that Gladwell is more of a challenger than collaborator in our knowledge industry.

The discussions by Gladwell and the commentators raise many pointed questions. Gladwell comments on the ability of and incentives for academics to not write in a way that "reaches" practitioners. Should we academics strive to develop translation skills? Should we devote effort to do this work? In short, as Hoffman's commentary humorously asks: Should we put Malcolm out of business? Gladwell and some of the commentators say no, that would not be optimizing our skills and training. Others (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005) state we need to, that the emergence of corporate universities signals our declining relevance in the marketplace. The current discussions about AACSB criteria concerning academically and professionally qualified (that there is a distinction is itself informative) are pointed to as additional significant influences.

In preparing these documents, these and many other thoughts were triggered. In a follow-up conversation, the author, Dan Gruber, mentioned that the interview sparked lively discussion among everyone with whom he discussed or shared his draft. Anticipating and to illustrate this, we included several commentaries here to illustrate some of the poignant conversations and their potential for continuation. So in closing, let's see what the following pages evoke/provoke . . . and in doing so fulfill the purpose of this section of *JMI* . . .

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MEET THE PERSON

The Craft of Translation

An Interview With Malcolm Gladwell

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Best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell talks about how he "simplifies and synthesizes" research in his books and articles with the goal of getting readers excited about the "academic study of ideas." The self-described "conversation starter" gives a glimpse into how he puts together his articles and where his ideas emerge. The reader learns about Gladwell's relationship with academia, which he sees as an "important cog in the process" of disseminating research to a wider audience. Gladwell illuminates the power of narratives in presenting complex ideas. He also shares what he would like to teach and research at a business school, if given the opportunity. Finally, Gladwell's thoughts raise key questions to consider about the role and responsibility of scholars in translating research to audiences outside of the academy.

Keywords: *theory/practice; rigor/relevance; translation; narratives*

Few writers are as adept at getting a conversation started from their work as is Malcolm Gladwell. In the past decade, he has generated a buzz about sociology and psychology by telling compelling stories and linking them to research in both fields. Many strings of research familiar to readers of this journal have been introduced to new audiences by Gladwell. Network theory, rapid cognition, and the fundamental attribution error are just a few examples. Meanwhile, his articles have covered many critical management and organizational issues, from hiring the right people to

designing work environments to why some people choke under pressure.

Gladwell has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* magazine since 1996 and is the author of *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference* (2000) and *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005), both of which were number one *New York Times* best sellers. Gladwell was a reporter with *The Washington Post* from 1987 to 1996, where he covered business and science and then served as the newspaper's New York City bureau chief. The 43-year-old

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I would like to thank Malcolm Gladwell for being so generous with his time and for his willingness to share his insight. I appreciate the guidance of Steve Sommer during the process of publishing this article and thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to the commentators on the interview for their perspectives: Andy Hoffman, Rakesh Khurana, Chris Marquis, Kathleen Sutcliffe, and Timothy Wintermute. Finally, I would like to thank several colleagues for their input and feedback on various stages of the interview: Adam Grant, Jonathan Gruber, Katherine Lawrence, Gretchen Spreitzer, and John Paul Stephens.

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Gladwell was born in England, grew up in rural Ontario, and now lives in New York City. He is a graduate of the University of Toronto, Trinity College.

Among Gladwell's many accolades are being named one of the "100 Most Influential People" by *Time Magazine* and one of the "Top 50 Business Gurus" by Accenture.¹ He is a popular keynote speaker at conferences and has addressed numerous organizations. Gladwell has been a featured guest on everything from the Today Show to The Charlie Rose Show. It is hard to find a media outlet where his work has not been featured. A *Fast Company Magazine* article proclaimed Gladwell "The Accidental Guru" and touted him as a "rock star" (Sacks, 2005).

Gladwell is no stranger to the academic world. He has presented at meetings of the American Sociological Association (2000) and the American Psychological Association (2002). His work has been discussed in formal settings and informal ones by faculty, graduate students, and academic administrators. I have long been an admirer of Gladwell, and when I found out that he would be in Ann Arbor for a book signing, I e-mailed him and asked if he would be interested in meeting to talk about *Blink* and about his relationship with academia.

Gladwell graciously agreed to meet, and about a dozen colleagues assembled at a local restaurant to chat with him after the book signing. We had a vibrant exchange, and as I reflected on the talk in the weeks following Gladwell's visit, I felt that many of the topics we discussed would be interesting to a broader academic audience. I had three goals for the interview: (a) to provide readers of the *Journal of Management Inquiry* with a sense of how Gladwell fits into the world of management and organizational research, (b) to illuminate what it means to translate academic research and how scholars might employ this craft, and (c) to stimulate a discussion about how research in organizational studies might be presented to different audiences. I hope you enjoy reading the interview as much as I enjoyed conducting it.

THE INTERVIEW

Daniel Gruber: Your most recent book, *Blink*, is about thin slicing and making quick decisions. There are several different examples (from predicting whether a marriage will last to knowing when a tennis player will double fault) which illustrate the rapid cognition that takes place in various situations. What was your process for making the decision to participate in this interview?

Gladwell: Just that I had met you and liked you. And I feel an enormous debt to the academic world because so much of my work is inspired by original research that has been done by academics. So I feel that I have an obligation, and I am delighted actually to do things like this, so in a small way I can return the favor.

Gruber: The book has been on *The New York Times* best-seller list since it debuted. It has been reviewed and commented on by dozens of people. As you have digested all of this feedback and debated with others about some of the critiques of the book, what have you learned?

Gladwell: There is an important distinction to be made between popular works and academic works. My book is intended to be a popular work based on academic research, but it is not the same as an academic work. It is a different kind of literary enterprise. And it has to be judged by different criteria. One of the things that I have tried to do, particularly to people in the academic world, is to explain to them that you can't be judged by the same standards. It is not going to be as rigorous and as carefully argued and complete as an academic work is because it is a work of popular nonfiction. One of the things I have learned is the importance of making that distinction, particularly to more scholarly audiences who have expectations about books that are a little different from those of us in the kind of lay arena.

The other thing I have felt that is important is that my goal is to start an educational process and not complete an educational process. I am trying to get people excited about psychology, sociology, and basically the academic study of ideas. Hopefully I can inspire them to dig deeper on their own, whereas an academic work has a much more ambitious agenda. It is not really to inspire the process but in some ways to complete it. If your goal is just to inspire that kind of excitement and interest then you have to go about things very differently. You have to tell stories; you have to make connections between the everyday world and the world of research. You just have to approach things in a different way, and that has been a very important lesson to keep in the back of my mind as I go out and present this book. I just try to start a conversation. If I can do that then I have succeeded.

Gruber: So, what does a week in the life of Malcolm Gladwell look like?

Gladwell: What does it look like? Well, it really depends where I am. I travel a lot—both to report and to do speaking engagements and to meet with people. That is a very important part of my intellectual routine. I am a journalist. I am a reporter, and I find that a lot of my ideas come from face-to-face interactions with people. It is very important for me to meet a wide variety of people to get exposed to new ideas and find out new stories. So, when I am traveling, some chunk of my time is spent on the road trying to expose myself to as many different worlds as possible. When I am at home, I work from home. I do

some writing in the morning, and I spend a fair amount of time moving around libraries. It is important particularly now with so much stuff being online to indulge my curiosity. When I have a little idea, I try to take half an hour out and try and follow up on it to see if there is some interesting research in that area. I am not confined to a specific area. I can go wherever I want to go.

Today, somebody sent me a psychology paper that had been submitted for publication, and I was looking at it and then was poking around the footnotes, through the endnotes. I saw a bunch of papers that looked really interesting, and I spent an hour this morning tracking down those papers and reading them—not with anything in mind but just the thought that this is sort of cool. I wondered if there is something here.

A good chunk of time was spent this morning on a story I am writing now. It is a story about a particular idea—the power law distribution.² I am looking for different examples of power law distributions, and I am trying to find as wide a variety of examples as possible. I was looking at some studies of cohorts of juveniles that tracked their criminal behavior, and if you track it out you will find the power law distribution—essentially a very small number of kids commit a lot of the crime. I spent the morning noodling around, finding this research, reading through it, e-mailing a bunch of the investigators on the project and wondering most importantly now how would I make this little tidbit—how would I explain it to a lay audience. It is a big, long, complicated story, and I cannot tell it all, but what part of it can I pull out and make comprehensible to a general audience? That is a fairly typical day for me. It has all of those kinds of elements of thinking about things and tracking things down and trying to interpret things.

Gruber: How do you go about finding that nugget that will be used in the article?

Gladwell: I do not always know what I am looking for, but I am looking for a way to tell a story. Very often I am telling stories about ideas. I am turning ideas into narratives. I am looking for some way to bring the story to life. The thing that I found is that academic writing has no place for those kinds of nuggets. Out of necessity—that is not what academic writing is about. Lots of academics will have narratives about their research that will never make it into print.

A good example is that I was talking to John Bargh about priming research, and this story is in *Blink*. He was doing these priming studies in which he was exposing people unconsciously to things and words that had to do with politeness [Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996]. He had an experiment set up in which they had to do a task and then hand in their paper. There would be somebody else talking, and the question would be how long would they wait before they interrupted and handed in the paper. If you primed them with polite words, they would wait forever. This was also going on just outside his office. He was describing how he was sitting in his office,

and he would listen to these conversations go on and on and on while these people waited patiently. And it took place over a course of weeks. That makes the whole thing make sense. You begin to sort of understand that it is not some sort of abstract, dry piece of research.

You get the emotional wallop of that story when you begin to understand what it felt like to listen to these people drone on and on and on. That is the kind of thing that you cannot put in an academic journal. I suppose you can, but it does not really belong there. There is always that story behind research. Research is an intensely kind of human enterprise. It is not just manipulating numbers. So it is worthwhile calling up people and talking to them about their experiences. You can find all kinds of interesting things. I really do kind of hunt for that. I have a basic underlying confidence that if you talk to people long enough, a good story will always tumble out.

Gruber: I have read some descriptions of your practice of taking your ideas and sharing them with everybody you know and meet. Tell me more about that practice.

Gladwell: It is very important I think to spread the word high and low, particularly to people who you do not know well. They will always have access to some little tidbit that you would never have heard about otherwise. That has been a very profitable research tool for me. It is really a social research tool.

Gruber: Who is in the group to which you bounce around ideas?

Gladwell: There are two kinds of people. There are people who e-mail me things kind of out of the blue. They read something I have written and they say, "You know this reminds me of x ," and that has actually been surprisingly fruitful. Then I have people whom I have met and struck me as being really interesting who I just have stayed in touch with for this reason. For example, I know this guy who is a president of a record company. I met him randomly at some conference, and he has been inspirational in about three stories I have written. He knows about a world that I do not know anything about. He will always say some really interesting thing that will invariably trigger some other thought. Everything he thinks about is through the prism of music. Music turns out to be this wonderfully fertile ground for all kinds of subjects.

Another example: I am pretty active giving talks. The first reason for doing so is because I like giving talks and more importantly because if you give talks to a wide variety of audiences, that increases your chances of having that kind of encounter. I am doing a story right now on homelessness. It is actually the same story as the power law distribution story. It came about because I spoke at a conference of homeless advocates. I did not know anything about it, and I did not think I was terribly interested, but I thought, it is just down the street and I can spend a couple of hours, I might as well go. Lo and behold, I went there

and stayed and listened to a lot of the presentations and thought that there was something really interesting going on here. That resulted in a story.

Gruber: How do you synthesize all of that information?

Gladwell: Well I collect these things. I collect little stories and then I try and make them fit together. So I have all kinds of stories running around in my brain, and I try to make them fit. Sometimes they work, and sometimes they do not. If they do not, I just keep them for the next story. It is just a matter of juggling pieces. I collect pieces kind of willy nilly and try to find a home for them. Usually I am working on more than one article at a time. At the moment, I am sort of working on one and a half. There are three articles that are basically finished, and I am just cleaning them up. There is one that I am actively engaged with and just about to start writing, and there are two that I am kind of nosing around on a preliminary basis to figure out if there is something there. They evolve tremendously over the course of reporting.

Gruber: Readers of *The New Yorker* who know your work recognize your unique ability to write about personality tests, ketchup, SUVs, and other diverse topics. Where do you come up with your ideas for articles? What are you reading on a regular basis?

Gladwell: Well, for a lot of my story ideas, the basic idea is incredibly banal. I am not asking the exotic question. I am asking the really, really obvious question. SUVs—that is what we are all talking about, personality testing—people are obsessed with Myers-Briggs, so those are very, very straightforward. The ketchup thing is—I just had a guy who was in the supermarket business who I would have lunch with every couple of months. It was his idea. He said that I should write about ketchup. He said more people have gone broke trying to run up against Heinz than almost any other company. It is a sure way to lose your shirt. I thought that was really interesting.

A lot of my ideas come from books. I do read fairly widely, although not that widely. I am not a voracious reader. I am a very selective reader. I spend a lot of time with the footnotes of academic articles to see where ideas are coming from. I am always kind of aware of the fact that I need to come up with an idea for a story, so I am always on the lookout for something puzzling or interesting. Because I am not limited to any particular area, I have enormous freedom and latitude in where I get my ideas from.

Gruber: You mentioned your affinity for the footnotes and endnotes of academic articles. What do you like about them?

Gladwell: There is something wonderful about footnotes. If you read books, there is always some parenthetical notion that does not fit into the main body of the book but is enormously interesting. If you take note of it and follow up on it, you can sometimes find out something really interesting.

Gruber: I have heard you and others describe your work as being a translator of academic research to mainstream audiences, a liaison, a popularizer, an emissary, and a parasite. How do you see yourself and your work?

Gladwell: The parasite is sort of a joke, but I am the bird attached to the top of the very large beast, pecking away and eating the gnats. I try to be very clear about it that I do not do original research. I very rarely even come up with a truly novel idea on my own. I am someone who draws inspiration from the brilliance of others and repackages it in forms that are much more available to a lay audience. I am a popularizer, a simplifier, and a synthesizer, and I say that unapologetically. I happen to think that those roles are very, very important. I consider myself and others in my position as important cogs in this process. There is no greater tragedy than all of this brilliant stuff that goes on in academia being confined to academia.

Part of the answer is that academics should feel free to write for broader audiences, but very often they can't. They don't have time. It is not valued in the academic world, or the skills that it takes to be a good academic do not overlap always with the skills it takes to be a good popularizer. It is a different task with different requirements. So there is a role for people like me to come along and liberate some of these ideas from academic obscurity. I am very proud of that.

I happen to think that some of my great inspirations, people like Tim Wilson [Wilson is the Sherrell J. Aston Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia] and Dick Nisbett [Nisbett is the Theodore M. Newcomb Distinguished University Professor at the University of Michigan] ought to be household names. To me it is criminal that they are not celebrated alongside other kind of popular intellectual figures. They have enormously meaningful and significant things to say about why we behave the way we behave. They deserve recognition. Part of my motivation is to bring these ideas to life. One of the most popular pieces I ever did relied very heavily on work done by Carol Dweck. [The piece Gladwell is referring to is "The Talent Myth" published in *The New Yorker*, July 22, 2002. Dweck is the William B. Ransford Professor of Psychology at Columbia University.] Carol Dweck deserves a big audience. It is criminal if she does not get that audience. I know she tries to write popular books, but sometimes that is not enough. That is a big part of my motivation. It is to serve that intermediary role.

Gruber: Have you come across any scholars who are critical of the role you play in translating their work?

Gladwell: Every now and again. I always expect there to be more of that. I do have to take certain liberties and make certain sacrifices and compromises in my description of the work. That is something that sometimes is going to be frustrating to people in the academic world. But I cannot write it their way. I have to make the compromises to reach a broader audience. I have also been successful at this, and I imagine that is also frustrating to some people. I have built a career off of the backs of other people's work, and I sometimes feel a little uncomfortable about that. That being said, the overwhelming majority of academics who I have

written about have expressed to me their pleasure at what I have done and their delight, and that has been enormously gratifying. I have really gotten an incredibly gratifying flood of positive feedback from academics who appreciate what I am doing and are happy to have their ideas represented to a broader audience.

Gruber: What do you think about academics who act as translators of their own work?

Gladwell: That is a tough one. Not everybody can be Steven Pinker.³ You can use him as an example of that rare academic who is both incredibly accomplished in his own field and brilliant at popularizing what he does for a broader audience. I don't think everybody can pull that off. There are a handful of others. Maybe it is asking too much, and also time spent engaged in popularizing is time not spent pursuing original research. And I think we should all do what we are best at. If you told me that some of these psychologists who I value so much told me they were going to spend the next 2 years of their lives working on popular books and not pursuing new, innovative research, I would say, "You know what? Maybe that is not the best [idea]."

Maybe the onus is on people in my world to be far more diligent in finding the good stuff and in popularizing it. We have existing ties to popular media outlets, and we are trained in the art of storytelling. I think the system works best when people like me work in combination with academics. It is not that I am saying that academics should not try this, but I am not sure that everyone can or should. The Pinker person or the Jared Diamond are incredibly rare to have that type of storytelling gift as well as being rigorous academics.⁴ I think perhaps the onus is more on people in my position to step up to the plate more.

Gruber: Have you considered the possibility of partnering with an academic similar to what Stephen Dubner and Steve Levitt did with their *Freakonomics* book?⁵ Or the idea of a book in which each chapter focuses on a new topic and is coauthored with an organizational scholar?

Gladwell: I have never thought about that, only because I have never done collaboration, and I am not sure whether I am a good collaborator. It is certainly an interesting idea. I would like to find ways of foregrounding my intellectual influences more. For example, I just redid my Web site [<http://www.gladwell.com/>], and for *Blink* I have put up not just an expanded bibliography but also a whole set of links to all of the academic books that really inspired me. And I think that people who found *Blink* interesting should read them to learn more. There are a number of ways. I thought that Tim Wilson's book *Strangers to Ourselves* [2002] was a truly brilliant book, and if you read *Blink* and you liked it, you should read Tim Wilson. That will take you one step deeper into a lot of the things I was exploring. That is now on my Web site and in the endnotes of my book. There are many ways to do this. One way is collaboration, and that is something that perhaps I should

think more about. Another is for me to be more aggressive in showcasing my influences.

Gruber: What work have you seen as having made the most impact?

Gladwell: It is hard for me to gauge that type of stuff. With *Blink*, I sort of feel like—just with the feedback I have gotten from people—the most important thing has been a renewed awareness or a new awareness of the importance of unconscious discrimination and unconscious bias. That is very important because I feel that many people have a very naïve and unsophisticated notion of what bias is and [they think] that if you do not consciously feel you are acting in a biased manner towards somebody else that you are out of the woods. This is the idea that in fact, no, this kind of stuff is much deeper. The extent to which I have helped people come to a deeper understanding of that has been useful and important.

Bringing the whole Mahzarin Banaji research to a wider audience [Banaji is the Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University], Mahzarin told me that since my book came out, the number of hits on the Web site where you can take the implicit association test [IAT; www.implicit.harvard.edu] has gone up by an extraordinary percentage. Some of that is not me, but some of that may be me. I am enormously proud of that. That strikes me as, look, we have helped to educate a swath of Americans about the way their minds work, and that is not a trivial thing. Everyone in America should take the IAT. I sort of think that in every high school science class there ought to be a week spent on this kind of stuff, and every kid should take it and learn a little about these things. If I am part of that process, it makes me enormously happy.

Gruber: You discuss the work by Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal (1993) on teacher ratings in *Blink*. A few seconds into the first class and you are judged for the entire semester. Do you have any advice for the business school scholars who are reading this interview to deal with this challenge?

Gladwell: This whole question of storytelling is something that I have recently become a lot more interested in. There is such a cliché about how stories are important and that is how we process information, but one that we nonetheless have neglected. The importance of beginning the presentation of any complex idea with a narrative and paying very careful attention to how the story is told—that stuff in my mind is so overwhelmingly critical.

The thing about stories that is important is that when we talk about those first impressions being formed so quickly and being so important, what we are talking about is how an enormous amount of pressure is on the speaker. An incredible amount of attention and focus is being put squarely on the personality and the character and the mode of presentation of the person talking. The thing about storytelling is that it shifts the attention and the focus from the storyteller to the story, and that is really important. It takes the

load off. I think that is what we want to do. We want to try and diffuse this highly charged overly pressurized situation so that you forget.

If you immerse an audience in a story, they forget about who you are, and they get sucked up in the story. That is what you want. That is what allows people—it strikes me—to back off from the high-stakes, perilous first impressions and get past them and engage in the substance of what you are talking about. If you are not telling a story, I do not think that people do that. I think that people are still incredibly focused on you. If you can get people immersed in a story, all of a sudden, whether you are White or Black, tall or short, fat or thin, attractive or unattractive, it really begins to matter a lot less.

Gruber: If you were guest lecturing at a business school for a semester and the school gave you a research budget, what types of studies and/or simulations would you want to conduct?

Gladwell: What an interesting question. There are things that I am interested in, but I suspect they have been studied. I am not familiar enough with these kinds of fields to know. Here is a question—it is not purely organizational, but for the next piece I am writing, I am very interested in if you hire somebody or do something new of any kind, even organizationally new, how long do you wait before you know whether it is going to work out? How much patience should you have with something new? I was interested in this question anecdotally, and I began asking people in business that question, and the range of answers I got was so profound.

For example, when you hire somebody for a job, how long do you give that person to see whether it is going to work out or not? I got everything from a week to a year depending on the organization. There is no single answer obviously, but I sort of feel like we need a better understanding of the value of patience. That is something that I do not even know how you would go about studying, but I think it is a tremendously interesting question. It would be worth studying. The problem though is not that we have not studied what we need to study. The problem is that what we study is not being implemented in the real world—that is the problem. The difficulty is not with academics. The difficulty is with people in my position who have not been nearly diligent enough in bringing to life the insights that researchers have come up with.

Gruber: If you were invited to teach a semester-long elective course at a business school, what would you teach, and who would you bring in as guest speakers?

Gladwell: That is interesting. I suppose that I would like to teach a course about the creative process. I would like to spend a lot of time talking about failure and bring in people who have failed to talk about what it means to fail and about cultures that accept failure and learn from failure. I sort of think that people who are learning about business have the notion that the creative process is a lot more orderly than it actually is. What impresses me about really creative

environments—the ones that I have seen in the real world—is just how messy they are and how much latitude managers give creative people and how willing they are to tolerate screw ups and detours and that kind of thing.

Gruber: When interacting with your corporate clients, how do you balance being an idea generator and telling them how to run their business?

Gladwell: I don't tell them how to run their business. That is an important thing. I am there to inspire them to think about what they do in a different way. I make it very clear when I talk to a group that I don't know their world like they do. I am not a consultant. I cannot prescribe solutions for them. I am simply there to be a spark for a kind of evaluation of who they are and what they do. That resolves part of the problem.

There are two parts to every business. There are fairly universal issues that virtually all people in business face and there are things that are particular to certain worlds. I am really speaking on the universal side. How do you manage information? How do you decide who is socially important in an organization? Those are questions that everybody is facing. I am not zeroing in on something specific to financial services or specific to health insurance. There are outsiders that corporations bring in who are experts in their world, and that is why they are brought in. I am never brought in under that pretext. It is always clear that I am somebody who is speaking universally. That is why I feel like I can do it comfortably and safely. We are clear from the get go that I am not an expert in their world.

Gruber: What's next for you? Howard Gardner [2005] suggested the idea of integrating your conclusions from *The Tipping Point* and *Blink* into a single account. Is that something you would consider doing?

Gladwell: I don't think that I want to go back and revisit the areas of these books. I think it is important to move on. I have no idea what I will write about next. I think you do really need a good idea, and I don't think I have a good idea right now. I am just sitting tight until something pops into my head that is of interest.

Conclusion

It was a joy and a privilege to spend time with Gladwell when he was here in Ann Arbor and to speak with him on the phone last summer. His ability to engage with an audience is exceptional, whether it is speaking to a few hundred people gathered at a book signing, with a dozen academics over dinner, or with me the phone. Gladwell is a gifted storyteller and a remarkable person to learn from on many levels. As calls for rigor and relevance in our field continue to gain momentum,⁶ it is useful to consider how Gladwell is able to take raw material that largely comes from academic journals and translate it into relevant ideas (his articles for *The New Yorker*, *The Tipping Point*, and

Blink). It is no wonder that many of his articles are read widely in business schools and in organizations.

One view of the successful management professor of the future that was described in this journal recently explained that he or she will be called on to "take his or her research ideas published in good journals and translate them into actionable items for executives or MBA students. . . . In the future, we're going to have to do more of that blend" (Zell, 2005, p. 274). I agree with this sentiment and believe that to address these increasing demands, we as organizational scholars should consider additional ways to develop these skills.

Management departments could consider new practices to develop the capacity for translating research. One option is to have a PhD seminar on translation for senior students. The seminar would consist of faculty in the department rotating through and discussing how they went about translating their journal articles to an organizational audience, whether it was in a practitioner journal, a business book, or other outlet. Another thought is to have a writer-in-residence who would spend a semester or year working with faculty and doctoral students at a business school on translating their research.

It is not necessary for all of us to aim for Gladwell's level of popularization, but he does present some compelling insights. Among the most incisive, it seems, is "There is no greater tragedy than all of this brilliant stuff that goes on in academia being confined to academia." Gladwell's thoughts here also bring up critical questions for us to consider: Is translation a worthy goal? How can we measure the impact of work that has been translated? Who should be responsible for translating our research (academics, journalists, both)? To what extent should we be concerned about relevance? How does popularizing differ from translating? Who can we learn from in the academy about effective translation? At this point, I will leave these questions to some colleagues whom I have asked to comment on the interview.

NOTES

1. *Time Magazine*, April 18, 2005; Accenture, 2003, *Outlook Journal*, Volume 1.
2. The article Gladwell is referring to is "Million-Dollar Murray," published in the *New Yorker*, February 13, 2006.
3. Pinker is the Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. He

conducts research on language and cognition, writes for publications such as *The New York Times*, and is the author of six books, including *The Language Instinct* and *How the Mind Works*.

4. Diamond is a professor of geography and physiology at the University of California, Los Angeles and winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Medal of Science. He is the author of, among other books, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) and *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2004).

5. Dubner is an author and a writer for *The New York Times Magazine*, and Leavitt is an economics professor at the University of Chicago. Their book has been a best seller since it debuted and was the result of an article that Dubner wrote and in which Leavitt appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*.

6. Three with which I have resonated the most are those made by Bennis and O'Toole (2005), Hoffman (2004), and Weick (2004).

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MEET THE PERSON

Gladwell as Sensegiver

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Our comments evolved out of a set of discussions about Daniel Gruber's interview with Malcolm Gladwell. We want to acknowledge at the outset that in recent years we have very much enjoyed reading and discussing Malcolm Gladwell's work, especially his pieces in *The New Yorker* and, of course, his books. Dan's interview provided an interesting, provocative, and multilayered account that for us shed some new insight into the nature of Gladwell's work. And we had a very similar reaction to it. In our view, Gladwell is not a translator, nor an emissary or a popularizer. We think of Gladwell as kind of an interpreter or sensegiver.

That is, Gladwell "interprets" academic research and in so doing "applies" the research as he interprets it to problems in the real world. This is something that would be hard if not impossible (and even perhaps unappealing or distasteful) for organizational scholars to do, but because he calls himself a journalist, he can get away with it. Just as he claims that a speaker who begins a presentation of a complex idea with a story can deflect the audience's focus from the speaker's character and personal attributes, he too uses narrative by calling himself a journalist, popularizer, parasite, and so on to deflect his "scholarly" intentions. He uses narrative as the methodology to develop theories and to test them. As a scholar, he seeks answers to questions that he cares

about, he does his research, and he communicates his findings.

Unlike a translator who tries to faithfully convey the information that is in one language into another language, an interpreter explains what is conveyed so that the person who hears the information can better understand it. Gladwell claims in the interview that he uses stories because they are an effective way to gain and hold the attention of the reader and audience, but he talks more frequently about the power of good stories, how a well-constructed narrative helps the audience make sense of the information by connecting it to the world and experience in which they live (e.g., "You have to tell stories; you have to make connections between the everyday world and the world of research."). If it were just a translation, the sensegiving would not be as important as the literal conveyance of what the writer and speaker say. Even if someone understands the words (defining them), they still would not understand the concepts. This is also different from a journalist who conveys the news (just the facts), versus a journalist who comments on and explains the news to the audience. Gladwell asks, "What part of it can I pull out and make comprehensible to a general audience?"

Gladwell acknowledges more than once the power of narrative: "Very often I am telling stories about ideas. I am turning ideas into narrative." Gladwell

neither develops theories nor tests them in the usual sense. Still, the simple act of interpreting a set of ideas changes or transforms the ideas or theory that are being interpreted, even though it might be quite subtle. The change can take place during the sense-giving process in which the interpreter is engaged and/or in the changes dictated by the narrative structure that the interpreter has adopted. This is evident when Gladwell claims, "[I] take certain liberties and make certain sacrifices in my description of [a scholar's] work."

Moreover, we also could argue that Gladwell tests his theory because the audience now puts the theory to the test of their own experience. Do the stories ring true? Does the explanation that is offered really explain things as readers understand and encounter them? What is the result of their putting the theory into practice? As he says, "The problem is that what we study is not being implemented in the real world." (Of course, it is an empirical question to what extent readers, after reading Gladwell, actually put the theory into use.)

In our view, Gladwell imperfectly characterizes the functions that academic journals play. Of course, most journals want to reach a particular audience, generally an audience perceived to be scholarly, and scholarship takes many forms, including qualitative and narrative forms. There are plenty of examples of research grounded in strong stories, one striking example being Karl Weick's (1993) work on the Mann Gulch disaster published in *Administrative Science*

Quarterly. But the more important purpose of academic journals, and one that Gladwell doesn't seem to acknowledge, is to vet the research of scholars through peer review. In contrast, Gladwell has no peer review for his published articles. The theories he presents and applies can only be reviewed by editors of *The New Yorker* or the readers.

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MEET THE PERSON

Diagnosing and Dissolving Our “Translation Gap”

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During the past several years, a number of scholars have noted that business school research has had little impact on management. For instance, Warren Bennis and James O’Toole (2005) argue that business schools are in a self-defeating feedback loop that has resulted in a model of education in which research and practice have become increasingly disconnected and that most of the research carried out in business schools is irrelevant to managers. Relevance, they argue, applies both to the practical implementation of ideas and to insight into the underlying forces that shape business, markets, and behaviors. They write,

During the past several decades, many leading B schools have quietly adopted an inappropriate—and ultimately self-defeating—model of academic excellence. Instead of measuring themselves in terms of the competence of their graduates . . . they measure themselves almost solely by the rigor of their scientific research. They have adopted a model of science that uses abstract financial and economic analysis, statistical multiple regressions, and laboratory psychology. Some of the research produced is excellent, but because so little of it is grounded in actual business practices, the focus of graduate business education has become increasingly

circumscribed—and less and less relevant to practitioners. (p. 96)

Such a summary likely rings true to many business academics and points to one of the reasons that popularizers of business-oriented academic research, such as Malcolm Gladwell, have become so necessary and essential. As the quote highlights, structures and incentives at business schools have created a “translation gap” where business school research has moved further away from practitioner audiences.

Although the quote above may ring true to business academics, the general public would likely find this situation quite ironic. As institutions devoted to professional training, leading business schools claim to put “power in practice” (at Michigan’s Ross School of Business) or to “develop innovative, principled, and insightful leaders who change the world” (at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business), yet many other scholars have corroborated that a fundamental disconnect runs through the business academy. For example, although Stanford’s mission is developing innovating and insightful leaders, a senior faculty member, Jeffrey Pfeffer (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002), suggests that the situation is so dire that it is unlikely that there is any value to business education.

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WHAT EXPLAINS THIS DISCONNECT?

Christopher Jencks and David Riesman (1968), in their study on research universities, warned about a status anxiety that academics in professional schools experience. The temptation of professional schools, they noted, is that they become more enamored of the disciplines that inform their practice than the professions to which they are linked:

As they look across the street instead of into their students' futures, they become more concerned with the "broad" academic and quasi-academic skills they all value in common [and] less concerned with the "narrow" professional skills that set them apart from one another and from the university as a whole. (p. 252)

Given the acute status anxiety about their academic bona fides, many business school academics were especially vulnerable to identifying themselves in disciplinary terms, especially after the publication of the highly critical Ford and Carnegie foundation reports that questioned business school academics' commitment to research. Stanford's former dean, Robert Jaedicke (Schmutter, 1989), noted that by the early 1980s a greater proportion of the faculty identified themselves not as business school professors but with a particular social science discipline:

[Faculty] are much quicker to align themselves with disciplines today than in the era in which I grew up. . . . When I entered the academic world, I never thought very hard about whether or not I would receive tenure. It was a growth industry, and you took for granted that if you aligned yourself with an institution that you like, and it liked you, everything would work out. But times have changed. . . . Not only is the quality of Ph.D. education better today, but standards are also higher and the evaluation process for tenure is more rigorous on all campuses. I think it's natural to expect professors to respond by aligning themselves with their disciplines. They need to have market value that extends beyond just one institution. (p. 6)

Among the top tier of business schools, this disciplinary orientation has been further reinforced by the faculty hiring and promotion processes. In subjects such as strategy, organizational behavior, and finance, prospective job candidates are increasingly sorted and selected not by the particular phenomenon they study or its relevance to managerial practice

but by whether their research is publishable in a first-tier disciplinary journal. In both form and content, the business school faculty promotion system now increasingly resembles the one found in university arts and sciences departments.

The turn toward disciplinary research, while admittedly having a major impact on the rigor and quantity of research, did change the attitudes and values of business school researchers with respect to considering the managerial implications of their research. Lyman Porter and Lawrence McKibbin (1988) note many business school scholars are in fact indifferent to the concerns of management: "Most business school professors are purposely aiming their research reports toward their academic brethren and . . . do not care whether such publications are comprehensible to practicing managers or not" (p. 167).

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

We feel that the need for business school academics to connect their research to practice is of greater import today than at any time in our history. Unlike other academic subjects, few institutions command the social attention of contemporary society and absolute power than do corporations. As the sociologist Charles Perrow (1991) noted, we live in an organizational society:

Organizations are the key to society because *large organizations have absorbed society*. They have vacuumed up a good part of what we have always thought of as society, and made organizations, once a part of society, into a surrogate of society. (pp. 725-726)

Under such a situation, academics at business schools should arguably be at the center of public debates about the role of the corporation, yet we frequently find ourselves marginalized in public debates to policy experts and economists. No doubt in part because of a perception that there is a lack of ability or anything to say.

On the research front, we are slightly more optimistic than either Bennis and O'Toole or Pfeffer and Fong and feel that the recent trajectory of organizational scholarship suggests that research is becoming more relevant to understanding the issues of today. As Davis and Marquis (2005) note, although organizational research in the 1970s and 1980s focused on elaborating abstract theoretical paradigms, research

in the 1990s was characterized by a problem-driven approach that is increasingly connected to daily management and public policy challenges. For example, they found that approximately 90% of the articles published in the theoretically rigorous *Administrative Science Quarterly* in the 1990s focused on topical and contextually situated issues as opposed to elaborating an extant theoretical paradigm. This may be a surprise to many business scholars socialized at a time when disciplinary orientation and theoretical contribution was paramount. But clearly there has been a shift in the focus of organizational research in the past decade and a half. Examples run the gamut from micro studies of how knowledge workers experience performance (Quinn, 2005) to more macro-level questions such as why and how do corporations' socially responsible activities influence their finances (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). In the tradition of theorists such as Marx and Weber, whose own work was an attempt to explain the dramatic transformations of their times, we are living in a society of dramatic transformation. And our best research and theorizing reflects this struggle.

Focusing on contemporary problems is not a suggestion that organizational scholars should become journalists and be documenters of social issues. This type of middle-range, contextually situated theorizing illustrated above is reminiscent of pioneering practice-oriented business research that argued theory was a "walking stick" (Roethlisberger, 1977). Under this perspective, researchers are not wedded to theoretical traditions but view theories as valid to the extent that they inform existing circumstances. The current approach to studying phenomena by testing competing and complementary perspectives fits well with this perspective. For example, in a recent issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Phillips (2005) studied how causes of gender imbalance in Silicon Valley law firms are informed by institutional-, network-, and power-oriented theories. This article makes a novel contribution to the theories of interest, but the findings that historically developed organization structures either promote or hinder the advancement of women have clear practical implications.

The interesting question then becomes: Why isn't such research with clear management implications diffused into wider society? It is understandable that arcane debates on organizational theory do not gain a widespread audience, but why not problem-driven research with clear implications? Here we feel that

some of the structural issues highlighted by Bennis and O'Toole come into play. Beyond just incentives on the appropriate types of research, we feel that the key element in bridging our translation gap is not simply the development of a competence in individual researchers but the creation of institutional mechanisms at business schools that can showcase and celebrate faculty research. These could include a greater focus on connecting faculty research expertise with their teaching responsibilities, getting early-career faculty more involved in executive education, and even creating new honor and reward systems that foster research that influence public debate. As one specific example, here at Harvard Business School (HBS), we have not only the *Harvard Business Review* but also *HBS Working Knowledge*, an informal e-mail newsletter that has a circulation of more than 100,000 practitioners. Wharton has a similar mechanism to diffuse faculty research more widely (*Knowledge@Wharton*). Such venues provide an opportunity to help academics think through connections with practice and also put researchers directly in touch with relevant practitioner audiences. If a business school is to truly have "power in practice," it needs to put its money where its mouth is. Michigan, for example, has a skilled press office that issues press releases and summaries of faculty research. The assumption of such an approach is that journalists will then translate the research into a story of interest to the broader public. Our experience is that this concrete step of translation needs to be taken within business schools by professionals experienced in academic research and reaching popular audiences. Such a perspective suggests that practitioners are not just an audience to reach but a constituency with whom to engage in dialog.

In closing, we are not suggesting that business school academics should aim for the popular audience that Gladwell does. But the interview with Gladwell highlights a larger issue: the need for business school academics to be better translators of their research, as Gruber said, to strive for "more of a blend." Like Bennis and O'Toole suggest, there may be structural causes of the observed translation gap. But we are more sanguine about the future. We feel that on the research front the increase in problem-focused research since the 1990s brings research closer to current management issues, and we suggest that translation is not an individual issue but that business schools should develop some institutional infrastructure to facilitate and support this translation.

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MEET THE PERSON

Let's Put Malcolm Gladwell Out of Business

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I have nothing against Malcolm Gladwell. He is bright, articulate, and an excellent communicator. He is providing a needed service, making complex academic ideas accessible to a broad audience. But I have a problem with the idea that what he does must lie outside academia. I agree strongly with his statement that "academics should feel free to write for broader audiences, but very often can't" because they lack the time or the skills or because academia does not reward or value it. But I also believe that there's no reason that we academics should not be able to do what he does. In fact, there is every reason that we should. So there is no malice when I facetiously say that we should *put Malcolm Gladwell out of business*.

From where I sit in a professional business school, I disagree with two points Gladwell makes in the interview. First, I think that the divide he sees between popular and academic works is an artificial one. (Donald Stokes, for one, challenged the dichotomy between basic and applied science in his book *Pasteur's Quadrant*.) The ultimate goal of the academic is to be a teacher in whatever form or domain that takes. And a good teacher has one simple guiding purpose—communicating an idea. That form of communication will vary based on the audience and the topic. So purely academic work theoretically speaks to academics, purely popular work (and I don't like that term) speaks to a popular audience, and purely practitioner work speaks to practitioners. But the problem is that there is no such thing as a purely academic, popular, or practitioner audience or

work. Some tools that work in one domain can work in another. And furthermore, the same piece of research can work for these different audiences if it is translated properly. There is no reason why scholars should focus only on one audience or one set of tools to the exclusion of others.

Second, I disagree with the distinction that Gladwell makes between work that starts an educational process and work that completes it (with academic work falling into the latter category). Academic work does not provide a final, singular answer. It is not definitive. It is one view on a complex puzzle. Research in the disciplines of economics, sociology, psychology, and political science will each provide a different view on the same particular problem. Does any one of them end the conversation? No. Graham Allison made this point quite nicely in his book *Essence of Decision*. Each discipline contributes one piece to understanding the whole. In that way, research actually starts a conversation.

Unfortunately, the academic rules of what constitutes legitimate research, coupled with the pressures of tenure, leave little room for more mainstream work. And above it all, there is a certain snobbery in academia that if we connect to the mainstream, we are somehow demeaning ourselves (John Kenneth Galbraith satirically wrote about this in his book *A Tenured Professor*). We pretend that we are above it all, sitting in our ivory tower, remaining objective and indifferent to the real world. And we eschew anyone who does otherwise. I don't subscribe to this notion. In fact, I

believe it creates a perverse and self-fulfilling vicious circle. Because academia does not value people who can write to mainstream audiences, it will not attract nor retain those who can do this. The rules of academia create the world of academia, and that world is biased away from making our work accessible to practitioners. And this enables Malcolm Gladwell to do his work.

The rewards in academia are to create academic knowledge that lies in academic journals. We measure the value of that work through journal status (supposed *A* journals vs. *B* journals) and citation counts. Journal status is artificially defined by its selectivity and particular theoretical focus. And the average number of citation counts among all academic articles is frighteningly low. In his words, Malcolm digs through this academic literature and “liberates” these ideas from “academic obscurity.” Can we really be satisfied with a legacy of work that lies in academic obscurity of select journals that are not often cited? Why wait for Gladwell to liberate it (and make himself wealthy and famous for doing it)? Why shouldn’t we liberate it ourselves by presenting it in a way that all can read, not just a select group of academics?

Now, I recognize that not all of us can or should do this. Can all research be translated into something that is accessible and useful to practitioners? No. Some academic research is motivated primarily by academic questions and therefore cannot be connected to practical concerns. But much research is motivated by problems or concerns in the world of practice and is therefore interesting beyond its strict academic domain. We all have a place in the supply chain of research (if you will forgive me this business jargon). Basic research supports applied research, which supports policy development, which supports managerial change, and so on. The links and ties in this chain are many and diverse, all of which lead to change within the world of some form of practice. But we truncate this process by leaving it to others to finish.

Unfortunately, to defy the institutions of academia and publish work that is engaging, interesting, and saleable in this end marketplace of ideas is a frightening challenge. It is intimidating to walk into a room of practitioners and present *your* ideas about how *their* world works. Not that academic seminars can be any less intimidating, but stepping outside the academic seminar room involves leaving the more controlled and predictable scholarly space, where people share your view of the world. They share a common set of rules and form of communicating. We know them and feel comfortable within their secure embrace.

Trying out your ideas in the world of practice becomes a trial by fire. We defend our ideas against people who are living the phenomena that we are studying. They are not a lab or a petri dish. They have ideas about our work and its validity. They will be more wedded to their view of the world and will be much more challenging to win over. Although we can win over an academic audience by challenging their theoretical models, to win over a practitioner audience, we must challenge the mental and behavioral models of their tangible world. We must get them to not only agree with us, but by agreeing, they will also be forced to change, and this creates tension. But where there are risks, there are rewards. There is nothing more satisfying than using our work to change the way people look at their world and motivating them to action for change, whether that be in management, policy, or everyday life. That is a far more provocative and exciting task, as Malcolm Gladwell knows (witness the impact of his book *The Tipping Point*).

Although Gladwell correctly states that “the problem is that what we study is not being implemented in the real world,” he incorrectly states that the “the difficulty is not with academics.” I am far more likely to use a Gladwell article in my MBA syllabus than an article from *Administrative Science Quarterly*. And I can’t remember the last time I saw an ASQ article written up in the business section of the *New York Times*, much like I might see a write-up of a medical study from the *New England Journal of Medicine*. That should tell us that something is wrong. Those of us in a professional school such as business publish work that the professionals we graduate will never see—not in our classrooms and not in their primary knowledge sources once they graduate. Let’s learn from Malcolm Gladwell and resurrect our work from academic obscurity by bringing it to people who will give it life beyond the academic journal and seminar. I believe that if we do this, our work will be greatly improved. As we test our ideas in the field, we will emerge with new and better ideas for our next studies. We will be better academics.

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