

C

E



Center for
Effective
Organizations

**SEIZE THE DAY:
ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES CAN AND
SHOULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

**CEO PUBLICATION
G 00-3 (376)**

SUSAN ALBERS MOHRMAN
*Center for Effective Organizations
Marshall School of Business
University of Southern California*

April, 2000

Seize the Day: Organizational Studies Can and Should Make a Difference

Susan Albers Mohrman
Center for Effective Organizations
Marshall School of Business
University of Southern California
U.S.A.

Phone: 213-740-6934

Fax: 213-740-4354

Susan.Mohrman@marshall.usc.edu

To appear in the Millennium Issue of *Human Relations* investigating the future of the Social Sciences, in January, 2001.

Written in January, 2000

Seize the Day: Organizational Studies Can and Should Make a Difference

Susan Albers Mohrman
Center for Effective Organizations
Marshall School of Business
University of Southern California

This is a time in history when organizational studies can and should contribute to the shaping of organizations and institutions that have immense impact on the character and quality of life. The unfolding global knowledge economy has presented great turbulence and contradiction: entailing unparalleled opportunity and largess for some, decreased fortune for others, and the challenge of adapting to a new order for all but the most recent entrants to the workforce. Galloping technological advance has forged new industries, such as biotechnology, and resulted in the convergence of others, such as telecommunications, computer and most recently entertainment. These changes have yielded societal wealth and at the same time have threatened traditional workforces and firms. Technology has transformed the way that work is done, putting a premium on knowledge and thinking, and reducing the value of physical labor and skills. The success of firms in transforming themselves to be competitive in the global economy has moved wealth and employment around the world. Work moves where there are low cost skills and capital, a trend that threatens traditional workforces in developed nations and reshapes their economies to focus primarily on high skilled, knowledge-based, value adding activities. Companies are at the center of all these trends and to a large extent are determining the nature of societies in the new century.

The seemingly continuous discontinuous transition offers an unprecedented opportunity for organizational researchers interested both in advancing organizational science and generating knowledge that can impact the changing forms and contexts of organizations (Lewin & Stephens,

1993). For those who believe that the best way to understand a human system is as a continually changing entity, the challenge is to find research approaches that can capture, shed light on, and derive knowledge from and about dynamic social systems. This period in history offers indisputable opportunity and, perhaps, responsibility, to make a difference. For this to happen, the field must orient itself not simply to description and explanation, but to the creation of actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1996, 1997) that addresses the inherent organizational and societal challenges. There are several possible barriers to our playing such a role. We may move too slowly and continue to lag behind practice (Lawler, 1999). We may keep our distance, therefore failing to be a contributor to the ongoing learning processes by which organizations are defining the new order and dealing with its issues. We may remain within ideological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological confines, thereby failing to contribute to understanding and shaping the systemic changes that are occurring

I am advocating an active role of engagement with companies. In particular I suggest that organizational research be crafted to inform the design choices that are fashioning the new order. The appropriate role of social science is not advocacy of particular solutions or particular stakeholder interests; rather, social scientists must assume an explicit role in generating knowledge useful to practitioners as they make choices that shape the new social systems. Far too much is at stake for social scientists to observe, measure, comment, theorize, and critique from the sidelines. The discourse of organization science and the discourse of practice must meet in the field. Three course corrections may be required. First, organizational researchers must acknowledge and take seriously that organizations are artifacts created by human beings to achieve their purposes. Organizations are the intended and unintended results of design activities. The organizational sciences should be geared to producing knowledge that can inform

the design process. Second, in crafting and learning from research, a connection must be made between researchers and the practitioners who carry out the ongoing design activities within organizations so that the knowledge generated through research becomes part of the knowledge of organization members. Third, organizational researchers must bridge the many disciplinary and ideological islands in the academic community in order to see the whole system that they are studying. Each of these three points is briefly elaborated below.

Informing Organization Design

Organizations are “artifacts”—created by people for their instrumental purposes (Simon, 1969). Designing and redesigning are the essence of organizing. Organizations are designed when they start up; and are redesigned as they go through the stages of growth, when they change their strategy, and/or when they encounter major environmental change. Much attention has been given to macro-redesigns, or “restructurings”, that have occurred in many organizations as they seek to compete effectively in the global economy. For example, they may reconfigure into global product line units, or establish networks of alliances and partnerships, or form new corporations through mergers that cut across nations. Equally important are the more micro design processes within the organization. Major restructuring sets off waves then ripples of redesigning throughout the organization, as each of the elements of the organizational system—business units, departments, teams, workgroups and individuals--learn to operate in the restructured organization (Tenkasi, Mohrman & Mohrman, 1998). Organizations transform themselves in small and major ways through ongoing self-organizing properties (Weick, 1993). Indeed, such self-designing activities are a primary way in which organizations and their

members learn to be more effective in accomplishing their purposes. They are not activities with which organizational science has often engaged, much less learned from.

Currently, entire industries have been in a state of hyperturbulence—the amount of change and the magnitude of the competitive threat experienced in these industries has exceeded the gradual adaptive capabilities of the firms. This state has yielded revolutionary changes entailing the redrawing of industries and the generation of new organizational and network forms (Meyer, Goes, & Brooks, 1993). These forms often represent a departure from the bureaucratic framework that has guided design and provided the intellectual framework for much organizational research in the past (Lewin & Stephens, 1993). For example, once vertically integrated organizations are reconfiguring themselves into flat, dynamic network structures and work is being housed in temporary structures such as project teams rather than in permanent departmental units. Such major redesigns are accompanied by an array of change initiatives in which organizational members determine how to do things differently to fit with the new macro-design. There is no template for these changes, which carry huge consequences for the lives of people and the character of society. Organizations are inventing new approaches to practices such as compensation, staffing, metrics, and knowledge management. Employees are grappling with the need to reframe their understanding of the organization and their relationship to it. They are trying to develop comfort with new and more contingent relationships with their employers, learning how to operate in roles fraught with uncertainty, ambiguity, and increased responsibility, and facing the need to learn and develop new skills and knowledge in order to remain employed. Rarely are organizations, their members, or the consultants they hire actively engaged with organization scientists in these learning processes.

At the Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California, we have recently looked back at previously conducted multiple year research project to understand its usefulness to the ten companies that participated (Mohrman, Gibson, and Mohrman, in press). The original research project had investigated the conditions that affect how quickly organizational units can achieve fundamental change. A year after the completion of that project, we conducted interviews to determine whether managers in those companies had experienced the research as useful, why or why not, and what they meant by “useful”. We found that although the topic of the research (acceleration of transition) was perceived by all the companies as relevant (all these companies were going through transitions in their core designs), they did not always find the research to be useful. Usefulness was determined by whether the research findings were actually incorporated in organization design decisions: whether action was taken that was informed by the research.

Connecting Researchers and Practitioners

A critical challenge for the field is to conduct research in a manner that makes it more likely that the research findings become part of the knowledge base within companies, so that they can inform ongoing design activities. Conventional wisdom holds that research will contribute to design activities when it is explicitly conducted as collaborative action research. In that case the researcher is generally also functioning as interventionist. The research project we examined was characterized by positivist approaches to data gathering and analysis and aimed at the development and testing of generalizable causal relationships. The researchers were not functioning as interventionists, nevertheless the research still proved useful to the extent that a two-way connection between the researchers and organizational practitioners was established.

This finding is consistent with the contention that valid, actionable knowledge is unlikely to be generated if a traditional arms length relationship is maintained in which practitioners are considered and treated as “subjects” (Argyris, 1996).

Academics tend to conceptualize the issue of relevance and impact as a knowledge transfer challenge (Tenkasi & Mohrman, 1999). Countless informal and formal sessions at gatherings of organizational researchers examine the question, “How can we get practitioners to learn about, value, and use the research we do?” This image implies a one way translation of academic findings into the language and frame of reference of the practitioner. However, knowledge is generated and consumed by different communities in relationship to each community’s unique thought world (Dougherty, 1992; Fleck, 1979). Practitioners are likely to apply pragmatic criteria to knowledge, while scholars may be interested in description or explanation. For example, Kanter and Eccles (1992) observed and commented on a conference of academics and practitioners in which the academics presented their theoretical perspectives and empirical findings regarding network organizations and practitioners participated in a discussion of the findings. There was a gulf between the two communities; each found different kinds of data compelling, defined the phenomena (networks) quite differently, and had different purposes that underpinned their interest in the subject. While academics were interested in objective data that enables classification of networks along gross dimensions, practitioners were interested in data that has subjective importance given their purposes and in understanding the subtlety and nuances that might help them know how to create networks. This gulf between them is not simply one of translation—it entails substantive issues of focus and purposes. This gulf must be bridged if academic research in this area is to usefully inform design activities.

In the USC research project mentioned above, we found that creating opportunities for the researchers and organizational members to work together to frame the purposes of the research and interpret the findings enhanced the likelihood that research will be useful. This does not mean that researchers abandoned their theoretical interests and research methodologies. Rather, the perspectives and purposes of both communities became embedded in the research. Through sessions set up for joint interpretation of the data, researchers became aware of how practitioners explained the patterns that emerged, and practitioners were exposed to the theoretical frameworks and models that guided the academic researchers. Through such interactions, the findings of the research and the conceptual framework guiding it became part of the knowledge base of organizational participants that could be brought to bear on subsequent design activities. For research to be actionable, it must not only be valid and predictive; it must also relate to and become part of the practitioners' thought-world. This is unlikely if the researcher does not also come to know and take into account the perspective of the practitioner. The perspectives of both researchers and academics are enriched through incorporation of the others' points of view. Doing useful research that leads to the application of that research depends on far more than finding timely and relevant research topics. It depends on creating a relationship where the research is conducted with mutual understanding and taking each other's purposes into account. It requires a recognition that academics and practitioners are involved in different kinds of practice, and that both are guided by the concepts and theories they carry in their heads. For one world to do work that influences another there must be an effort to connect these worlds.

Bridging Academic Islands

The many divisions within the academic community are equally strong barriers preventing organization research from informing organization design. Disciplinary and theoretical divides make it less likely that research will grapple with the real problems of organizations, problems that are systemic and not limited to the confines of one discipline or one theoretical tradition (Argyris, 1997). These call for multi-faceted and interdisciplinary approaches.

A particularly pernicious divide, from an organization design standpoint, has been between those who advocate positivistic organization theory and those who advocate “postmodern” or “contra” organizational science. Positivistic approaches have come to be characterized as “managerial” in orientation because they are perceived to emphasize control and efficiency. In contrast, more interpretive frameworks emphasize that organizations are socially constructed and can only be studied through the meanings that various stakeholders attach to them. Advocates of the latter approach see the positivistic tradition as contributing to a dehumanizing rationalism and capitalistic imperative. In laying out the history of these two orientations, Marsden and Townley (1996) have argued that it is time that the organizational sciences realize that this is not an either/or proposition. Understanding the dialectic between the dehumanizing aspects and the empowering aspects of efficiency, modernity and capitalism is “...the most pressing problem facing organizational studies. ...[M]odernity is Janus faced: it enriches and impoverishes, empowers and represses,...enhances efficiency and dehumanizes (p.671).”

Indeed, in our studies of organizations in transition, we find that even within a superficially homogeneous workforce, reactions to organizational changes are generally

bifurcated. The same flat, electronically connected, fast-paced, performance-oriented environment that stresses accountability and self-management is experienced by some as exhilarating, enabling, and liberating, while others find it threatening, repressive, inhumane, and exploitative. The divide exists among managers as well as among workers. A simplistic categorization of the impact of the new economy on the workforce is not possible.

The process of organization design requires recognition of and comfort dealing with both sides of this ideological divide. Design deals with the rational configuration of organizational activities and resources to achieve human purposes. Those of us who would contribute to design cannot segment the rational, often economic, impact on organizations from the impact on people's lives (Mohrman, Mohrman and Tenkasi, 1997). Nor can we limit our examination of purpose to the intentions of top management and stockholders (Mohrman and Lawler, 1998) at the exclusion of broader societal and human purpose. New organizational forms are often elegant solutions to environmental challenges demanding more performance with fewer resources. These designs may provide great gains for stockholders, increase living standards, and provide growth and opportunity for many employees. On the other hand, employees are experiencing greatly increased demands for high performance, ongoing learning, and long hours. New organizational forms may create divisive distinctions between core employees, who are highly connected to organizations, and more loosely connected contractors and temporary workers. However, workers who want to craft work lives that fit their life situations appreciate the variety of possible employment relationships. New information technology and particularly the Internet, has linked individuals to information that can empower them and serve as a democratizing force in society. It has also, ironically, yielded a situation where employees are

working electronically with others whom they have never met, and to whom they have no interpersonal connection or sense of belonging.

These problems cannot be examined from within a narrow disciplinary perspective. They are inherently economic, political, sociological, psychological and technological. Solutions to today's issues will require changes that transcend particular organizations, and may require the emergence of new institutions, at macro global levels and more micro local community levels. The new organizational forms are still unfolding. The true impacts of these new approaches on employees, communities, societies and nation states, and indeed on companies themselves are yet to be fully experienced, let alone understood. The true test of organizational science is if it is able to contribute to the crafting of new design approaches and solutions to the problems that are inherent in the current state of discontinuous change that has sent shock waves through every institution of society. If it is able to contribute then by definition it has been able to keep up with understanding the cutting edge of organizational phenomena. Organizational researchers can learn from and contribute to the fundamental design issues being addressed during this transition, but only if we are able to connect with practitioners and their worlds. To do this, we have to expand our horizons, get out of our narrow niches, acknowledge the complexity of the phenomena we aspire to understand, and attend to the systemic impact of design choices.

References

- Argyris, C. 1996. Actionable knowledge: Design causality in the service of consequential theory. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 32: 309-406.
- Argyris, C. 1997. Epilogue: Actionability and design causality. 505-509.
- Dougherty, D. 1992. Interpretive barriers to successful product innovation in large firms. Organization Science, 3: 179-202.
- Fleck, L. 1979. Genesis and development of a scientific fact. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kanter, R.M., & Eccles, R.G. 1992. Making network research relevant to practice. In N. Nohria & R.G. Eccles (Eds), Networks and organizations: Structure, form and action: 521-527. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Lawler, E.E. III. 1999. Challenging traditional research assumptions. In E.E. Lawler III, A.M. Mohrman, Jr., S.A. Mohrman, G.E. Ledford, Jr., T.G. Cummings & Associates (Eds.), Doing research that is useful for theory and practice (2nd ed.): 1-17. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Lewin, A.Y., & Stephens, C.U. 1993. Designing post-industrial organizations. In G.P. Huber & W.H. Glick, (Eds.), Organizational change and redesign: Ideas and insights for improving performance: 393-410. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marsden, R. & Townley, B. 1996. The owl of the minerva: Reflections on theory in practice. . In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy & W.R. Nord (Eds.), Handbook of organization studies: 659-676. London: Sage.
- Mohrman, S.A., Mohrman, A.M. Jr., & Tenkasi, R. 1997. The discipline of organization design. In C.L.Cooper & S.E. Jackson (Eds.) Creating tomorrow's organizations: A handbook for future research in organizational behavior: 191-205. West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Mohrman, S.A. & Lawler, E.E. 1998. Conclusion: Facing the challenges of the future. . In S.A. Mohrman, J.R. Galbraith, E.E. Lawler III, & Associates (Eds.), Tomorrow's organization: Crafting winning capabilities in a dynamic world: 394-412. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mohrman, S.A., Gibson, C.B., & Mohrman, A.M Jr. In press. Doing research that is useful to practice: A model and empirical exploration. Academy of Management Journal.
- Myer, A.D., Goes, J.B., & Brooks, G.R. 1993. Organizations reacting to hyperturbulence. In G.P. Huber & W.H. Glick (Eds.), Organizational change and redesign: Ideas and insights for improving performance: 66-111. New York: Oxford Press.

Simon, H.A. 1969. The sciences of the artificial. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Tenkasi, R. V., & Mohrman, S.A. 1999. Global change as contextual collaborative knowledge creation. In D.L. Cooperrider & J.E. Dutton (Eds.). Organizational dimensions of global change: No limits to cooperation: 114-138. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Tenkasi, R., Mohrman, S.A., & Mohrman, A.M. Jr. 1998. Accelerated learning during transition. In S.A. Mohrman, J.R. Galbraith, E.E. Lawler III, & Associates (Eds.), Tomorrow's organization: Crafting winning capabilities in a dynamic world: 330-361. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Weick, K.E. 1993. Organizational redesign as improvisation. In G.P. Huber & W.H. Glick (Eds.). Organizational change and redesign: Ideas and insights for improving performance: 346-382. New York: Oxford Press.