

## Getting Management Knowledge Used

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Steve Allen, never at a loss for a clever remark, once was asked by a man in his television studio audience, "Mr. Allen, do they get your program in Chicago?" Allen's reply—without missing a beat—was "They see it, but they don't get it!" Steve Allen's remark neatly skewers a basic dilemma in the management field: how to move beyond simply *disseminating* worthwhile new management knowledge, to actually getting knowledge *used* to enhance education and facilitate future knowledge development—and enhance the *actual functioning of organizations*. One does not necessarily lead to the other, just as we know (in psychotherapy and in everyday life) that insight does not necessarily lead to behavioral change.

James C. Worthy (1992 [this issue]) provides a fascinating framework within which to consider the challenges of getting management knowledge used. His findings are rich, and they come to us virtually out of a time capsule, fresh from their original writing in the early 1950s. Worthy's work at Sears, Roebuck was disseminated through management journals back then, and indeed the Sears "organization surveys" had significant influence on the developing field of organizational studies in the years following. The vivid and well-expressed management knowledge he presents in this article is just as valid today as in 1950—but we still have not well-used this knowledge, despite its dissemination 40 years ago!

The gap between dissemination and use of management knowledge on many topics exists for a reason illustrated by a joke so old Steve Allen might be embarrassed to tell it. A drunk is searching for his car keys near the streetlight rather than in the dark alley where he lost them because, he says, "Over here the light's better!" We continue not to fully meet the challenges of getting management knowledge used because we give only limited attention to the human dimensions of change—particularly the complicated psychological and sociological dynamics of the management field itself. Some learnings from a related field called *knowledge utilization* which has emerged largely from public sector activities in health, education, and human services, may help to close this gap. Blended with what we already know from organization development and planned change studies (e.g., Beer & Walton, 1987; Porras & Silvers, 1991), the professional field of knowledge utilization offers promise for invigorating efforts to promote use of management knowledge.

Worthy's studies of organization structure each have specific and concrete findings. The studies show that *decentralization* of administrative authority and responsibility enhances organizational performance, when the organization truly permits managers to operate with an adequately broad range of discretion. Worthy's analysis is timely for managers of today's downsized, "lean and mean" organizations—most especially the cautions he gives about differences between the *appearance* and the *philosophical/operating reality* of decentralization. As major multinational corporations like IBM and large public sector organizations, previously highly centralized, accumulate experience with decentralization, Worthy's cautions will no doubt become even more relevant.

The studies show that *less administrative structure* within Sears stores resulted in better overall performance, in part because frontline managers were free to make their own mistakes and learn from

them. Worthy's analysis of these Sears stores in the 1940s sounds very much like the current concept of the *learning organization*—"a consummately adaptive enterprise with workers freed to think for themselves, to identify problems and opportunities, and to go after them" (Dumaine, 1989, p. 48). But again, Worthy has cautions: In looking for alternative explanations for the results he observed in his studies (a methodological advance still not widely followed in much management research!), he found that the basic style and personality of the store manager was the key ingredient for success in the less structured organization. Put the wrong manager type in this less structured environment, and difficulties occur—or the structure starts to increase! His advice: Select managers with the appropriate style to begin with. Such a thoughtful analysis is highly relevant today, as the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act requires employers to identify "essential job functions" and make personnel decisions on the basis of them.

The studies conclude that a *broad span of control* was conducive to success, from the merchandising vice president on down. Today, management theorists like Peter Drucker have written about corporate CEOs being more like symphony orchestra conductors than like traditional managers, with large numbers of people reporting to them for vision and values rather than for direct guidance, and span of control has broadened in many large workplaces (Dumaine, 1989). Yet once more, Worthy has some cautions: For the broader span of control to be effective, there must be a significant degree of *stability* in the organization's structure and work force, so that people can get acquainted with each other personally and in respect to their job roles, and so that reasonably trustful working relationships can develop. As we see the lingering results of the "merger mania" of the 1980s and as recession continues to press corporate leaders toward short-range profitability and "quarter-to-quarter" thinking, Worthy's measured analysis once again is right on target.

For specialists in organization development and planned change, Worthy's studies also contain valuable wisdom. In discussing his second study's results, he points out that "desirable change"—reducing the degree of administrative structure, in this case—can sometimes have "undesirable consequences," putting managers into work environments not suited to their personality and styles. Most recent reviews of organization development (OD) and organizational transformation work (e.g., Beer & Walton, 1987; Porras & Silvers, 1991) also emphasize the limits of these approaches and the importance for success of careful fit between goals, strategies, and environments. Combine this with Worthy's observation about the desirability of organizational stability to permit broadened span of control to be effective, and the dictum appearing on the wall behind might well be George Bernard Shaw's: "If it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change."

How much of Worthy's findings and analysis, however well expressed and buttressed with substantial empirical data, are truly "new" in the 1990s? Not so much, and that is just the point. Forty years later we are still struggling with most of the same issues in management research—and almost all of the same issues in organizational life! We "see" it, but we don't "get" it. Why?

First, the responsibilities of most who study organizations and those who teach about them are seen as just that—studying and teaching. Utilization is somebody else's job. In academia, the reward systems and the basic acculturation we all share beginning in undergraduate days are heavily weighted toward dissemination, not utilization: The peer-reviewed journal and the professional conference presentation are the two approved means by which results from research are shared, despite considerable empirical evidence (Glaser, Abelson, & Garrison, 1983; Rogers, 1983) that these are two of the *least* effective ways to stimulate actual adoption of innovations, as opposed to merely distributing information about them. Researchers often take a vow of chaste objectivity that makes it difficult to engineer results for real-world application, and that forbids interacting with the subjects of the research about how questions are framed, results are interpreted, and findings applied. Approaches such as William Foote Whyte's

"participatory action research" (Whyte, 1990), in which researcher and subject work more collaboratively, are still not widely embraced.

Second, when a potentially useful body of new management knowledge emerges, there often is not more than a token gesture in the discussion section of the article or speech about utilization issues, and little "professional structure" exists to enhance these needed activities. In particular, there are few well-trod pathways for dealing with the resistance they may well develop concerning the aspects of management theory, education, and practice, which themselves may need to be altered for use to occur. We are much happier studying how some other organization should change, not our own in terms of the professional societies, academic institutions, and consulting firms that provide the "home base" for most management study today. The same can likely be said of research and development (R&D), human resources or other departments in corporations that may undertake in-house studies.

So, what can be done to increase the potential for use of valuable management knowledge, such as that contained in Worthy's article?

At least one part of a better response to this challenge involves lessons from the field of knowledge utilization, which is specifically concerned with strategies for promoting actual use of innovations in practice or technology by individuals and organizations. Beginning in the 1920s with studies of how farmers adopted new farming methods and how teachers adopted educational techniques, the field of knowledge utilization now spans more than 70 years of research and scholarly study, often overlapping with management sciences, but also producing its own distinctive body of concepts and strategies (Backer, 1991a, 1991b; Dunn & Holzner, 1988; Glaser et al., 1983; Rogers, 1983).

As in the case of OD (Porras & Silvers, 1991), little theory building has yet happened in knowledge utilization, but some preliminary efforts are now developing (Rich, 1991). However, the theoretical concepts underlying it can be traced at least back to the European beginnings of social science, with Gabriel Tardes' "Laws of Imitation," and early anthropologists known as the British and German-Austrian "diffusionists" (Rogers, 1983). In fact, the notion of adapting knowledge to the needs of society dates back to the Greeks and is a theme running through much of Western thought. Work in the history of philosophy and science, and in applied social research, also underlies this field. Knowledge utilization as a field of research and scholarly activity reflects the increasing importance of knowledge in all human activities. Early studies were concerned primarily with the adoption of innovations by individuals, but over the last 30 years, the emphasis has shifted markedly to organizational adoptions, thus opening the door for interface with management sciences and organizational change theory (Backer, 1991b).

Lessons from the field of knowledge utilization that may have application for increasing the use of management knowledge include the following.

1. Knowledge utilization requires change, which is psychologically threatening and typically causes psychological reactions of depression, anxiety, and paranoia in those who must change to use the new knowledge. There are well-known psychological remedies for these symptoms, which are eminently "treatable" if acknowledged as real and perfectly natural. Management professionals whose knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors must change for use to occur *will* experience these reactions, and their human responses must be addressed skillfully. These concepts have been addressed in the management literature by Levinson (1972).

2. Knowledge utilization requires resources, and the resources cannot be small compared to the magnitude of the change that would result from application of the new knowledge. For instance, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Extension system is probably the most successful, and best-documented, knowledge utilization mechanism in the world (Rogers, 1983), with remarkable success in improving both farming practices and community life in rural America. One main reason for its success in getting out new knowledge developed by USDA researchers and others is that *every dollar*

spent by USDA for research is matched by a dollar spent on dissemination and utilization. Yet how often do we assume that utilization efforts—if we think about them at all—for some new finding in management will happen automatically, or that “someone else will pay for them”?

3. Just as organizations need consultation to undertake OD or organizational transformation efforts, so management scientists may need outside consultation to develop and implement potentially effective plans for knowledge utilization. In this regard, interactions between professional societies in management, such as the Academy of Management, and those in use, such as the Knowledge Utilization Society, may be in order. This interchange would be for more than information sharing: It would be an effort to mobilize actual interventions to help meet the challenges of getting management knowledge used, perhaps by developing ongoing programs of interdisciplinary training and technical assistance.

4. The field of knowledge utilization in the public sector has recently undergone something of a “renaissance,” as chronicled by Backer (1991b). After a period of neglect in the 1980s, federal agencies supporting health, education, and human services now are looking much more sharply at what can be done to improve services in a tight-resources environment, by increasing the application potential of the research and community demonstrations they sponsor. One by-product of this renaissance has been an increase in the number of “guidance publications” on knowledge utilization, such as a recent book on efforts in the drug abuse field (Backer, 1991a). Much of the material in these guidance publications could be easily translated for application in the management field.

5. As electronic communication technology continues to evolve, vigorous new channels for information are becoming more and more available that can supplement traditional print formats—audiocassettes, videocassettes, teleconferences, and so on (Backer, Rogers, & Sopory, in press). Although the management field already is heavily invested in such communication tools, thoughtful analysis of what delivery system can best reach what audience with what goals of actual use might result in a better “fit” between the medium and the message, as has been found in recent work in the knowledge utilization area (Backer, 1991a).

Finally, this journal can enhance the potential for use of management knowledge by considering some strategies that have been found useful in recent knowledge utilization studies. For instance, “alternate formats” of journal articles that abstract usable findings in brief summary could be devised for dissemination to those who might never read entire articles. Commentaries can be encouraged that lay out a plan for what actions would need to occur to promote use of the findings from the article preceding.

Such recommendations, in keeping with Worthy’s cautionary approach, need to be taken cautiously, however. First, most of what has been suggested here is hardly new to the management field; in truth, these are largely familiar concepts. The value comes from developed technologies and strategies that are “repackaged” in a new format, and the overlap must be readily and humbly acknowledged. Second, there must still be a focus in the development of knowledge on its validation and refinement, on *not* promoting for use what is not yet ready for such application. Third, efforts at planned change in the turbulent 1990s really depend more on the model of “logical incrementalism” first advanced by Quinn (1980): Plan a change, apply it, see how the environment changes as a result of both the planned change effort and other forces at play, and rework the change program as needed. This really is more a process of “managing change that is happening anyway” than it is planned change in the traditional sense, but it is likeliest to result in real organizational improvement. Otherwise, we are likely to remain in the dark alley, not even seeing the new knowledge, much less getting it.

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