

Actionable Knowledge

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Actionable Knowledge

Actionable knowledge reflects the learning capability of individuals and organizations to connect heterogeneous elements (social, political, economic, technological). The relational understanding generated by actionable knowledge can extend existing modes of knowing and inform future action. The focus of actionable knowledge is on (learning) practice as a form of self-organization that is fluid, dynamic and emergent. Actionable knowledge is therefore, a pragmatic engagement with the social complexity of organizing.

Conceptual Overview

Actionable knowledge has been a central concern in management and organization studies on at least two levels. Firstly, actionable knowledge has been positioned as a response to the long-standing concern about the contribution and relevance of management research to management practice. Actionable knowledge illustrates the relationship between theory and practice. It shows the impact that management research can have by demonstrating that the knowledge generated is actionable i.e. implementable by the users whom it is intended to engage (business practitioners, policy-makers, researchers).

Secondly, actionable knowledge, seeks to articulate and theoretically advance our understanding of the nature of action as a phenomenon and the relationship between action and knowledge (modes of knowing) in organizations. The attention is on the conditions that underpin the relationship between knowledge and action and the potential benefits and outcomes for organizations who succeed in effectively

‘managing’ both what they know and how they act on what they know. Each of these perspectives are discussed in more detail.

The Relationship Between Theory and Practice

The relationship between theory and practice is at the core of a long-standing debate that seeks to articulate and define the distinctive character of management research in relation to the sciences. Conflicting views dominate the debate. For example some commentators like Lance Sandelands in 1990 and more recently Ghoshal in 2005 articulated the relationship between theory and practice, as incommensurable, incompatible and therefore, ‘intertranslatable’. Drawing attention to the distinction between explanation and understanding he and others that followed have challenged the assumed causality in the relationship between theory and practice. These perspectives provide a particular orientation towards what knowledge is and how it may or may not be related to action.

An alternative positioning of the relationship between theory and practice has been captured in Kurt Lewin’s assertion in 1943 that ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’. This assertion provides the most convincing articulation of the relationship between theory and practice as reflective of the complementary and intimate connection between theory and practice. ‘Action Science’, ‘Action Research’ ‘Design Science’ are among the modes of management research that seek to maximise the parallel and reciprocal development of management research and management practice. These conceptualisations help position actionable knowledge as a distinct type of research (neither ‘applied’ nor ‘basic’ research) with intervention methodologies at its core. Intervention methodologies as Chris Argyris, 2004

describes them are intended to support organizations and their managers to bring about change in the status quo. They seek to go an extra step beyond description and explanation towards creating different 'virtual words' by engaging the actors in rediscovering their human quality to act. Action therefore, becomes the main focus and criterion of validity in management research.

The Relationship Between Knowledge and Action

Actionable knowledge is therefore not only about the connections between theory and practice but perhaps more importantly between knowledge and action. Here we find again Chris Argyris leading the way by articulating two theories of action what he calls Model I and Model II. 'theory-in-use'. The main thrust of these models is a focus on revealing the governing variables, action strategies and consequences that constitute the emerging defensive mechanisms. Defensive mechanisms reveal that one of the most important conditions for fostering the relationship between knowledge and action is learning.

Model I theory-in-use reveals the defensiveness, misunderstanding and self-fulfilling and self-sealing processes. Such mode of action results in skilled unawareness and skilled incompetence, because it seeks to produce unilateral control. Model II theory-in-use reflects 'espoused theories' of action. The role of the intervener is to help individuals and organizations to transform their espoused theories into theories-in-use. Central to this process of transformation is 'double loop learning' – learning 'new' set of skills and 'new' governing values so that ideas can be tested, actively reflected upon and new possibilities revealed through experimentation. Model II therefore, disturbs current practices and seeks to introduce new actions by generating new

knowledge about ways in which the existing problems can be overcome. The proposed 'Action Cycle' is intended to support this process through four phases of – diagnosis, invention, production and evaluation. This engagement with defensive routines rather than sidelining them provides a stronger connection between knowledge and action and in Argyris's terms it shows that actionable knowledge 'is most likely to be of help to human beings because it describes how they should act. The basis for the sense of competence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy is effective action...Action is therefore, at the heart of what it means to be human'.

The relationship between knowledge and action has also been informed by Pfeffer and Sutton's analysis of 'The Knowing-Doing Gap' in 2000. They provide further explanations as to the barriers of turning knowledge into action and suggest a range of management practices that can create or reduce the knowing-doing gap. They present these in the form of eight guidelines for action:

1. Understanding how things are done and why they are done the way they are done.
2. Learning what works and what does not work by trying things out.
3. Establishing a cultural tone that action is valued.
4. Allowing for mistakes to happen so that learning can be fostered.
5. Driving out fear and inaction.
6. Fighting unhealthy internal competition.
7. Measuring the knowing-doing gap and doing something about it.
8. Leadership from the Top in what they do and how they allocate resources.

Actionable knowledge prompts practitioners and academics alike to critically reflect on their actions in creating knowledge and to seek to develop new practices that foster knowledge and action as emergent, dynamic processes that refine the rules and disrupt existing routines through implementable solutions.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

Although actionable knowledge as it is currently conceptualised, has contributed significantly to the way we have come to understand the importance of knowledge and its relationship to action, we are still experiencing great difficulty in creating knowledge that is actionable. The difficulty is partly because we don't know enough about how knowledge and action connect in relation to management practice. We need more research that studies the management practices that connect knowledge and action. We also do need to rethink the very research practices for studying management practices. The latter point reinforces the call for reflexivity (*reflexive critique*) in management research in its approach towards creating knowledge. There is a tendency to develop management theories that are intended to inform management practice without any evidence how the researchers developing such theories have applied their theories in their own practice. This tendency only goes to perpetuate one of the most problematic forces that work counter to a productive relationship between theory and practice, knowledge and action – the politics of knowledge creation.

Dominant theories of knowledge creation assume distinctive roles between producers and consumers (i.e. academics being producers of knowledge, consumed by business practitioners) and by creating this divide between producers and consumers of

knowledge, we fail to see the dynamic interaction between them. As Hassard and Kelemen (2002) remind us, the study of the production of knowledge should also consider the consumption of knowledge as this “(...) fuels the creation of new knowledge while new knowledge acquires its status as ‘knowledge’ only when selected for consumption by important players” (p.333). These important players consist of not only academics and business practitioners, but also of policy-makers, consultants and gurus. We therefore, need to give more voice to the politics of knowledge creation mindful of both how certain ideas are privileged over others in developing theory as well as, how in practice some of these ideas are selectively adopted. This process of selection is often driven as much by the short-term, context specific needs of practitioners, as it is driven by the translation of ideas into prescriptions for action.

If we look closer at these processes of translation we appreciate more why actionable knowledge is so hard to be created. Translation is not simply a matter of changing the language and words used in order to attribute a specific meaning to a particular idea. Nor is translation about the transformation of theory into practice by predefining what behaviours and actions a particular idea should exhibit. If we treat translation in these terms we continue to fall into the trap of implicitly suggesting that something is not as good as the original given it requires to be adapted –translated – if it is to be of any use. Therefore, translation helps explain why the relationship between knowledge and action , theory and practice is dysfunctional.

An alternative view of translation would be to understand translation as a process of network construction by focusing on the ‘powers of association’ (Latour, 1986), of

achieving something through others. As Callon (1986) puts it, to translate is to displace, to be indispensable, placing oneself at a strategic point through which others (human and non-human elements) must pass. Through translation, a geography of obligatory points of passage is constituted, and one single voice (the translator's voice) is able (and entitled) to express the voices and aspirations of others. This perspective of actionable knowledge would be founded on the principle of collaboration and co-creation of knowledge hence, the focus would be on how things are connected and what are the conditions that foster different kind of inter-connections.

This perspective draws attention to a way of thinking that focuses on integration and differentiation rather than distinction and isolation. Therefore, the emphasis is neither on action nor knowledge, theory or practice in and by themselves in isolation. The focus instead is on the conditions that underpin the way theory and practice, knowledge and action are interconnected. This implies that it is just as important to look for how theory serves practice and knowledge serves action as it is to understand the *theory of practice* and the *knowledge of action*.

The focus on connectivity and relationality as central to both future management research and management practice, also draws attention to trans-actionality. The latter point reinforces the need to pay attention to different actors in the process of knowledge co-creation so that the emerging tensions between multiple and competing priorities and perspectives can be usefully engaged with to extend the possibilities for action, knowledge, theory and practice. This means that production and consumption models give way to *models of co-creation* where common practices govern the

interaction between multiple actors (e.g. academics, practitioners and policy-makers). An initiative that has been leading the way in developing such a perspective is GNOSIS (www.gnosisresearch.org) which identifies *re-search* as a common practice which can usefully integrate knowledge and action, theory and practice by providing a space for connecting different communities and perspectives (across the sciences and across communities). This focus on interconnectivity calls not only for exploring effectively the interdependencies between theory and practice, action and knowledge. It also calls for a commitment to learning from and through collaboration.

Future research seeking to advance actionable knowledge needs to focus on the complexity of organizing and draw attention to the conditions that underpin the interconnections that can be fostered through inter-relationships and inter-dependencies that embrace organizing as a relational process linking heterogeneous elements. This process of organizing cuts across areas that usually are presented as having clear boundaries separating them and through its emphasis on interconnectivity it also draws attention to self-organization, emergence and fluidity. Actionable knowledge needs to capture the process of searching and re-searching, the discursive, distributed, contested, unfinished, never-ending nature of knowledge, action, theory and practice.

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See also: Reflexivity, Practice, Action Learning, Action Science, Management Learning

Further Readings and References

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