
Whither Management Research? Reflections and Resolutions

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Preamble

It gives me a deep sense of delight to witness the commencement of the ninth International Conference on Management and Economics (ICME) 2020, under the theme of “The Role of Business Intelligence in Shaping Organizations in Emerging Economies” organized by the Faculty of Faculty of Management and Finance (FMF), University of Ruhuna. As a continuous learner in management, whilst simultaneously playing multiple roles of a teacher, a researcher, a supervisor and an examiner, my attempt is to share some relevant thoughts on a topic that has a direct relevance to the selected conference theme. In essence, it is a reflection on management research in the Sri Lankan context.

1. Introduction

“Research is to see what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought.”, so said Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, a Nobel Prize winning Hungarian psychologist. It is, in fact, developing a third eye to see beyond what is obvious. The field of management in Sri Lanka, both private and public sectors alike can immensely benefit if more insights beyond mere information would be the norm in making policy decisions. Management research is of utmost importance, in this sense, globally and locally alike.

Management research is a part of the wider array of social research. As many of us have come across, management research is viewed as “a systematic, data-based, critical, objective, scientific investigation into a specific problem, undertaken with the purpose of finding answers or solutions to it” (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013:2). Whilst positive initiatives are being taken, current situation with respect to research in Sri Lanka is far from a satisfactory level. Pinikahana (2013) highlighted the need to focus on for private sector to collaborate in university research.

“Sri Lanka contributes only 0.17% from GDP whereas Singapore contributes 2.3%, South Korea, 2.9% and China, 1.3% from their GDP for research. A recent report published by the Ministry of Technology & Research in Sri Lanka revealed that Sri Lanka has only 287 researchers per million which is less than the world average of 894. The average number of researchers per million in the developed world and the developing world is 3272 and 374 respectively. It is clear from these statistics that Sri Lankan situation is worse than the average third world situation. The most alarming situation is that it is getting worse in recent years. For example, in 1996 Sri Lanka had 6000 full time researchers including university researchers but by 2006 this number declined to 4200” (Pinikahana, 2013).

“It is time to deviate from traditional concept of university research and establish some links with the industry, both public and private for collaborative research”, he concludes. This highlights the need to “reach the unreachable” in conducting management research, aptly justifying the theme. In fact, it has a global and local relevance. Bennis and O’Toole (2005) lamented that “too focused on “scientific” research, business schools are hiring professors with limited real-world experience and graduating students who are ill equipped to wrangle with complex, unquantifiable issues in other words, the stuff of management.” It clearly points to the need to have *rigor*, *relevance* and *reach*.

In such a context, any move to strengthen the research rigor, particularly among the University community is commendable. As I observe, there is a clear need to create better awareness on the importance of research. Academics can play a pivotal role here.

1.1. Academics as Researchers

Academics engage in scholarly activities. They deal with knowledge in playing multiple roles.

They have to think and act as knowledge creators as well as knowledge sharers. Academics influence the attitudes and aptitudes of student community. Superiority in scientific thinking, blended with socio-cultural realities is what an academic should smartly possess. Academics should shift from their perennial plight of “publishing or perishing” to a new paradigm of “thought leadership”. Such a transformation requires vision and passion. Overcoming socio-economic as well as religio-cultural barriers in moving ahead with a strong intrinsically-driven motivation is the need of the hour.

1.2. Triple Roles for Academics

The way I see it, academics have triple roles to play. These can be depicted as a knowledge pyramid of academics. Figure 1 depicts the details.

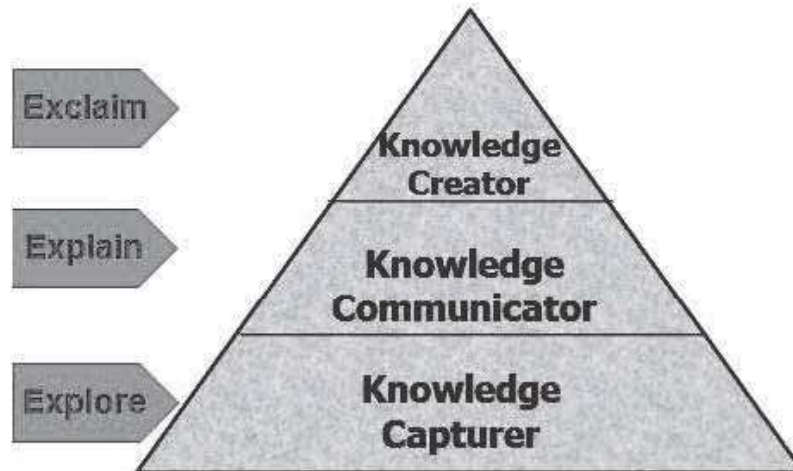


Figure 1: Triple roles for academics

Source: Dharmasiri, 2016

1.2.1. Academics as Knowledge Capturers

The bottom of the knowledge pyramid contains the role of knowledge capturer. This includes the learning dimension of an academic. We learn from the womb to the tomb, as life-long learners. I prefer to be called as a management learner than an “expert”. This is more relevant in the context of change, where knowledge is rapidly getting obsolete. Particularly, in the areas of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), the rate of knowledge updating seems more rapid.

This is where the academics have to explore new knowledge. They should have the mindset of exploration. It reminds me of a story that I heard about an elderly professor. He was serving in a residential campus in a European city, staying in the upper-most floor of the building complex. His room was well lit early morning and the students could see him reading. Among the students, they were discussing as to why this veteran still suffers in getting up so early to read. One student had the guts to go and ask from him, as to why he is doing so. The professor gave a profound answer. “I would rather you drink from a flowing fountain than from a stale pond”.

Upon reflecting, I was wondering whether we Sri Lankan academics are more “flowing fountains” or “stale ponds”. We might be hurriedly offering re-cycled knowledge over and over

again to cater for ever-increasing lecture demand. Hence, the knowledge capturing dimension suffers and opportunity to review and renew oneself gets neglected.

1.2.2. Academics as Knowledge Communicators

The middle part of the knowledge pyramid is all about sharing knowledge. It highlights the traditional role of teaching. Communicating knowledge does not necessarily mean lecturing. We at the Postgraduate Institute of Management (PIM), have been practicing, what we call four modes of teaching. They refer to “tell, ask, show and do”. Telling means the typical lecturing. Asking means to engage the learning community by raising questions expecting answers from them. Showing refers to audio – visual interventions such as documentaries, movie extracts, video recordings, internet-based resources such as YouTube etc. Doing means to get the student community to engage in group discussions. In a typical three hours “session” (we prefer this as opposed to a lecture), roughly one third would be telling.

I see clear issues among us, Sri Lankan academics in this respect. Are we loading students with knowledge through one-way communication in making them mere receivers? They would easily resort to “parrot technique” in memorizing everything and reproducing at the exam with spelling and grammar errors. Are we being challenged by the student community sufficiently, in leading to a meaningful interactive discussion? I might be biased here in basing on mostly post-graduate teaching experience. Yet, irrespective of what level an academic has to tackle, an appropriate adaption is always possible.

1.2.3. Academics as Knowledge Creators

This is where the research comes into the limelight. Sri Lankan academics should reach the pinnacle of knowledge pyramid in becoming knowledge creators. Relevant research with rigor and results is the need of the hour.

Bartunek et al., (2001) highlight that there is a considerable gap between organizational research findings and management practices. As they observe:

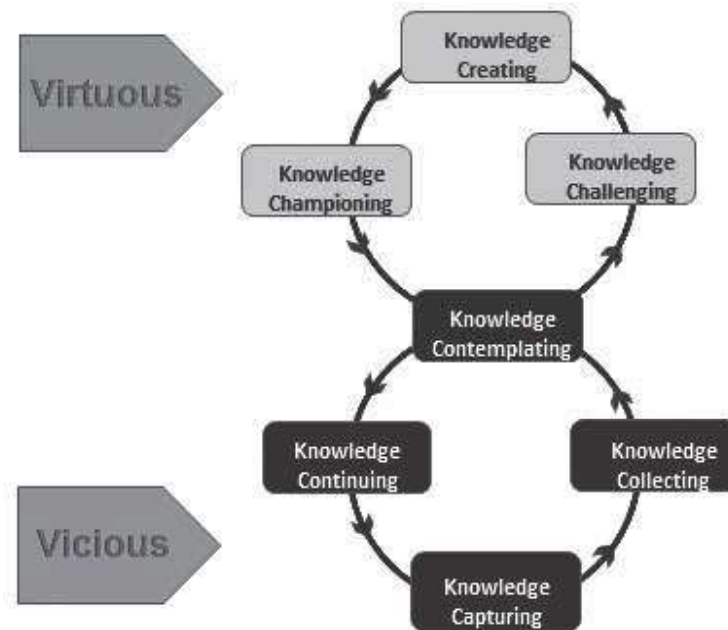
“Although volumes have been written about the probable causes and consequences of this gap, surprisingly little empirical evidence exists concerning the various viewpoints. The articles in this forum provide data on the role of academic-practitioner relationships in both generating and disseminating knowledge across boundaries. The contributions of each article are summarized in light of recent theories of knowledge creation, and suggestions are made for

increasing the value and relevance of future research to both academics and practitioners” (Bartunek et al., 2001: 1).

In such a context, any move to strengthen the research rigor, particularly among the University community is commendable. As I observe, there is a clear need to create better awareness on the importance of research. This I see acutely in the field of management.

2. Moving from a Vicious Cycle to a Virtuous Cycle

In moving up in the knowledge pyramid, academics need to move from a vicious cycle to a virtuous cycle. I have attempted to capture both the cycles as depicted in figure 2.



Source: Dharmasiri, 2016

Figure 2: Vicious Cycle to Virtuous Cycle

As figure 2 depicts, the bottom is the vicious cycle where an academic gets stranded in capturing, collecting, contemplating and continuing of knowledge. In other words, one gets engrossed in sharing same knowledge over and over without reviewing, reflecting and renewing. I refrain from giving Sri Lankan examples, but I know many among us who experience this situation either knowingly or unknowingly.

The break though occurs when one moves from the *vicious* cycle to the *virtuous* cycle. Instead of moving beyond knowledge contemplating to knowledge continuing, the cycle should break with knowledge challenging. That's the entry to the passage of knowledge creating and knowledge championing.

Let me explain this much needed move through an example. Rather than pinpointing at others, I would share my experience. When I started teaching Human Resource Management, I diligently adhered to the text-book models, in sharing my experience through them. I could even remember the entire lecture or even several lectures by heart. I was essentially, recycling same knowledge, of course with delivery effort sans intellectual stimulation for me. I realized it is just tutoring and not teaching. I needed to move beyond.

When I started challenging the appropriateness of some of the teaching models to our socio-cultural context, the move from viscous cycle to virtuous cycle began. My research on Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) shed new insights to the way we approach people particularly in the humanly rich South Asian context. It gave me more confidence to blend western models with regional and local realities, rather than blindly sharing what the books say (Dharmasiri, 2013).

3. Barriers for Knowledge Creation

Having discussed the increasingly important role of knowledge creation, it is worthwhile to investigate what prevents it happening to the desired level. As Alvesson & Sandberg (2013) observe:

“Despite the huge increase in the number of management articles published during the three last decades, there is a serious shortage of high-impact research in management studies. We contend that a primary reason behind this paradoxical shortage is the near total dominance of incremental gap-spotting research in management” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013: 1).

Moreover, observers have long noted a considerable gap between organizational research findings and management practices (Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001). As they admonish, “although volumes have been written about the probable causes and consequences of this gap, surprisingly little empirical evidence exists concerning the various viewpoints”. In the local context, as we often observe, only some of the MBA programs in Sri Lanka contain a research component, and management research is perceived to be something extremely difficult and to be left to the experts to handle. Should that be the approach of management learners? I would say “no”. Why management learners are reluctant to embark on management research? I would

propose that we need to overcome barriers associated with management research. Let me discuss seven such barriers.

3.1. Skill Barrier

I have seen management learners being scared to engage in management research stating that they do not have necessary skills to do so. Skills can be acquired in variety of ways and same is true for management research skills. The starting point is an inquiring mindset.

When you have a problem in focus as an unsolved puzzle, a logical step-by-step approach is needed in understanding the nature of it, and finding solutions for it. There are range of ways to strengthen the skills of doing management research including books, websites and short courses. It is encouraging to see that pioneering academic institution who started offering an MBA program to Sri Lanka is still maintaining a research rigour, making it a vital component in MBA education.

3.2. Scope Barrier

Some tend to complain that the extent involved in a management research is so vast. Scope is there for the researcher to decide. I have heard many a times from my senior colleagues that management researchers want to cover everything under sun and moon. Instead, they should clearly demarcate a boundary within which their investigation will be carried out. A beginner can start studying on his/her organization or even a division of it.

On the other hand, a veteran researcher will clearly identify the scope which is relevant to the nature of the problem under investigation. For an example, in a study of employee satisfaction, instead of covering all employees all over the world, a demarcation such as “middle level managers of private commercial banks in Sri Lanka” would be a more sensible scope.

3.3. Size Barrier

The fundamentals of research say that we study a sample as we cannot cover the entire population. It is issue of depth and breadth. You can do an island-wide survey but the depth of investigation can be rather shallow.

Instead, selecting a reasonably sized sample that represents the characteristics of the population can be a more practical approach. Continuing on the earlier example, selecting middle managers from one bank or from several banks is a decision on sample size.

3.4. Style Barrier

There is no one universal approach to management research. Diverse patterns can be seen in moving beyond traditional number-crunching practices.

What I mean by style is essentially the approach to management research. It can be one of the following:

- Study of an unexplored area, E.g.: Career aspirations of call-center operators,
- Challenge what is already known, E.g. Motivational factors of sewing workers apparel industry
- An existing problem formulated in a novel way, E.g.: Why plantation workers rest change
- New interpretation to existing findings, E.g.: Revisiting culture study by Gert Hofstede (A famous Dutch anthropologist)
- New evidence on a previous issue, E.g. Productivity and employee satisfaction
- New method/ technique adopted, E.g.: Use of “grounded theory” for local research
- Replicate a study done elsewhere, E.g. Study of organizational commitment
- Synthesis of existing knowledge, E.g. Combining two studies on different aspects of stock market performance

Hence, it is clear that there is no universal style towards management research. The challenge is to select the style matching the nature of the investigation.

3.5. Structure Barrier

Some management researchers insist on a formal structure in approaching research. The world is moving towards multiple structures. I saw how story-telling has influenced as a powerful way of narrating a management research, in the recent past.

In perusing through the fundamentals of management research, two key structures can be found. They are related to an *exploration* or an *explanation*. The twin terminology associated is deductive and *inductive* approaches. Deductive approach begins with an initial idea or conceptualization of the problem in focus. It is applicable when substantial knowledge is already in existence. In contrast, the inductive approach begins with the observation of realities and then moving towards generalizing the results. It is more suitable when available knowledge is insufficient to develop predictions.

Each approach leads to a different structure of the management research. It is difficult to say, which is better out of the two. A more pragmatic approach will be to find the best fit with regard to the nature of problem under investigation.

3.6. Source Barrier

Some of the management researchers complain that they have no access to sources of information in formulating the problem. There is no one source but multiple of sources are available in order to gain knowledge.

There are electronic databases that contain thousands of research papers. In some management programs, instead of access to a physical library, the students receive a user name and a password, inviting them to visit a virtual library full of versatile resources. On the other hand, there is a wealth of local management research, sadly not yet available in electronic form. Visiting several management institutes will serve the purpose, instead.

Hence, source should no way be a constraint in conducting management research.

3.7. Support Barrier

There is a need for guidance with regard to management research. The usual practice is to seek the support of a supervisor. However, the supervisor is only a guide and the researcher has to take the ownership of the project. Assumption that being dependent on the supervisor will ensure research success is a myth.

Here, the emphasis is on self-reliance and confidence in oneself. Supervisor can give valuable suggestions, and guide through grey areas, but he or she is not there to do the research for the researcher. Right use of the supervisor in asking right questions is the preferred approach. Of course, in critical junctures, supervisor's wealth of experience will be of help in taking the correct decision.

Therefore, being over dependent on external support will not take a researcher anywhere.

4. Moving Beyond Seven Barriers

Management research has to gain a renewed enthusiasm in Sri Lanka. As Uyangoda (2015) observes:

“Sri Lanka’s culture of social science research does not have strong theoretical and philosophical foundations. This absence is reflected in the exceedingly descriptive character of many of the social science and humanities research publications. Scholarly research is also about interpretation, theory building and critically interrogating the existing parameters of knowledge in both empirical detail and theoretical interpretation” Uyangoda (2015: iii).

The presence of several annual research conferences and the availability of several management journals are a welcome sign for a better future. A lot more needs to be done to ensure that management research contributes to the development of Sri Lankan economy whilst enriching the body of knowledge.

We need more management researchers who would genuinely add value in broadening our understanding, in turn contributing to individual and institutional development. When such research projects happen, we can look forward to a high impact on economic growth with socio-cultural implications. I refer not only to the success of a research project, but the subsequent benefits to the humanity at large. Figure 3 depicts the definite way forward.

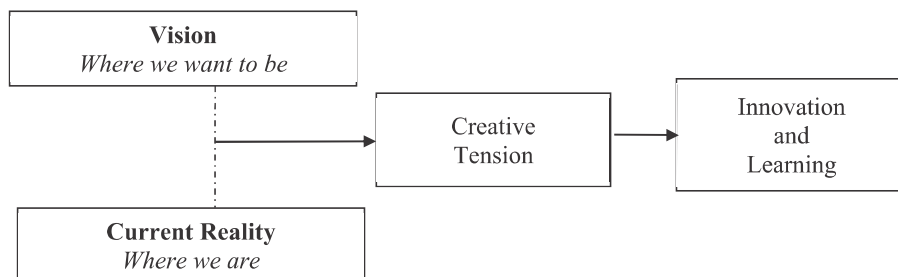


Figure 3: From Current Reality to Desired Future

Source: Senge, 1990

As figure 3 illustrates, the creative tension is generated from the gap between where we want to be and where we are. As Senge (1990) explains, the principle of creative tension shows that an accurate picture of current reality is just as important as a compelling picture of a desired

picture. This should be the resolution of all management researchers in order to experience “creative tension” in the knowledge voyage. “What is common to good research, whether qualitative or quantitative in their approach, is the tendency to emphasize the tentativeness of the findings” (Ranasinghe and Fonseka, 2011:15).

“Telemedicine, which is defined as ‘the practice of healthcare using interactive audio, visual and data communications and includes healthcare delivery, diagnosis, consultation and treatment as well as education and transfer of medical data’, has been gaining popularity in the health services sector” (Jha & Gurung, 2011:1). There are many live examples of this nature can be found in supporting the dire need of research reaching the unreached.

Such an approach will be crucial amidst the Covid19 pandemic where crisis management has come to the forefront as a researchable arena. Hart, Heyse, & Boin (2001) illuminate us on this as follows:

“We identify three main developments in crisis management practice, which bring new challenges to crisis managers. These are: the evolution of an industrial towards a risk society; a development from heroic to besieged crisis response; and a change from episodic to continuous crisis management” (Hart, Heyse & Boin, 2001).

The local response to a global crisis as in the case of Covid19 offers ample opportunities for researchers to engage in a wide array of investigations.

“Increasingly, management researchers are using topic modeling, a new method borrowed from computer science, to reveal phenomenon-based constructs and grounded conceptual relationships in textual data” (Hannigan et al, 2019). As they further elaborate, “doing so enables us to identify and discuss how topic modeling has advanced management theory in five areas: detecting novelty and emergence, developing inductive classification systems, understanding online audiences and products, analyzing frames and social movements, and understanding cultural dynamics”. These are the promising signs of emerging tools for the benefit of management researchers in order to engage in meaningful knowledge creation.

5. Conclusion

Management research has a long way to go in ensuring the consistent reaching the unreached. With awareness of the content, and familiarity of the contents, the committed conduct with clarity and coherence is what is required. Overcoming the seven barriers discussed above and moving from a vicious cycle to a virtuous cycle of knowledge creation will pave way for higher

vibrancy of management research in Sri Lanka. It requires reflections and resolutions towards results.

I am sure that the ICME 2020, organized by the Faculty of Faculty of Management and Finance (FMF), University of Ruhuna is a steadfast step towards *exploring, expanding* and *excelling* in the fitting aspects of “the role of business intelligence in shaping organizations in emerging economies reaching unreached through innovative research in management”. I wish the conference all the very best.

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