

1993 Presidential Address:

## WHAT IF THE ACADEMY ACTUALLY MATTERED?

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In the spring of this year, *Newsweek* magazine published an article with the startling title, "The Death of Management" (Samuelson, 1993). When I saw it, I groaned to myself, "Just my luck. My year as president of the Academy of Management and the whole thing goes belly-up."

Actually, it was not as crushing an article as its title implied. It was mainly a rehash of the obvious and well-worn point that someone who succeeds in managing one enterprise will not necessarily do well in another one—that you can't just parachute in and analyze your way out of any complex managerial dilemma. As if someone said you could. One more straw man skewered. Namely, the article did not exactly deal a fatal blow to our field or its premises.

So, as Mark Twain said, news of our death is greatly exaggerated. But it gets one thinking. What if the field of management, or say, specifically the Academy of Management, did die? Which, in turn, gets one thinking, What if the Academy of Management never existed? What if we had no occasion to be here in this room today?

To think in these terms is to conjure up Frank Capra's film classic, *It's A Wonderful Life*. In the movie, Jimmy Stewart plays George Bailey, the small-town banker who attempts to end his own life, only to be shown the error of his ways by his guardian angel named Clarence. Clarence's tactic, of course, is to take George Bailey back through time and show him the void that would have occurred if there had been no George Bailey, reminding him of all the lives he's touched and people he's helped—how the world is much better off because he's here.

Let me be your guardian angel for a few moments, giving you a glimpse of what might have been if there were no Academy of Management. It will be an unsettling trip. Unlike George Bailey, we will find that things might have worked out very, very well without us. Frankly, I'm not

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sure Clarence would have wanted any part of our passage back through time.

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The first thing we find—and perhaps most unsettling of all—is that there is another organization in our place. For, unlike individuals, institutions are replaceable. If one fails or never exists, there will be another one to meet the same needs—differently, to be sure, but the needs will be met.

In this case, the organization we see is named the Society for Administrative Science. It was founded in 1949 by a small group of scholars of business administration and corporate executives “to promote research and teaching that will enhance the administrative effectiveness and overall functioning of organizational enterprises.” Its start was rocky, as is often the case for fledgling organizations, but it grew and flourished.

I have here a stack of news clippings that will give you a sense of some of the milestones of this Society for Administrative Science and the field it represented.

Here’s one dated 1972: The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announces a new Nobel Prize category: administrative science. Coming three years after the first Nobel Prize in economics, this new category, in the words of a spokesperson for the Swedish Academy, “will honor extraordinary contributions toward the improved functioning of organizations in society.”

Another one, 1975: The Society for Administrative Science, in conjunction with the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, and with funding from a group of major European and American corporations, unveils a comprehensive Code of Ethics for Administrative Professionals, which becomes widely adopted by leading companies and business schools.

This, 1981: President Reagan announces the formation of a President’s Council of Administrative Advisors to inform policy deliberations on matters ranging from American competitiveness, to small business formation, and even to effective functioning of the executive branch of government. In naming the panel of five distinguished administrative scientists, President Reagan cites “the huge difference it makes to societal and economic well-being when our institutions are well managed and have the benefit of leading-edge thinking on administration.”

Finally, 1990: At the request of the new Polish government, the Society for Administrative Science is conducting a major symposium for Polish business, government, and labor leaders, entitled “Transforming the Polish Workplace: Toward Eco-

conomic and Human Vitality." Keynote presentations are being given by distinguished Society members from Asia, Europe, and North America.

And, to bring you right up to date: Today, the Society has 25,000 members around the world, conducts numerous conferences for scholars and executives, and publishes five journals and a monograph series. The research and expertise of its members are frequently represented in public policy and corporate policy discussions. In short, the Society for Administrative Science is of considerable significance. It matters.

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Members of the Academy of Management, that is what might have been. We might have mattered.

You would perhaps be more comfortable if I led in a celebration of our great accomplishments. And, I could have. To be sure, we have plenty in which we can take satisfaction. But I am more intent on creating a nagging uneasiness about the gap between what we as an Academy amount to and what we might amount to. Make no mistake. My ultimate purpose is not to bemoan our past or present but to stir us to raise our sights for the future.

I lay our shortcomings at nobody's feet in particular, least of all the people who have served so energetically and devotedly in Academy leadership positions over the years. Rather, we simply seem to have a minimalist ethos: minimal programming, minimal dues, minimal staff, minimal innovation, minimal visibility, minimal impact.<sup>1</sup> Each August, we come to talk with each other; during the rest of the year we read each others' papers in our journals and write our own papers so that we may, in turn, have an audience the following August: an incestuous, closed loop.

Colleagues, if we believe highly in what we do, if we believe in the significance of advanced thinking and research on management, then it is time we showed it. We must recognize that our responsibility is not to ourselves, but rather to the institutions around the world that are in dire need of improved management, as well as to those individuals who seek to be the most effective managers they possibly can be. It is time for us to break out of our closed loop. It is time for us to matter.

Recent initiatives are all in the right direction. The *Academy of Management Executive*, our vanguard effort to bridge theory and practice, continues to gain practitioner readers. John Veiga, *AME's* new Editor, has formed an Executive Advisory Board and launched a new section entitled

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to our "minimalism" fully aware that we are nearly 9,000 strong and some of our members complain about the Academy being too big. Headcount is not the issue.

*Translations*, offering managerial implications of research found in our more academic publications. The Board of Governors has retained the services of the public relations firm of Hurley and Haimowitz to help us enhance the visibility and prestige of the Academy and scholarly research in management. The Academy's new Teaching Committee, chaired so ably by Peter Frost, is helping us conceive of new links among management research, management practice, and the classroom. Our professional divisions—your divisions—are operating in a new era of increased resources and discretion; they are being spurred to launch bold initiatives that not only will serve their members in new ways but also will enhance the impact of their members' efforts. Finally, and certainly most newsworthy, is the Board's decision, reached just this week, to conduct a search for a full-time Executive Director who will bring the professionalism and continuity we so critically need if we are to become a truly consequential professional society that catalyzes and represents a truly consequential scholarly field of management.

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Obviously, much more needs to be done. I could set forth any number of possibilities, but let me identify four initiatives that I particularly encourage the Board of Governors to consider. First, we must set much higher sights for the *Academy of Management Executive*. Our research shows that the *Executive* is being used widely in our classrooms, but it has yet to reach or influence many executives. Jack Veiga's new features, which I have already mentioned, will help, but, to do this right, significant resources will be required. I propose that, for the next four years, on top of its current budget, all incremental revenues derived by *AME* (i.e., all net additional subscription and advertising revenues), less only the incremental costs of printing and distribution, be plowed back into *AME* to enhance its editorial content, aesthetics, and marketing. *AME* must become a premier outlet for more and more of our best thinkers. Our goal should be that by 1998 *AME* will be second only to the *Harvard Business Review* in its influence on managerial thought and practice. As a graduate of the Harvard Business School I will leave to others the campaign for the step after that.

Second, our professional divisions should be encouraged, possibly with seed money, to conduct joint conferences with practitioner organizations in their respective domains. Currently, divisions are essentially prohibited from engaging in any type of joint venture with outside groups—a bewildering irony because we have as members some of the leading scholars who have studied the compelling advantages of strategic alliances. A joint conference between, say, our Human Resources Division and the Human Resource Planning Society, or between our Business Policy and Strategy Division and the Strategic Management Society or the Planning Forum, could create a fertile ground for sustained and

enhanced links between the worlds of scholarship and practice—linkages we critically need.

Third, the Academy should initiate a new major award: a prize for exceptional scholarly contribution to the practice of management. To be judged by a panel of distinguished academics and executives, this honor would be bestowed annually to an Academy member whose writings have had widespread beneficial impact on the arts and sciences of management, as practiced.

Only works published at least 10 years prior would be considered, so the judges can be assured that they are evaluating genuine, sustained impact and not the momentary hype that accompanies so many of the espoused quick fixes that assail managers these days (Bleakley, 1993). In fact, this award should become one of our key signals to the business world—a signal that we stand ready to help managers separate fads and fluff from fundamental advances and insights. Our program of awards is instrumental in shaping and reflecting our priorities; it is clearly time that we start honoring those among us who have contributed the most to managerial practice.

Fourth, and finally, I would like to see the Academy of Management hold its annual meeting outside of the United States or Canada. If we wish to claim an international mindedness, and if we wish to exhort our students to an international mindedness, then we must show it and reinforce it in our own actions. Contrary to any fear of reduced attendance at an off-shore meeting, I believe such an event would be a pivotal occasion in the life of our organization—exhilarating, energizing, and highly visible. Because of long lead times in site-selection arrangements, the first year we can consider such a meeting is the year 2000. What a perfect point to signify a new global era for the Academy. I hope Mary Ann Von Glinow and her site-selection committee will pursue this idea.

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Right now, the major debates regarding business and management are framed almost entirely by lawyers and economists. Although those people are equipped with some useful tools and perspectives, they don't have all it will take to successfully create workable solutions to today's thorniest business issues. We could help. After all, we possess an understanding of complex organizations and of human behavior in those organizations. We could matter.

Why do we have such a limited role? The answer, I believe, lies not in any conspiracy or antagonism toward the field of management, but rather in our own failure to present ourselves—our body of knowledge and our perspective—to the world of affairs. My goal in having us finally do so is not so that we may achieve acclaim or notoriety, but rather that we may make a significant contribution to the solution of major problems facing our society and its value-creating enterprises.

The winds of change are sweeping not only through the business world, but also through higher education and business schools. All markets are becoming more and more stringent, including the market for ideas. Any academic field that is a reluctant wallflower will wilt. Any academic field that exists to satisfy itself and only its own interests will soon have few resources.

I urge each of you to raise your sights as to what the Academy and the field of management might become. Expect more from the Board of Governors. Expect more from your divisions. Encourage your colleagues to do the same. And, above all, take part in this campaign: Have a conviction in the importance of what you are doing, and work more than ever to establish its significance for others—both *within* and especially *beyond* the Academy.

It's been said that there are three kinds of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened. To a great extent, the role of a scholar is in the middle category: to observe, analyze, critique, and disseminate. This is important work, and we should never take our eyes off it. However, when an academic field has as its charge the thoughtful preparation and guidance of practitioner professionals, and when an academic field deals in a domain that vitally affects societal well-being, then that academic field must enter the world of practical affairs. Without being co-opted, it must strive for influence and impact. That is our challenge. We should matter. We must matter.

## REFERENCES

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