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EDITOR'S COMMENTS: PUBLISHING THEORY WHEN YOU ARE NEW TO THE GAME

The challenges with developing and publishing theory are well recognized, and some of the most accomplished theoreticians in management research have offered insights on the characteristics of good theory (Bacharach, 1989; Kilduff, 2006; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1989; Whetten, 1989). The purpose of this piece is more humble. I reflect on the challenges that confront junior scholars, such as Ph.D. students and junior faculty, who aspire to make a theoretical contribution early in their careers. As a junior scholar, I went through the review process at top-tier journals for nine theoretical papers. While I succeeded with five of them, I also lost four after three rounds of revisions—two as a doctoral student and two as an assistant professor. Reflecting on both the ups and the downs from the perspective of an editor has led me to some of the observations that I share below.

THINK BOLDLY BUT RESPECT THE "CRAFT" AND THE "GUILD"

Relative to the rest of the field, junior scholars as a group are less socialized in the paradigms of the field. They often explicitly endeavor to bring new ways of thinking to the field and are willing to go outside the paradigms the field relies on. Novelty, however, comes at a cost: novel things are harder to understand and, especially, to appreciate. The development of novel theoretical ideas, therefore, requires a considerable amount of skillful linking, bridging, and connecting to the current work in a given area. But junior scholars may not realize what it takes to connect their ideas effectively to current conversations in the field. In an effort to establish their expertise in a given area (especially if it is a relatively new paradigm), they tend to dedicate too much effort to reviewing the work in that area and not enough to developing their own original ideas. At the same time, guided by an explicit or implicit desire to assert the novelty of their contribution, they tend to underuse relevant management research. As a result, they tend to overstate the novelty of their contribution and to alienate the current experts in the area (selected as reviewers because of their expertise). What makes a contribution novel is not that no one in the field ever thought about a given idea but that the idea is articulated, organized, and connected in a way that suggests new directions for researchers who, hopefully, are already thinking about it.

At the other end of the spectrum are the problems that arise from sending for consideration the theoretical chapter from one's dissertation as a theoretical contribution. While generalizations in this regard are difficult, it may be fruitful for junior colleagues to think of the theoretical part of their dissertation as the preparatory work for becoming an expert in a given field, rather than as a distinct theoretical contribution. Many theoretical chapters do not receive much attention once the empirical portion of the dissertation has commenced, and, thus, they do not reflect the development in the students' thinking. Original theory development is an act best engaged in *after* completing the dissertation, because it can then benefit from investigating the problems empirically and reflecting on the findings, critiques, and defenses of the ideas. What emerges is a deeper, more synthetic, and more enriched understanding of the relationships of interest.

Both processes—connecting thoughtfully to the "guild" and reflecting deeply on the material—should help overcome what I have come to see as one of the fundamental problems scholars face in their first theoretical efforts: the need to recognize that ideas, no matter how original, are not theory. To become theory, ideas have to be *crafted* into a theoretical contribution—a well-ordered whole, with a clear logic and explicated causal mechanisms (Kilduff, 2006; Whetten, 1989). My emphasis here is on craft-

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ing—the painstaking development of raw material into an articulate, coherent, and elegant text. Mintzberg reminds us that "craft evokes traditional skill, dedication, perfection through mastery of detail" (1987: 66). Crafting therefore requires the application of a well-developed specific skill, which is not generated simply by virtue of enrollment in or completion of a Ph.D. program. As Sutton and Staw have observed, "Reading major theorists and writing literature review papers is often passed off as training in theory building, even though such assignments really don't teach one how to craft conceptual arguments" (1995: 380).

The point of my comments is not to suggest that few can succeed in the daunting enterprise of theory development but, rather, that the likelihood of success increases if young scholars recognize the specialized skills required for success. They can then borrow from strategy research the idea that such skills can be developed through persistent investments over time or that they can be accessed through collaborations and partnerships with colleagues who have developed the skills already. Importantly, at *AMR,* a coauthor can be added at any stage of the review process. Once the nature of the issues with the manuscript has been made more explicit through the first round of the review process, it may be useful to reassess one's skills relative to the nature of the task.

AVOID ISOLATION

Crafting and connecting are tools for developing an original contribution that will be comprehensible and acceptable to a community of scholars. These tools are honed in scholarly conversations—and especially through exposing one's work to the scrutiny of the "guild." If "scrutiny" sounds ominous, young scholars can think of the process as "doing your market research," as one extremely successful colleague termed it. Discussing and presenting ideas is the process through which one can understand how one's audience, rather than one's mind, views the potential contribution. This process is not unlike the process through which the markets for really novel products form. In such markets, producers and potential users engage in repeated interactions and iterations to learn about each other's needs and offerings (Dougherty, 1990).

Young scholars, however, may have several disadvantages in seeking to meet their target audience. They may have less developed professional networks from which to request qualified friendly reviews; they may worry about the reputational consequences of subjecting to scrutiny something that is still "in the works"; and, worst of all, they may be too worried that exposing their novel ideas may enable others with the superior theory development skills discussed above "to beat them to market." While some of these concerns may have some validity, the costs of developing a paper in isolation, as discussed above, usually far outweigh such "risks." Departmental or workgroup "brown bags," lunches with friends, and formal presentations at conferences are all excellent vehicles for engaging actively in the scholarly conversation through which papers are polished and refined.

PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

Published papers tend to look different from the papers originally submitted. The published versions have acquired additional elegance and polish from the additional crafting that has taken place during the review process. And while writing an "accept-as-is" draft may be an unrealistic dream for all but a few, one can aspire to send out a paper that entices editors and reviewers with its originality and craft. Yet it may be difficult for junior scholars, given their limited experience, to have a realistic assessment of when a draft is ready for submission. In addition, folk wisdom in our field seems to say that because reviewers' reactions are unpredictable, it does not make sense to expend a lot of effort on polishing a set of ideas that is bound to change.

Nothing can be farther from the truth. First, the carefulness of the crafting affects the extent to which the reviewers and the editor will understand and appreciate the ideas. Second, the carefulness of the execution is also a signal to the reviewers and the editor that the author has the requisite attributes of being systematic, diligent, and persevering—all of which are prerequisites for seeing a paper through the review process and for justifying the time that the reviewers and editor are willing to spend to help the author succeed. Put differently, given the editor's uncertainty about a young scholar's ability or motivation to undertake the additional work required for a successful revision, along with the costs of an additional round of revisions in terms of the author's, reviewers', and the editor's time, the likelihood of receiving a "revise-and-resubmit" is influenced by the quality signals conveyed by a carefully put together submission.

REJOICE BUT REVISE

A carefully crafted and original submission more often than not will generate a revise-and-resubmit, which is the proverbial foot in the door. It is thrilling, reaffirming, and hope preserving. And if one has not been through the twists and turns of the review process more than a few times, the emotional reaction to the invitation to resubmit may override careful thinking about what is actually required to stay in the game. The most common errors with revisions that are subsequently rejected appear to be (1) dismissing the issues raised as a failure on behalf of the editor and the reviewers to understand the author's points; (2) responding to the comments with cosmetic changes—that is, editing the language and adding a few paragraphs here and there, which can then be pointed to in the responses to reviewers; (3) responding to the comments literally—that is, doing everything the reviewers asked for; and (4) responding to the reviewers' comments rather than to the explicit guidelines in the editor's letter.

Obviously, the different nature of these problems calls for different specific solutions, but two general guidelines may help with all four. First, the editor's letter is the most important document that should guide an author's thinking about the revision. At *AMR,* the editor's letter summarizes and integrates the different viewpoints expressed by the reviewers and gives clear guidelines about what is required for a successful revision. The editor's letter therefore is not only a very useful "read" on the reviewers' comments but also a direct roadmap for revising. Second, a successful revision usually requires taking apart the paper one has so carefully crafted in order to integrate the review feedback into the logic of the theoretical arguments. Incremental, piecemeal changes made directly in response to reviewers dilute the clarity of the contribution and lead to what one reviewer has characterized as "a paper designed by a committee." In other words, if you implement every reviewer's suggestion literally, the arguments lose focus and coherence and your "horse" can easily become a "camel." The reviewers and editor do not want to see a camel; they want to see a better horse. They want you to develop *your* ideas, so you should use the reviewers' comments *to rethink the problem and the solution,* rather than as a checklist that, once completed, assures that the reviewers' comments have been addressed.

REVISE, DO NOT RESENT

I would like to acknowledge that many of the points above are probably easier said than done; I personally have found some easier to do than others. Everyone knows how difficult it is to deal with criticism and rejection, especially early in one's career, when so much hinges on the success of a single paper. What may not be as widely recognized is how these negative emotional reactions to aversive stimuli hinder our own success.

From my earlier experiences I learned several important lessons in this regard. First, I realized that harboring any negative feelings—of either fear or resentment—considerably impeded my ability to actually "hear" and act on the feedback received. In the review process of one of my earlier papers, a reviewer kept asking for something that "just did not make sense." I was enormously relieved when the editor decided to accept the paper without my needing to make the change requested by the reviewer. When I sat down to edit the final accepted draft, I suddenly understood what the reviewer was asking for all along. I made the changes, and the paper acquired a new coherence. I was then suddenly so grateful to the reviewer, but back during the review process, in my state of fear, I simply could not hear his or her suggestion. Second, with experience I have gained a better understanding of the role of the editor as someone who seeks to steward promising ideas and help authors develop them into high-quality contributions (and spends hours doing so!). As a result, I now can also better read the editor's letter, where, behind the descriptions of everything I have "failed" at, I see lurking the roadmap for improving the paper. Third, I am now prepared to make more radical changes in my own thinking on a topic because I have seen, over time, that successful revisions often require the emergence of a new gestalt—literally a new picture of the system of relationships. Finally, I collaborate extensively because I have found collaborations with trusted colleagues to be the best antidote to the stress of the review process. Collaborations are a means of getting access to requisite skills. They also help increase the number of papers one develops at any given time, thereby decreasing the potential threat-rigidity effects of a single high-stakes paper (see Ferris, Ketchen, & Buckley, in press, for a discussion of this issue). Most important, working with people we enjoy infuses the process with positive emotions, which, in contrast to negative ones, make us open-minded and creative.

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