Rousseau’s Oxford Handbook of Evidence Based Management

BY DAVID CREELMAN

Carnegie Mellon’s Denise Rousseau is not just a leading authority on evidence-based management (EBMgt); she is a leading force in bringing the field to life. A landmark step in the maturation of EBMgt is the publication of The Oxford Handbook of Evidence-Based Management, on which Denise acted as editor.

The book, though not light summer reading, should still bring a smile to the face of managers. It reassures us the EBMgt is real, is vibrant, and represents progress for the profession. I spoke to Denise about the Handbook and about the field of EBMgt.

Creelman: Am I right in seeing this book as a landmark for the field?

Rousseau: Yes, I do think it’s a landmark. There have been books about different aspects of putting rigor in decision-making, but this pulls EBMgt together into an integrated practice. Pfeffer and Sutton’s seminal book on the topic1 focused mainly on the organizational data side. Other books have focused on decision-making processes. However, the field has come to a consensus that there are three main pillars to EBMgt: making better use of organizational data; using decision processes that are known to be effective; and drawing on the science of management research. Putting those three pillars together in a coherent way was one of the first steps we had to take before we could put the handbook together.

Won’t people say that they already use evidence when they make decisions?

Very few managers make decisions without evidence. They use the facts at hand and draw on their own experience. What EBMgt brings is a deeper appreciation of the kinds of information and processes that lead to good decisions. Managers committed to an evidence-based approach aspire to practice more effectively. They recognize how hard it is to overcome constraints in available knowledge and decision biases.

EBMgt is building a set of practices and resources to support managers. For example, we realize that in situations where there is a lot of information about effective practice there are opportunities to structure the choices people make through checklists or other decision aids. This has been shown to lead to better decisions. Atul Gawande’s Checklist Manifesto shows the power of these tools.

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Gawande is a doctor, and the inspiration for EBMgt comes from the success of evidence-based medicine. Are you concerned that management is too different from medicine to transplant the concept?

This is one of the issues the Handbook addresses. There are clear differences between management and medicine. However, like medicine, management has been hampered because a lot of research evidence has gone underutilized. Twenty-five years ago there was no evidence-based medicine and decisions were surprisingly inconsistent with best practice. We see the same inconsistency in management today. We understand that management is a heterogeneous field and the EBMgt movement is working to develop practices that work comfortably in that world.

Is there a fear that the emphasis on evidence will eliminate room for judgement?

It is an understandable concern, though it’s unlikely to be a problem in management. Managers will apply a lot of judgement on what evidence is relevant to the issue, how to use that evidence and what is a priority. The point of EBMgt is to support sound judgement, not replace it.

I noticed the Handbook devotes a section to the problems in management research.

Accessibility and relevance of the academic research on management is a great concern and also a great opportunity. In the early days of evidence-based medicine we saw people begin to compile and distribute evidence on important questions like whether to prescribe aspirin after a first heart attack. We are seeing the same thing in management, with the Conference Board doing syntheses of important findings and SRHM compiling reports on what has been shown to work in areas such as career development, performance feedback and selection. Many academics are working with practitioners on the problems of research accessibility and relevance, so I expect a lot of progress.

How do you feel now that the book is finished?

I am excited and optimistic. We have not had quality connections between management practice and research since the 1970s when business schools were formed in their current model. Research problems have come from scholars, not industry. There are rich opportunities to improve management research and management education so it supports this emerging discipline of evidence based management. Making this happen requires better quality relationships among practitioners, educators and scholars.

Denise Rousseau is the editor of The Oxford Handbook of Evidence-Based Management

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