



Theme: THE QUESTIONS WE ASK¹

Our world is awash with research ideas and empirical results. The Academy of Management alone publishes four journals and an annual book series. In 2006, we published 3,540 pages of scholarly work. The *Academy of Management Annals*, a yearly publication devoted to taking stock of the work in our many sub-fields, is poised to add another 700 pages to the annual total. Our insights build year upon year.

There is an unmistakable trend in the last few AOM conference themes and presidential addresses. We yearn to apply the knowledge we discover. Our quest for an “engaged academy” and “evidence-based management” reveals just how much we want to share what we learn. At the same time, it reveals some uneasiness about why our knowledge has not found its way into practice. Those thousands of pages of scholarship contain as many questions as they do answers. Are those questions the right ones to be asking? What do they tell us about what is still unknown in our field? Come to Anaheim and let’s consider what we do not know about the world of organization and management – and what questions we might dare to ask. Let’s take stock of our questions. After all, our answers can only be as good as our questions.

Let’s begin by identifying the questions that define the theoretical and empirical frontiers of our sub-specialties. What puzzles, conundrums, points of confusion, and unanswered questions really bedevil you and your close colleagues? Reconnoiter your field of expertise and articulate the unanswered questions. Be sure to consider *the most meaningful* questions. Just because a question has yet to be asked or answered does not mean that we need to address it. Some questions are more important than others. Thirty-five years ago, Murray Davis counseled us to turn our assumptions on their head if we are to find interesting questions. But are interesting questions always the most important questions? What makes for a great research question? Indeed, what marks a poor one? Each division and interest group will receive a “free” session on the program this year to highlight the best research questions in their world.

But let’s do more than explore our scholarly neighborhood. Let’s honor our quest for relevance and move beyond a focus on just “our” thinking. Many of us navigate the theory-practice frontier. So let’s turn to the world of practitioners and take stock of their questions. What puzzles, conundrums, points of confusion, and unanswered questions bedevil them? And as we develop a clear sense of theory-driven and practice-driven questions, let’s pause to reflect on where we find

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ourselves. How do “our” questions stack up against “their” questions? It would be great to attend sessions where theorists and practitioners sit side-by-side and reflect upon their joint and separate puzzles and how they intend to address them.

How do our modes of inquiry sit with the demands of organizing and managing? Aristotle oriented us toward three different kinds of knowledge: 1) *episteme* or the universal truths that undergird so much of science; 2) *techne* or the context-dependent craft-based application of episteme in the service of some end; and 3) *phronesis* or what might be called practical wisdom. Perhaps the scholarship of management and organizations is best suited to working with episteme and techne, while the actual practice of managing and organizing calls for more phronesis. How do we understand phronesis? How do we develop phronesis in ourselves and others? Can we even teach practical wisdom? How can we best translate the knowledge we build into phronesis?

What are the politics of knowing? Are any questions “off-limits” in our world? What are these taboo questions? Do we ever self-censor? If so, why? What forces shape the kinds of questions we ask – tenure practices, funding demands, publication processes? How can we circumvent these forces? Let’s talk about all of this, not to tear down what we know, but to expand our inquiry into what we do not yet know.

Let’s also risk being introspective about how we each go about building knowledge. How do we learn from our research? How does one investigation most productively set the stage for the next? How do we learn from practice, from the successful and unsuccessful deployment of our ideas? And how do we learn from others? It may be that we don’t know the answer to a question but others in a different sub-specialty do. It may even be that others in an entirely different field know the answers. Traveling broadly and listening deeply may be essential to good scholarship. What are the qualities of mind and behavior that leave us attuned to the weak signals, anomalies and surprises that reveal great questions and equip us to pursue the paths to their answers?

Let’s also confront the unknown. For the professors among us, how do we teach when what we don’t know may overwhelm what we do? How do we teach when our students demand evidence-based solutions to organizational problems, and we have none to offer? And for the practitioners among us, how do we make decisions in a world filled with more questions than answers? How does the act of questioning itself change our habits of mind and our behavioral repertoires?

Finally, what in the world of organization and management is unknowable? Is there a limit to reason in understanding human behavior in organizations? We critique rationality but we seem to behave quite rationally in our pursuit of knowledge. What is the place of faith in our work?

We gathered in Seattle after the WTO protests to consider the place of democracy in our work. We went to Washington DC to consider the place of government in our work. And now we are going to Anaheim to take stock of the questions we ask and don’t ask. Anaheim may seem to be an incongruous setting to consider such weighty matters. Some might wonder how we can think clearly in a land of endless sunshine and beautiful beaches. How can we not? If we are to step away from our daily pressures, gather with friends and colleagues, and think hard about our unanswered questions, then let’s do it in a beautiful place. I am really looking forward to our time together next summer!

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