

Editorial: Methodological approaches to addressing grand challenges in management research

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There is an increasing recognition of the potential for science to generate knowledge and actively contribute to society's advancement and well-being. Management scholars, in particular, are demonstrating a growing commitment to research that addresses critical social and ecological challenges. At the same time, universities, academic journals and funding bodies are raising expectations for research that creates concrete societal and environmental impact (Williams, Parker, Kennedy, & Whiteman, 2024). As a result, researchers are now called to broaden their methodological approaches and critically reflect on their academic practices to meet these evolving demands.

In this editorial, we underscore that this moment offers a crucial opportunity for management scholars to contribute to the practical solution of grand challenges. Researchers can help tackle some of the most pressing global issues by transforming methodologically rigorous research into actionable insights. Additionally, we point out some promising, though not necessarily novel, methodological approaches that management scholars might consider when conducting their research. Equally important is the need for proactive engagement with practitioners to implement courses of action that drive meaningful positive changes.

Grand challenges: an increasing concern among management scholars

Grand challenges are typically large-scale and complex, transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries and necessitating collaborative, interdisciplinary approaches integrating diverse perspectives and expertise. Examples of such grand challenges include climate change, global health issues and inequality, each demanding novel solutions and broad, systemic thinking (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015).

"Grand challenges are formulations of global problems that can be plausibly addressed through coordinated and collaborative effort" (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016, p. 1880). These problems are very difficult to solve because they involve causes and effects at multiple scales of time and space, affect multiple and diverse stakeholders, require broad knowledge across various fields and demand engagement in political action. In short, they are complex, uncertain and lack straightforward solutions (Ferraro et al., 2015).

Not surprisingly, companies play a crucial role in contributing to and sustaining these problems. Although they also offer viable solutions, companies often resort to defensive patterns and strategies in response to the uncertainties and interdependencies embedded in these complex issues. Such complexities can also be overwhelming and discouraging for stakeholders, frequently hindering proactive engagement and inhibiting decisive action.



Defensive behaviors, such as avoiding responsibility or delaying decisions, further complicate the problem and undermine opportunities for collaboration.

These challenges extend beyond the scope of companies, impacting societies and individuals. Addressing grand challenges requires a coordinated collective effort, as these complex issues span multiple sectors and disciplines, involving numerous stakeholders (Ferraro et al., 2015). In this regard, management scholars can actively raise their concerns and collaborate with organizations and governments (George et al., 2016). By fostering cross-sector dialogue and driving actionable insights, management scholars play a crucial role in bridging theory and practice, influencing policies, guiding organizational strategies and driving interdisciplinary cooperation.

Management research can contribute by offering impartial, empirically robust evidence to address society's pressing grand challenges (George et al., 2016). Tackling grand challenges is crucial in advancing social progress and presents significant theoretical potential to discover new concepts, relationships and organizational logic (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016). The global crises, therefore, create distinct opportunities for innovative research that has the potential to generate valuable theoretical insights.

Dealing with grand challenges through impact-driven research

While management research has significant potential contributions to solving these complex problems, grand challenges require innovative thinking and non-traditional methods to be tackled effectively, as they involve intricate and dynamic technical and social elements (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). In this regard, scholars have proposed new frameworks (Langley, 2021; Muñoz & Dimov, 2023; Schiele, Krummacker, Hoffmann, & Kowalski, 2022; Reinecke et al., 2022; Dwivedi et al., 2024) and provided practical examples of conducting rigorous research that engages practitioners in addressing grand challenges (e.g., Bansal & Sharma, 2022; Williams et al., 2024; Hamann, Nilsson, Drimie, & Freeth, 2024).

An effective strategy for undertaking impactful research involves focusing on problem- or phenomenon-driven inquiries that address critical and unresolved social and environmental issues, such as the grand challenges (Wickert, Post, Doh, Prescott, & Prencipe, 2021). Such approach call for reevaluating the expectations around interactions with the so-called “informants” or subjects in the field. Bansal and Sharma (2022), for instance, advocate for a more engaged role for scholars, encouraging them to collaborate with practitioners throughout the research process to amplify practical impact. This engagement helps avoid producing research that leads to “insights dissociated from managers’ needs” (p. 828). In fact, the interaction between scholars and practitioners should go beyond merely understanding phenomena and exploring relationships between variables through collecting and analyzing present and historical data. If scholars aim to make a meaningful impact on practice, they should actively collaborate with practitioners rather than remaining neutral observers or distant spectators.

Concerns about the impact of research on practice and the willingness to bridge the gap between them have also been explored through the lens of translational research. Traditionally rooted in the health sciences, this concept focuses on ‘ensuring that new treatments and research knowledge actually reach the patients or populations for whom they are intended and are implemented correctly’ (Woolf, 2008, p. 211). Muñoz and Dimov (2023) bring the concept of translational research from the health sciences into management, arguing that several journals in the field have called for a translational approach that translates research into “actionable guides for practice” and fosters interaction between researchers

and practitioners. The framework for translational research in management suggests that researchers depart from basic science (“the world as it is”), then experiment with formulating preliminary solutions (“the world as it ought to be”) and ultimately focus on implementing meaningful changes in practice.

By actively pursuing societal impact with practitioners, researchers adopt an insider perspective through their involvement and engagement, much like ethnographers are required to do (Dumont, 2023). Such designs enable researchers to access insights into practitioners’ experiences that are invisible from an external viewpoint, thereby influencing practice in turn. Research in this context is conducted simultaneously with the creation of its impact. Rather than being seen as external outcomes or “artifacts”, impact is considered a fundamental component of a dynamic process encompassing collaboration, creativity and learning (Simsek, Bansal, Shaw, Heugens, & Smith, 2018).

Another promising avenue for collaborative and impact-driven investigation into the urgent challenges we face today is action research. Action research involves considering the context, both organizational and theoretical, in which the issue is explored; building strong relationships between researchers and participants, treating them as co-researchers; ensuring the inquiry process follows iterative cycles of action and reflection; and delivering dual outcomes that are both practical and scientific. As an intended outcome of action research, scholars expect to take an active interventionist role (Zandee & Coghlan, 2024).

An effective cooperative inquiry form of action research encompasses cycles of action and reflection that embrace an extended epistemology composed of experiential, presentational, propositional and practical forms of knowing. Experiential knowing involves directly engaging with the context, phenomena and agents involved. Presentational knowing emphasizes the importance of understanding, co-describing and presenting experiences alongside practitioners. Propositional knowing involves formulating propositions grounded in theory and practice to intervene and impact the context. Finally, practical knowing refers to engaging in practice with co-inquirers to achieve transformative outcomes (Heron & Reason, 2008).

Final remarks

As management scholars demonstrate a growing commitment to not only investigating but also effectively addressing grand challenges, concerns regarding the limited practical impact of management research have emerged. In pursuing concrete and significant practical effects in tackling grand challenges, some management scholars have proposed insights for impact. For example, translational and action research emphasizes the importance of collaboration with practitioners, viewing impact as an integral part of the research process rather than a post-study consideration. Such approaches align with the growing relevance of impact-driven research, which enables scholars and managers to address grand challenges through rigorous research that is responsibly responsive to real-world problems.

We acknowledge, however, that addressing grand challenges, rather than merely understanding and describing them, is not an easy undertaking. Concerns about the rigor-relevance gap (Kieser and Leiner, 2009) persist and are likely to remain. Criticisms of engaged-with-practice research include being excessively time-consuming, lacking theoretical grounding, introducing bias and deviating from traditional methodological approaches (Zandee & Coghlan, 2024).

Despite these objections, as humanity and the environment confront urgent challenges, we sought in this editorial to emphasize the crucial role researchers play in actively shaping

an innovative and better future. This effort should be grounded in the traditional rigor of science – replicable, extendable to various contexts, and based on the observation of reality – while also being relevant to practice. In doing so, researchers can bridge the gap between theory and practice, driving meaningful changes that benefit both society and the planet.

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