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COMMENTARY

Bringing evidence to others: Know your audience first

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Policy makers and managers make decisions daily that affect the motivation and well-being of individuals as well as the performance and competitiveness of companies. Rogelberg et al. (2022) rightfully call for making science more accessible so that these decision makers can take an evidence-based approach to decisions. They also provide methods that will help psychologists create messages and reach a broader audience. However, the stories we want to tell are not always the stories that others want to hear. To have influence, we need to empathize, understand, and adapt to the leaders and professionals that consume information to make decisions. This commentary offers an audience-based perspective of bringing science to others.

This view is driven from over 10 years of experience of translating science into messages and practices leaders can use. As a company, we've tried to add value to our business and professional communities by promoting evidence-based practice through noncommercial activities. These multimedia activities have included learning events, roundtables, newsletters, articles, blogs, infographics, videos, and podcasts. To succeed, these activities need to be audience based, which starts by having empathy and understanding your audience. To paraphrase Alfred Adler (Clark, 2016), empathy starts by seeing with the other person's eyes, hearing with the other person's ears, and feeling with the other person's heart. This commentary highlights learnings on the challenges the audience is seeing, how they hear messages, and how they feel and are swayed in their decision making.

Be relevant to your audience's challenges and pain points

During the great recession, my wife (another industrial-organizational [I-O] psychologist) and I decided to start a Science and Practice series. Our goal was to translate high-quality academic research into "news that leaders can use." Our first two sessions, Virtually There and Better Change, were designed to help leaders solve the problems and challenges, or pain points, that they faced in the recession. The Virtually There session explored research on how virtual work affected team performance, the factors that could help these teams successfully perform, and the practices that leaders could implement to help their managers and teams. The Better Change session focused on the effects of downsizing and how change interventions influenced outcomes such as resistance, turnover, and performance. Because companies were downsizing and cutting back on travel, these sessions were well received and led to the creation of more Science and Practice sessions that have been delivered to thousands of leaders in Asia, Europe, and Africa since 2009.

Leaders are interested in information that helps them solve their largest challenges, so having the right content for the right audience at the right time is critical. To do so, you need to see and understand the challenges that leaders are facing. This is difficult because each audience has unique needs and each presenter or author has a unique perspective, and these often don't match well. For example, I've seen consultants present data and practices from large multinational corporations that were not relevant to their audience of small business human resources (HR) managers and have seen I-O practitioners discuss U.S. diversity categories when visiting their company divisions in Asia. In each case, the audiences lost interest as the research and practices presented were not relevant to their context and set of challenges. Almost every time I present, someone in the audience asks about where the research was conducted because they want to know if it is relevant to them. On one hand, we cannot always adapt to audience needs, as these can vary by company size, growth rates, industry, region, and other factors. On the other hand, we can try to understand their top two or three challenges and adapt the material and information to be as relevant as possible.

We can do this by asking leaders about their challenges and what they are thinking about and by testing topic ideas with them. Use this input to define your audience, their pain points, and the questions they might have on a topic. For example, leaders often want to know about outcomes and the best ways to drive these outcomes. I leveraged this when creating a Science and Practice session on growth mindset recently by asking myself four key questions: (1) What is growth mindset? (2) Does growth mindset affect individual or organization outcomes? (3) Can growth mindset change over time, and how? (4) What practices can I use to improve growth mindset? These questions led me to a review of psychology, neuroscience, and education research, which helped me refine my questions and identify the most interesting findings for my targeted audience. I presented the material and then refined it based on audience input, as some messages resonated more for established companies and other messages had meaning for start-ups and scale-ups. Ultimately, this led to an evidence-based masterclass on growth mindset, infographics, and blogs to help communicate findings to a larger audience.

Provide context so the audience will hear your message

Early in the Science and Practice series, I created a session on diversity that explored the influence of diversity on business outcomes and the methods that were most likely to help improve diverse representation in management populations. The audience reaction was mixed because outcomes from the academic research were so inconsistent with findings mentioned in the popular press. One HR leader with responsibility for global diversity asked me hostile questions throughout the presentation until I presented research on how to improve minority group representation in management. She apologized after the presentation and commented that their company had made great progress in diversity representation after following advice from Kalev et al.'s (2006) research that I had reviewed. In another instance, I shared longitudinal research that indicated diversity on company boards had a small but significant effect on innovation and firm reputation that then drove a 2%–5% return on equity (Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009). Two HR leaders cited contradictory research by McKinsey (Barta et al., 2012) that indicated that companies with diverse boards had a 53% higher return on equity. Although I explained the differences in research quality between the two studies, they responded by saying, "This is just two different studies with different outcomes, right?"

These sessions taught me an important lesson on the need to hear with the ears of your audience. I was presenting material that went against their beliefs and they did not understand, nor care to understand, the differences between high-quality academic research and what was printed in the popular press. I can't blame them. Research is messy and it often takes years to have enough high-quality research in an area to make reliable conclusions. Until then, the casual reader is confronted with contradictory research findings. These leaders must decide what research is most valuable, and they are more likely to trust research that fits within their mental framework than research that disagrees with widespread belief. They also are more likely to trust a name brand like McKinsey than an academic researcher who is unknown to them.

I addressed these challenges by including information on evidence-based practice (for an example, see the APA's Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006) to highlight several types of evidence and the value each brings to decision making. I also included clippings from the popular press to highlight contradictory messages and used this to discuss the difference between good and bad research. Most importantly, I included more best practices to highlight the benefits of following good research, and I started sharing more examples of how evidence shaped my work with leaders, teams, and organizations and how this led to positive outcomes. Together, these changes helped participating leaders become better consumers of information and made the academic research more approachable.

Build trust with your audience to influence action

Early in my career, I approached a newly transferred regional CEO in my company about implementing a sales selection assessment. I was armed with a presentation highlighting the assessment's prediction of performance and its return on investment from our largest business unit in the United States. Within 2 minutes, he dismissed the idea because a peer of his in the US had commented that the assessment "wasn't that great." He did not know me at the time and did not trust the research, but he did trust his peer's opinion. I found a similar dynamic in the Science and Practice on diversity discussed above. Leaders who had experience and a relationship with me, our company, or the Science and Practice series were open and trusted the content. They knew they would be challenged and would learn. We had no prior relationship with the leaders that were most skeptical and questioned the research.

Building trust is important but difficult in today's world. Leaders are inundated with newsletters and invitations to webinars and conferences. There also are over 600 million blogs in the world (Byers, 2022), 4 million podcasts (Fuccio, 2021), and thousands of new business books each year. Finding your voice amid these competing voices is difficult. Worse, research suggests that experts may find building this trust even more difficult. For example, research on blogs in a marketing context (Doyle, et. al., 2012) indicates that authoritative knowledge (e.g., scholarly knowledge) of the blog creator negatively influenced trust. However, engagement knowledge (i.e., investment of time within the community) and instrumental improvements (i.e., content that benefits the reader) were positively related to knowledge outcomes and trust. In other words, investing in and developing relationships with readers is more important than having academic, business, or other expertise in the area.

Individually, we can learn from this and focus on building and extending trusted networks to engage and influence others toward evidence-based practice. This requires a persistent investment in time and energy in writing, presenting, or facilitating dialogue with your target audience. To reach larger audiences faster, consider reaching out to other well-known I-O psychologists that author books, lead global HR functions, and/or lead large consulting firms. Many have existing networks and may be better heard because of their names, the companies they work for and/or the positions they hold. Partner with them to share research with their communities or to coauthor articles that will reach a larger audience.

Conclusion

Our field has much to offer and, unfortunately, our research is often overlooked when leaders make decisions. To effectively share our research with them, we need to take an audience-based perspective by focusing on their needs and challenges, creating messages they will hear, and building trust with them over time. By doing this, we can better tell our stories and have them be better heard by our audience.

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