

Research for Performance



Good theory is practical precisely because it advances knowledge in a scientific discipline, guides research toward crucial questions, and enlightens the profession of management.¹

Why do Research?

It was Kurt Lewin, the “intellectual father of contemporary theories of applied behavioural science, action research and planned change”² and the man who is said to have invented organisational psychology, who famously wrote, “there is nothing so practical as a good theory”³. In the Glowinkowski Research Institute (GRI) we believe this is indeed the case if you want to create valid and practical techniques within the field or organisation development. For us, organisational development - the field we work in - is about distilling the science of the management of change; it is, as the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology eloquently put it, about “integrating science and practice at work”. To be successful, you have to do research.

But it's all Smoke and Mirrors...

We've encountered a great deal of research in our quarter century working with organisations around the world. Some has been excellent, however, all too often, it is carried out in a vacuum and then 'forced fit' to the real world. Whilst it may be scientific in the purest sense, it lacks any practical grounding. The reaction from managers tends to be, “It's all very interesting, but so what; how does it apply to me and my business?”. At the other end of the spectrum, many techniques have been seen that possess no scientific foundation at all. Whilst they claim to be panaceas to many problems, in the absence of grounding in valid research, the techniques tend to be superficial, providing no lasting impact upon the organisation. Indeed, very often, the euphoria of 'taking the magic pill' quickly wears off leaving a bad situation made worse by unfulfilled expectations. Staff become disheartened by another 'management fad'.

Impromptu, 'back of a fag packet' solutions get what they deserve: a quick fix, but no sustainable change.

¹ Van de Ven, A.H. (1989). Nothing is Quite So Practical as a Good Theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 14, 486-489

² Schein, E.H. (1998). *Organizational Psychology*, 3rd ed. London: Prentice Hall

³ Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science; selected theoretical papers*. Cartwright, D (Ed.). New York: Prentice Hall

⁴ Anderson, N., Herriot, P., & Hodgkinson, G.P. (2001). The practitioner-researcher divide in Industrial, Work and Organizational (IWO) psychology: Where are we now, and where do we go from here? *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 74, 391-411

Grounding Research in Reality

An excellent way of framing this distinction is put forward by Neil Anderson, Peter Herriot and Gerard Hodgkinson⁴. Anderson and colleagues combine two simple dimensions, one representing methodological rigour and the other representing practical relevance, to create an easy to understand four box model (see figure 1).

Let's examine the quadrants in a little more detail.

Quadrant 1

When there is high practical application but low methodological rigour to research, it creates the Popularist approach. It tends to stimulate an initially positive reaction but, on reflection, this wanes and it becomes harder to see how anything constructive can be done with the findings. Often called 'Junk science', it bears a resemblance to junk food; it does you no good and whilst hunger is quickly sated it returns again relatively soon afterwards. Popularist research, often endorsed by 'celebrity leaders', tends to be superficial and generally lacks substance. Beware the airport bestsellers list!

Quadrant 2

Here, there is low practical application and low methodological rigour. It appears to be whimsical and although possibly talked-up through adept PR in the media, quickly fades into obscurity with little or no application in the world of business. Sometimes, we have seen attempts to apply the research in large organisations facing scrutiny about their performance. They spend considerable money but to no avail and quickly realise the research is puerile as well as being scolded by commentators for wasting investors' or taxpayers' money.

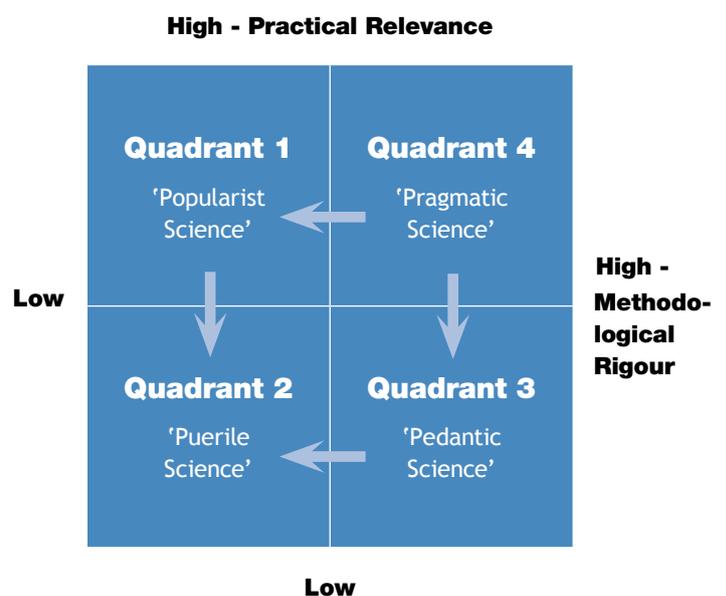


Figure 1: The Four Box Model of Psychological Research

Quadrant 3

The third category is the combination of low practical application with high methodological rigour. In many respects this is typical of academic type research which then seeks application roots. Anderson and colleagues position this as pedantic, managers' reactions are often, "very interesting, but so what?".

Pedantic science tends to arise out of academic mental jousting, i.e. "My theory is bigger and better than yours!". The arguments concern the tiniest details - the dots on a pin-head. The upshot is that people know more and more about less and less until they know everything about nothing. Although fastidious in design, the research simply does not address an issue and has no application.

Quadrant 4

Here, high practical application is combined with high methodological rigour. The researchers' findings and conclusions, based on sound research and valid theory, are regarded as pragmatic, as sensible, pertinent, practical or relevant to the challenges confronted in the majority of organisational lives.

(We should add at this point that the word 'pragmatic' is being used in a very positive sense, i.e. it is regarded as the best descriptor or label of the four 'p-words' the researchers have framed in their model. In one of our own central feedback frameworks, we use the word 'pragmatist' but in this instance it is a label counter-balancing another, namely 'perfectionist', each being regarded as non-pejorative terms to anchor a particular measurement scale. It will always be the case in referencing the world of behavioural research that terms and labels will be used interchangeably and it is important to understand the sometimes subtle nuances of how they are being used.)

Change interventions conducted in organisations, e.g. to Organisational Design, to processes, to culture etc., which are characterised by clearly pragmatic research underpinnings stand the best chance of being implemented successfully and, crucially, delivering a positive impact upon Climate. As a direct consequence, there is immediate uplift in performance, which is sustained over the longer-term.

The arrows in the model in figure 1 represent the forces on research to drift into non-pragmatic territory. Whether it is the lure of headlines, desire to outwit other researchers or some other factor, research can easily lack rigour or practicality. Whatever the reason, when pragmatism is lost, so is quality.

GIL's approach to research

Throughout the years that GIL and the GRI has operated and for the many years prior when Dr. Steve Glowinkowski conducted research in his own personal capacity, our watchwords have been 'valid and practical'.

Our aim has been quite simple and focused; namely to develop a methodology, a development curriculum, a toolkit or set of components that fit together coherently and cohesively; in other words, they build on each other rather than undermine each other.

At the heart of our work lies our core model, the Integrated Framework, which itself is born of extensive research. Each element of our toolkit is designed to harmonise with each other in the short-term and, over the long-term, progress the organisation's overall capability to achieve its long-term purpose.

As a result, we possess a compendium of case studies reaching back over a quarter of a century covering every business sector and every geographic area of the world. This longitudinal library of evidence provides a unique aspect to our work in that our research, our theory, has been proven to work in practice. In other words, it is imbued with an unrivalled aspect of predictive validity. Human behaviour being what it is, that predictive validity can never be 100% but our pragmatic research is as good as it can practically be.

For example, we have developed:

- Selection processes that use criteria that have been proven to be statistically correlated with superior performance, i.e. competencies that are truly behavioural so accord to the original definition of the term.

A competency was defined by Richard Boyatzis⁵ as "a characteristic behaviour associated with successful organisational outcomes". The word 'behaviour' is vital. So many alleged 'behavioural competency frameworks' referenced in selection contain items that are not behavioural, e.g. leadership, change management, inspiration. By drifting from the pragmatic origins of the original behavioural scientific research, such frameworks have been 'dumbed down' and so become populist or puerile.

This may appear to be a pedantic argument but from the practical application of our selection process, which relies on a particular style of interviewing (itself proven to be highly reliable), we are confident we are being pragmatic. We have the subsequent corroborative performance data.

- Leadership development programmes that like selection are based on pure behavioural principles.

⁵ Boyatzis, R. E. (1982). *The Competent Manager: A Model for Effective Performance*. New York: John Wiley & Sons

Our learning methodologies appeal to all different styles embracing personal learning and group practice and review. Our coaching style is directive rather than benign counselling because this stimulates the necessary response and reaction to propel performance growth. We use the term 'coaching is for experts' to position our interventions as being positively developmental rather than stage 1 of the discipline process.

Again we possess the corroborative evidence that such valid and practical inputs deliver enduring, measurable change.

Over the last thirty years through the raft of longitudinal case studies and action research interventions using our approaches and toolkit referred to above, we have shown measurable behavioural change driving performance improvement which is sustainable.

Quality in research is fundamental to the quality of approaches and tools. Our tools and approaches underpin everything we do so it's a matter GIL and the GRI take very seriously. The words practical and valid are at the heart of everything we do. Great research leads to great performance.





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