

Blinded by science: Viewpoint . Donald Sull: Gurus' writing springs from an ancient tradition; [London edition]

Donald, Sull. Financial Times. London (UK): Feb 3, 1997.

For years management writers have endured the contempt of academics in the social sciences. The label "scientist", say scholarly critics, will not be earned until the management gurus systematise their ad hoc observations into a unified theory and submit it to rigorous empirical tests.

When judged as a social science, even a fledgling one, management theory fails miserably. Much of the theory is contradictory, even faddish, in contrast to more respectable academic fields which build cumulatively on a single body of coherent theory.

But management thinking should not aspire to being a science, not even when it grows up, for the interests of managers and social scientists are worlds apart.

Social scientists favour theories using as few variables as possible. These parsimonious theories translate into models that explain only a sliver of the phenomenon, while lumping unexplained bits together as exceptions. Managers, meanwhile, live in a messy world where many factors influence their success, and they cannot afford to ignore relevant variables.

Scientists also value methodological rigour, and place a very high burden of proof on evidence, routinely rejecting hypotheses in which they have 90 per cent statistical confidence. Managers cannot afford the luxury of statistical certainty and must often act despite few observations, spotty data and imperfect analysis.

While it is not a science, management thinking does fit squarely into an ancient tradition offering pragmatic wisdom to help politicians, soldiers and traders act more effectively in affairs of the world. Writers such as Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Machiavelli and Benjamin Franklin have offered practical tips for dealing effectively in public affairs. Their writing eschews systematic philosophy in favour of memorable aphorisms, rousing exhortations and vivid examples of effective men and women.

Wisdom is much harder to define or measure than propositions based on scientific theory. We have no statistical tests to measure a statement's wisdom. Advice that promotes effective action could be deemed wise, but this measure is too abstract to prove useful. Three more tests can help us sift nuggets of pragmatic wisdom from drivel.

First, to qualify as pragmatic wisdom, business writing should help managers inspire change among colleagues and subordinates. Inertia, or the tendency of organisations to persist in business as usual even in the face of environmental change, poses one of the greatest threats to organisational improvement. The gurus, at best, can help galvanise managers to overcome inertia.

Second, good management writing should pick out the critical challenges. Gurus can focus management attention on important elements of success that they might otherwise ignore.

Third, to qualify as pragmatic wisdom, business writing should stimulate managers to think. Business writing, for all its contradictions and messiness, displays more respect for managers than the scientific approach. The gurus acknowledge the complexity of the real world, and offer a rich diversity of ideas and metaphors to help overcome organisational inertia, surface considerations, and jar managers' thinking. Urging gurus to become scientists will only result in bad science with no increase in wisdom. Instead we need to build on traditions in all the humanities, such as history, literature, and rhetoric to inform action in the real world. Managers need first rate Plutarchs, not second-rate Adam Smiths.