

## **PASSING THE TORCH OR TORCHING THE PAST?**

Fred A. Ware, Jr.  
Valdosta State University

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*The issue of whether or not historic and fundamental theory is valuable enough to be included in introductory management courses in business schools is illustrated in this case, directed at aspiring educational administrators in any discipline. Opportunities are provided to consider the worth of teaching the basics to achieve academic discipline sustainability and practitioner validity, as well as in the possible counter productiveness of omitting them. Administrators are also challenged to evaluate the hypothetical benefits, or lack thereof, of tapping into the experience of retiring faculty members, specifically in examining curriculum topics that are considered foundations of that academic discipline. The gradual and sometimes subtle drifting away from teaching tried-and-true fundamentals by newly-minted instructors who favor cutting-edge theory is spotlighted, encouraging administrators to be proactive in monitoring course content of all pivotal introductory courses.*

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### **AN EPIPHANY?**

Long-time business school dean Arnold Addison experienced a sudden “Eureka” moment in the faculty lounge just as he poured his second cup of coffee. The trigger of the thought was the facial expression seen on newly-hired assistant professor of management, Evan Whalen. The dean had attended the same university where Evan recently and successfully defended his dissertation. As the coffee was brewing, Arnold had casually asked if the young man happened to know one of his old instructors at that institution, wondering whether or not the professor had retired. Three years ago he had enjoyed interacting with the old gentleman at a national conference. His mentor had presented an interesting research paper and Arnold had acted as one of the discussants.

“Sure, Dr. Addison,” Evan had replied, “he’s been there forever but his course material is way out of date. He still includes that old stuff like the functions and principles of management.”

“Well, some of old stuff still works, Evan,” Arnold had replied, instinctively defending his former professor. “I think of it as the foundation of many later years of the research findings and practitioner experience that makes up our discipline today.” “I see your point, Dr. Addison, but the text we use in our intro course doesn’t even mention those sorts of things,” Evan explained. “I guess I could add it to my lecture notes sometime. Well, it’s nice talking to you and have a great day!”

Those words and the look on Evan’s face had struck a chord: When faculty members retired and texts were written or revised, were students gradually missing out on

the ABC's of their chosen major discipline? Perhaps most thought-provoking was Evan's smile; did it imply that *he*, the dean himself, was out of touch with reality? Is that "old stuff" still valuable or is it obsolete? If essential, what could he do to ensure that it didn't slowly fade away?

### **WHO'S TO BLAME AND DOES IT REALLY MATTER?**

Dr. Frances Rose, another management colleague was filling up her coffee cup. "Say, Fran," Arnold called from across the faculty lounge, "got a minute? "Sure, what's up?" she replied. Frances had been on the faculty for nearly thirty years and had chaired the search committee that hired Arnold ten years ago. "What do you think of the text we're using in our introductory management course?" he asked, knowing that she taught the subject numerous times during her early years on the faculty. "Would you like the quick version or can you spare an hour," was her immediate response. "Let's compromise," Arnold smiled, "I'll spring for lunch if you have some time today. " Frances agreed and on the spur of the moment Arnold invited young Evan Whalen to join them at the campus cyber café at noon.

"Wow, I really appreciate this, Dr. Addison," Evan exclaimed as the trio seated themselves and moved their food from trays onto the table. "As your generation says, it's not a problem, Evan. I hope that you two don't mind mixing a little business with pleasure," he responded cheerfully, mentally contrasting their differences in background and experience. As the three enjoyed the light meal and surprisingly relaxing background music, Arnold recalled that Fran had worked for ten or twelve years in the aerospace industry, becoming a middle manager before deciding to earn her Ph.D. and go into teaching at the university level. Evan, on the other hand, had moved rapidly through his bachelor's, masters and doctoral programs with honors. His non-academic experience consisted of part-time employment as he attended school. Evan's dissertation chair, a friend of Arnold's, had raved that Evan was considered their institution's "best and brightest" doctoral graduate in years.

Arnold began the discussion. "I wanted to get your opinions about our introductory management course. Do you think it's doing the job?" Fran reacted immediately. "Well, it's supposed to be an introduction to management *and* organizational behavior but I believe that it's gradually evolved to nothing but OB. We used to teach an intro course as a prerequisite to an org behavior course until we went for accreditation by the AACSB. The other majors didn't want their students to have to take yet another management course; they were already stuck with Introduction to Management, Business Policy, Production/Operations, and Legal Environment. In those days we just used specific courses to cover a common body of knowledge and that handled the curriculum issues. The simple solution for our business school was to add OB into Intro the Management and make all majors take it. There were plenty of texts that did the trick in those days and everybody was happy." "Yeah, I remember all of those changes back when we first got accredited," Fran interjected, taking a sip of her iced tea, "Tom Long sure wasn't happy having to switch from Business Law



to Legal Environment of Business!”

“What went wrong with the intro course, Dr. Rose?” Evan asked, with raised eyebrows. “Nothing for a while,” she said, but as time passed I noticed two things: Management as a discipline kept developing more sub-disciplines. We saw that in calls for papers and sessions at Academy of Management national and regional meetings. Gradually, we recruited new Ph.D.s to teach P/OM, HR, QM/Decision Science, MIS, Policy, and OB. The OB instructors we hired always taught the intro course and over time the fundamentals of management went to the back burner. They chose intro to OB books and since I don’t teach the course any more, I stopped getting involved in picking the texts. What fries me is that students in my Small Business and Entrepreneurship class, even *management* majors, nowadays have never even *heard* of the classic functions of management! I don’t think they really understand what it is that they are majoring in!”

Arnold knew he had hit a nerve with Fran, but Evan’s faced displayed absolute incredulity as he wiped a napkin across his mouth. “Shouldn’t management majors eventually pick up those fundamentals in other courses?” Evan asked the veterans. “I should hope so,” Fran retorted, “but it seems a shame that we don’t get them off to clear start like they do in Marketing with those tired but still true four “P’s!” “This seems like a tempest in a teapot but at least I got a free lunch,” Evan thought to himself. “These two are living in the past.”

### **DO PRACTITIONERS HAVE ANY SAY-SO?**

Arnold and his wife Sue were eating dinner that evening while watching the news on television. Sue pushed the mute button during a commercial and quipped, “So how have things been with you? Think any more about retirement?” “Well, it’s in the back of my mind,” he responded, “but before I toss in the towel there are a few more things I want to accomplish.” “Give me a break” she shot back, “they will have to carry you out of that place on a stretcher! *Now* what are you working on?” “Well,” he replied, “I keep wishing that retiring faculty had some way of passing along at least a few tips to their replacements.” “Such as?” she quickly asked, glancing at the TV. “Here’s one,” Arnold tossed out. “How about making the new faculty aware of what *practitioners* want our students to know instead of being driven mainly by accreditation requirements or bureaucratic assessment statistics?” “You mean all of that bean-counting you’ve been complaining about for years?” she answered. “Exactly. Some of this stuff we measure makes the state legislators happy, but sometimes I get the feeling that our students and the people that hire them get the short end of the stick. Much of the research I see in the leading journals doesn’t seem to impact the shop floor with good practical advice for managers,” he said, simultaneously checking to see if the muted TV news program looked interesting yet. We ought to aim at least *some* of our research and teaching at industry.” “You’re surely not the first business dean to think of this, dear, but I see your point,” she mused. “But how about hurrying up this passing-of-the-torch routine so we can have some free time? I see your point about helping practitioners and students but don’t forget to

keep cranking out those scholarly “beans” so we’ll have a decent retirement check if you ever do quit!”

“You have a real talent in getting me back to reality,” he smiled, wiping some spilled food off of his TV tray as the family dog looked up with anticipation. The television news ended and the channel was switched to a football game. Arnold thought about his administrative responsibilities as dean of a business school and then as an academician in the business discipline of management. It would be easy to calculate an optimum benefit retirement date. He could buy three years of military plus that one year teaching in Europe for another institution. Why not simply retire? He chuckled to himself recalling a longtime friend and economics professor at another institution who just got up and walked out of his office on the day he retired. He told the department head that it was too much trouble to look through all of that stuff and just to throw it out! What about all of those lecture notes, refined over the years? Did he not have any legacy to leave his successors? Surely something could have been shared, yet maybe we old timers really are out to lunch.

“Are you still pondering,” Sue piped up, “or are you asleep? When I retired last year I figured the new people had their own agendas and the times they were ‘a-changing.’ Surely the world will keep turning whether of not retiring business instructors and administrators leave records behind.” “Yeah, yeah, I know,” he sighed, “but it does seem a shame that the wheel keeps on being reinvented and besides that, we seem to have drifted off course in my own field and it was under my watch.” “Don’t forget to let the dog out before you come upstairs, Arnold,” Sue said. “Why don’t we call it a night? You can save the world at another time!”

Arnold knew, of course that while he couldn’t solve the problems of the world, he should at least put some thought into ways of sharing at the local level *some* of what he and other academic soon-to-be-retirees had learned. Could that effort benefit practitioners, students, scholars, and even “bean counters?” But where could he start? Why not go full circle back to the basic *Introduction to Management* course? The die was cast.

### **HEY DEAN, IT’S NOT YOUR COURSE!**

The next morning Arnold spoke with Ron Levy, head of the management department. “You never taught the Management & Organizational Behavior course, did you Ron?” Arnold asked. “No; when I first came here they assigned me to QM and P/OM which as you know are my fields. I did teach Strategy one summer. Why do you ask?” Ron replied. “Well, something happened the other day which made me wonder if that course in our business school has gradually drifted into being only an introduction to OB. The foundations of management as an *academic discipline* may also be blurred for some of our students.” “What make you think that, Arnold?” Ron looked puzzled. “For one thing my senior small business/entrepreneurship class never heard of the functions of management,” Arnold explained. “Maybe it’s because the



semester system literally forces us to make Management & OB a *co-requisite* more than a *prerequisite*,” Ron replied. “We can’t make the Management/OB course a prerequisite for *everything* like we did under the old quarter system.” “Maybe we are letting too many of them take several management courses before they ever get Management/OB,” Arnold wondered out loud, then added, “but if the course is nothing but OB, they may never actually get exposed to the foundation anyway!”

Ron appeared puzzled at this sudden attention by the dean to one of the numerous management courses under his bailiwick. “What got you started on this crusade, Arnold?” Ron asked, looking slightly annoyed. They had been friends and colleagues for years and there had never a discernable subordinate-supervisor feeling between them. “I know that it’s always been customary here for instructors to have autonomy when it comes to choosing texts and preparing syllabi, but I have a feeling now that the whole department if not the school should have at least some say-so on the content of introductory courses,” Arnold exclaimed, almost pontificating then walking around Ron’s desk. He added, “In particular our Introduction to Management & Organizational Behavior course could be omitting a number of time-proven ABC’s of management. I know that it would be inadvertent but if I’m right, it could negatively impact our students and our practitioner constituency!” By that time Ron was wondering if Arnold had gone off the deep end and had taken too many pills that morning (colleagues had joked behind his back about his medicines but not in a vicious way).

“Sorry, Ron,” Arnold said sheepishly. “All of this started when it dawned on me that the younger faculty members perceive me as some sort of academic relic whose past scholarly contributions, if any, have now been eclipsed by administrative duties. If you could have seen Evan Whalen’s facial expression yesterday when I told him that a lot of that old, original management theory was still perfectly valid, I could visualize a thought bubble over his head with the word “geezer!” Arnold laughed and smiling at Ron asked, “Do me a favor and have a look at the latest versions of syllabi for that introductory course. Ask the instructors if or how they are covering the basics like the functions, principles, history, or what-have-you. I would feel better if I am wrong about the course being nothing but org behavior. On the other hand, if you don’t see any real introduction to our discipline, let’s work on that. Semester system or not, I want our majors to get those fundamentals as soon as they start their junior year, one way or another!”

## **EPILOGUE**

The business school’s policy called for keeping textbooks at least two years for the benefit of students’ opportunities to sell them or to buy used copies. The decisive moment for the Introduction to Management & Organizational Behavior course rolled around about a year after the dean’s sudden interest in its course content. The two young instructors, one being Evan Whalen, who normally taught several sections of the course met with department head Ron Levy; Arnold had been invited to sit in.

“Which text do you fellows want to use next semester?” Ron asked. Evan spoke up, “We agreed to stick with (same author)’s new edition of *Organizational Behavior*. As you asked last year, we both made sure that we covered that historical stuff in our lectures.” Arnold, nervous about going against their business school’s policy of not interfering with instructors’ pedagogy and course material, asked, “Just out of curiosity, why didn’t you consider one of (same author)’s intros to contemporary management books? He’s got good paperback and hardback versions and he always includes the old general management fundamentals along with the latest on org behavior. I remember, Evan, that you used that paperback in your study abroad course last summer in France. We talked about it.” “Yes, Dr. Addison, that’s right,” Evan replied, “but we figured the AACSB might think we were not really teaching OB if they saw that text in use. Besides, the one we picked has some brand new concepts that we both happened to use in our dissertations. It was a great coincidence!”

#### **ADDITIONAL READINGS**

Accrediting agency: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International, [www.AACSB.edu](http://www.AACSB.edu)

For examples of texts combining an introduction to management and organizational behavior see (1) Gordon, Judith R., R. Wayne Mondy, Arthur Sharplin, and Shane R. Premeaux, *Management and Organizational Behavior*, Allyn and Bacon, 1990 ; (2) Schermerhorn, John R., Jr., *Management and Organizational Behavior*, John Wiley & Sons, 1996; and more recently, (3) Jones, Gareth R. and Jennifer M. George, *Contemporary Management*, fifth edition, 2008, McGraw-Hill Irwin

The well-known four “P’s” of marketing: Product, Place, Promotion and Price, e.g., in Kotler, Philip and Gary Armstrong, *Principles of Marketing*, eleventh edition, 2006, Pearson Prentice Hall, p. 47

Hambrick, Donald C., “Professors Question Value of Business School Research.” *Academy of Management Journal*, December, 2007

The classic functions of management: Planning, Organizing, Leading, Controlling, and (sometimes) Staffing, e.g., in Megginson, Leon C., Mary Jane Byrd and William L. Megginson, *Small Business Management: An Entrepreneur’s Guide*, fifth edition, McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2006, p.105.