A call for deep engagement for impact: Addressing the planetary emergency

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Abstract
In a world facing catastrophic shocks, there are tremendous opportunities for management scholars to engage and make fundamental contributions to the grand challenges that lie ahead. To do so, our focus must move away from a theory-fetish toward a more applied action orientation that contributes to theory-building but does not make that its main or singular aim. In this paper, we argue, that our field’s primary research aim must not be to see how we can build theory out of a crisis, but rather how our organizational and management theories can contribute concretely to helping humanity prepare for and respond to these shocks and build long-term societal resilience. Furthermore, we argue that management scholars need to vigorously embrace a research agenda on sustainability focusing on deep engagement with practitioners to address grand challenges. To do so, we draw on experiences from our deep engagement with practitioners—an ethnographic study and a scientific activism effort. We offer several lessons and identify implications of deep engagement for impact within organization studies such as dedicated space in journals for impact cases.

Keywords
climate change, collaboration, ethnography, interorganizational coordination, research Methods, risk/uncertainty, sustainability, topics and perspectives

“Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
Affrighted gathering of human kind!
Eternal lingering of useless pain!
Come, ye philosophers, who cry, ‘All’s well,’
And contemplate this ruin of a world.”

–Voltaire 1755
Words can, as Voltaire knew during the Bubonic Plague more than 250 years ago, help inspire and direct action—but only if we let go of the fiction that *All’s well*. All is not well. Clearly. Scientists have been trying to tell world leaders this for a long time, relating to global threats from pandemics but also from catastrophic climate change, biodiversity collapse, and other grand challenges. Management scholars working on sustainability have made similar pleas. To no avail. Despite numerous international scientific scenarios highlighting the need to prepare for a global pandemic—or ecological disaster—most governments, except for the few which had experienced SARs or MERs, do not prepare, preferring instead to kick the systemic risks of a pandemic or climate change into the long grass. Why wreck today when tomorrow may never come? But the tomorrow of scientific scenarios has come, with devastating effect. What are we as management scholars to do? This is not a dress rehearsal.

In a world facing catastrophic shocks, there are tremendous opportunities for management scholars to engage and make fundamental contributions to the challenges that lie ahead. However, to do so, our focus must move away from a theory-fetish (Davis, 2010) toward a more applied action and impact orientation that contributes to theory-building, but does not make that its main or singular aim. Instead, we argue, that our field’s primary research aim must not be to see how we can build theory out of a crisis, but rather how our organizational and management research and theories can contribute concretely to helping humanity prepare for and respond to these shocks and build long-term societal resilience (Williams et al., 2019a).

In this essay, we argue it is through deep engagement with managers and societal actors—to address social, ecological, and biophysical risks and opportunities—that management scholarship can fulfill its purpose and impact potential. To be relevant, we must get out of our home offices and engage directly with business, civil society, and political actors. The ivory tower is a cage that will not save us. It is up to us to co-create the future we choose.

What is deep engagement?

Combining deep engagement with scholarly research is not new. Researchers have long experimented with different methods for creating groundbreaking research while involving practitioners. For example, action research seeks to leverage the research process as a vehicle for driving change through a series of planned interventions (Caniglia et al., 2021; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). And more traditional forms of qualitative research such as Ethnography bring researchers in close proximity with practitioners and can uncover issues of social justice and marginalized groups (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, and Lofland, 2007; Langley and Klag, 2019). Engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) challenges the gap between theory and practice and calls for the involvement of others throughout the research process. The transdisciplinary research process and approaches to co-creation involve practitioners from the beginning of the research process by identifying a research question that is of interest to both parties and producing knowledge that is both practically and scientifically relevant (Lang et al., 2012; Mohrman et al., 2008). All of these approaches bring the researcher in a close proximity with practitioners.

Regardless of the term used, management scholars need to put practical impact and co-creating societal resilience at the core of our research agenda and academic reward systems. Deep engagement for impact means continuously straddling the chasm between research and practice while facing the tensions and paradoxes that arise while striving for practical and scientific impact. It requires developing lasting relationships with practitioners, understanding their daily struggles, balancing degrees of emotional entanglement and involvement (Langley and Klag, 2019), and leveraging science in ways that help to advance practitioners’ agendas. While it may be more practical and efficient to only engage with practitioners to the extent that it advances scientific knowledge, deep
engagement requires a commitment and dedication beyond what is strictly necessary to publish rigorous scientific research. Deep engagement for impact is embedded in our research identity and a fundamental driver of our raison d’etre.

We argue that the most relevant way that management and organization studies can contribute is through deep engagement and working alongside the very managers who are struggling to respond to societal and planetary threats whether that is from a pandemic, climate change, biodiversity loss, impoverishment, or health crises. By taking such a stance, we believe that management research can identify barriers and opportunities for experimentation that helps organizations and societies build resilience to future shocks. Furthermore, we can lead or take part in collective efforts to work with managers to prepare for systemic risks by engaging with practitioners (Whiteman and Williams, 2018), providing relevant and digestible scientific knowledge, building flexible systems, and implementing resilience strategies.

How do we engage for impact?

We now provide insights from two of our own deep engagement experiences working alongside and with managers and decision-makers on issues of global sustainability and systemic planetary risk. The first is an ethnographic study conducted during a PhD dissertation and the second is a campaign of scientific activism developed and driven by the second author.

Ethnography at the WBCSD

During her doctoral studies, the first author conducted an ethnographic study with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) from May 2014 through March 2017 (Williams et al., 2019b). She was supervised by the second author of this paper, who helped her gain access to the WBCSD through connections with the CEO.

The WBCSD is a CEO-led, not-for-profit organization headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland that convenes around 200 multinational corporations to develop business solutions for sustainability. The initiatives of the WBCSD take a science-based approach and develop business solutions that aim to drive systemic change. WBCSD’s strategy, Action2020, launched in 2014, was based on the planetary boundaries framework and identified nine science-based priority areas for action including climate change, exposure to harmful substances, water, ecosystems, etc. (Williams et al., 2019b). The second author brought in the scientific perspective and the planetary boundaries framework to Action2020 and was actively involved in the development of the strategy. The first author worked on Action2020 projects when she was seconded to WBCSD during the duration of the ethnographic study. She was a member of the Redefining Value Team that seeks to change the way companies measure and manage economic, social, and environmental information and evaluate global risks such as climate change. Her role on the Redefining Value Team included tasks such as co-developing a guide for business action on the SDGs, developing communication materials to demonstrate the important and relevance of the SDGs for business, organizing events to bring together managers and academics for mutual exchange and learning about SDGs, and developing internal processes to measure the impact of Action2020. While it is difficult to measure the quantitative impact of these activities, through her participant-observation role she contributed to the work of the WBCSD in a variety of ways that went beyond the focus of her academic research. We now reflect on the process of working for a global NGO while collecting ethnographic data including the challenges and potential solutions. We aim to provide an unfiltered firsthand account of conducting such a study because such details are often left out of the methods section of published
papers, yet are crucial for advancing an agenda of deep engagement that potentially contributes to societal change, even if only in a small way.

The possibility of deep engagement for impact was incorporated into our funding proposal. The PhD position was funded by the European Commission’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Initial Training Network (ITN) funding scheme as part of a larger research network Innovation for Sustainability (I4S). Deep engagement was ingrained in the I4S network because each university signed the request for research funds with an established industry partner. The research design and incorporation of a secondment period in our research grant allowed us to work alongside practitioners, in our case contributing to the work of managers at WBCSD, where the PhD candidate offered her time and capabilities to help WBCSD advance their work on global sustainability. Since WBCSD receives many research-related requests asking for support on research grant proposals, offering our time helped open a conversation with the directors of Action2020 projects and provide concrete value-added to the project team as an additional person to help with key projects.

Although the second author had a personal connection with the WBCSD’s CEO and there was a formal agreement in place to collaborate on the I4S project, gaining access was still difficult. In the past, WBCSD had worked with many secondees from corporations, but to our knowledge, WBCSD never worked with a secondee from academia before, at least in the last decade. From this experience, we saw that organizational procedures were not in place to enable deep engagement projects. Although there were many difficulties that persisted for almost a year, we continued to pursue the collaboration with the WBCSD because it was a unique opportunity to understand a hard to access business network. And during this time, the first author was already becoming embedded in the field.

In our case, the PhD student had to balance being both a researcher and an active WBCSD team member in the field. This mode of deep engagement is not unusual for ethnographic studies. Rather we argue that ethnography is one research vehicle well suited for combining research with societal impact and the role of the researcher in contributing to practice and potentially driving societal impact can take various forms. The role of the researcher in ethnographic studies varies from an observer on the inside using ethnography to uncover issues of inequality (i.e. Whiteman and Cooper, 2016) to working full time for the organization of study and simultaneously conducting an ethnography (i.e. Reinecke and Ansari, 2015). Both research modes present important and viable opportunities to combine research with impact. In our case, the researcher fulfilled the role of the later and worked for the WBCSD on their mission for driving global change for sustainability.

The lengthy ethnography required dedication and flexibility to juggle working on WBCSD projects, most of which were not directly related to her thesis topic, and collecting copious amounts of firsthand data. The first author spent 156 days working during the day on WBCSD’s projects with her main work task being the SDG Compass (https://sdgcompass.org/). The SDG Compass is a guide for business action on the goals that launched at the same time as the SDGs in the UN Private Sector Forum on September 26th, 2015. The forum was attended by CEOs, heads of state, and civil society organizations. While it is difficult to measure the impact of the guide and attributing that impact directly to the first author is not possible, there is some anecdotal evidence that the guide contributed to the awareness of the SDGs among the WBCSD member companies and beyond. For example, the SDG Compass has been cited in and outside of academia. It was translated into 9 different languages and is cited often in sustainability reports. In addition to her work on the SDG Compass, the first author co-led an internal process aimed at measuring the impact of Action2020 against the SDGs. She also lent her time and capabilities to the Redefining Value Team in any way she could, for example, by designing and producing communication materials. Most of this work was not directly part of the thesis except for the work on the SDG Compass that related
to one chapter of the thesis. The chapter was not about the SDG Compass per se but more broadly about WBCSD’s endorsement of the SDGs.

The support of the supervisors was critical throughout the process. Both the academic and WBCSD supervisors were supportive of lengthy ethnographic fieldwork even if that meant taking away time from publishing research articles while seconded to WBCSD. Time spent away from research is a real concern for junior scholars that face pressure to publish in top journals and meet tenure requirements. In our case, the outcome of the fieldwork was to publish in *Academy of Management Discoveries* (AMD) in a special issue “Sustainable Development for a Better World” (see Howard-Grenville et al., 2019). This was an important for two reasons. First, AMD supports data and phenomenon-driven research and ethnography is one method to approach inductive data-driven work. Second, the focus of the issue was on the SDGs. Thus, in our case, the role of journal editors in supporting and creating space for impact-driven, societally relevant research helped to balance career pressures for publishing with deep engagement through ethnographic fieldwork. However, we do recognize that finding a balancing between career related pressures to excel in academia with deep engagement for impact is a real concern and there are not always easy solutions, particularly for junior scholars with tenure pressures. We offer potential solutions for this concern in the discussion section.

The fieldwork was enabled in part because the supervisors from different sectors—academic and NGO—had experience in both practice and academia. This made it easier to speak the same language, to be sympathetic to the demands and expectations of both worlds, and to work together. For example, at one point, the WBCSD supervisor prioritized the completion of her academic study above WBCSD related work activities. This allowed her to balance the demands of both worlds that had different performance metrics.

The unplanned involvement of the first author on the SDG Compass team reshaped the scope and focus of our academic study. It was not our intent to study WBCSD endorsement of the SDGs from the onset (see Williams et al., 2019b). Instead, this focus emerged through conversations with managers and deep engagement with the phenomenon of interest—WBCSD needed to develop this project to accelerate business awareness of the SDGs. A close proximity to managers and an immersion in their daily lives (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Langley and Klag, 2019) gave life to our findings and the focus of the contribution to practice became the focus of the research outcome.

In this example, the first author contributed to practice by contributing to the work of the WBCSD. At the same time, we recognize that this example does face several limitations in its ability to impact practice. One clear limitation is the ability to measure and prove impact. In this case, the impact was more indirect and subtle.

**Scientific activism in Davos**

Our second example illustrates a different approach to academic work on impact, one that is less research and where the goal is not publication per se. In January 2017, the second author convened a team of Arctic scientists and pitched a scientific expedition tent from Weatherhaven—now called Arctic Basecamp—at the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland. Over time, the mission of Arctic Basecamp has evolved into the goal of “speaking science to power.” The scientists of the Arctic Basecamp convene WEF participants at Davos in sub-zero temperatures to convey messages of global risk from Arctic change and to encourage bold and urgent climate action.

The idea behind Arctic Basecamp emerged shortly after a scientific trip to the Canadian Arctic in 2010 along with polar scientists and business leaders. The second author was asked by this multi-stakeholder group if she could come up with an idea of how Arctic science could become a
boardroom issue for multinational companies around the world that were interested in sustainability, as opposed to oil and gas exploration or shipping routes. The Arctic was, and is, fast-melting due to climate change and these changes would have substantial impacts around the world in terms of climate amplification, extreme weather, and impacts on food and water security (Whiteman and Yumashev, 2018). But this message of risk was not being discussed outside of Arctic forums (e.g. the Arctic Council), the media, or academia. She decided that one way was to bring Arctic scientists to the main forum for discussions on global risk—the World Economic Forum at Davos. This was easier said than done, and the group tried for five years to gain physical access to the WEF meeting and location in Davos. Over time, and through numerous failed attempts to get to Davos, the group realized that while Davos side-events were common, the real estate for events was expensive, largely inaccessible, locked up by prior contracts for multi-year periods, and there were no hotels available in Davos or nearby Klosters for non-members or non-official invitees of WEF during that period.

However, in 2015, together with academic partners from Arctic science, she suggested that the scientists go to Davos anyway by pitching a polar research tent to be used as both their sleeping area and event space. She was convinced by Donella Meadows’ research on systems change that one leverage point to change a system was to build new information channels across groups with decision-making power (Meadows, 1999).

Despite starting as an emergent idea in response to a problem, Arctic Basecamp is now a registered not-for-profit organization based in the Netherlands (www.arcticbasecamp.org). Its mission is to speak science to power to accelerate climate action. They work with global scientists, organizations, celebrities, and individuals to raise awareness of the global risks from Arctic change and to highlight the urgent need for scalable solutions to climate change. All scientists volunteer their time at events. Partners/speakers have included UN Global Goals, Al Gore, Christiana Figueres, former and current heads of state, student activist Greta Thunberg and youth climate delegates from around the world, US actor Rainn Wilson, artist Ellie Goulding, artist Banksy, model and author Lily Cole, global business leaders and networks such as the WBCSD, The B-team, We Mean Business, and civil society organizations including the Global Environment Facility, Mission 2020, WWF, The Club of Rome, HubCulture, and Extinction Rebellion. In 2020, Greta Thunberg launched the Unite Behind the Science campaign at Davos with Arctic Basecamp, Christiana Figueres, former Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, and youth climate delegates from around the world.

Most recently, in January 2021, Arctic Basecamp hosted a high-level panel as part of the media program at the World Economic Forum’s Davos Agenda week (https://www.weforum.org/events/the-davos-agenda-2021). In partnership with the World Economic Forum and TIME Magazine, the panel discussed what happened to the Arctic in 2020, why protecting it from warming matters to the rest of the world; and what positive, inclusive, and sustainable decisions can be taken including those in policy, science, technology, and the public to slow global climate change and achieve a post-pandemic recovery. Panelists included: H.R.H. Crown Prince Haakon of Norway, Robert Downey Jr. actor and philanthropist, Eric Rondolat, CEO Signify, Rainn Wilson, actor and activist, Baroness Bryony Worthington, Co-CEO of Quadrature Climate Foundation, and the second author as the founder of Arctic Basecamp. This panel was followed by a 3-hour online Livestream hosted by Rainn Wilson and Arctic Basecamp called Make Earth Cool Again, which brought together scientists, experts, business leaders (e.g. Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce), and entertainers (such as Billie Eilish, Finneaus, Ariel Winter, among others) in fireside chats, interviews, skits (by comedy writer Chuck Tatham from Modern Family, Arrested Development, How I Met Your Mother) and performances to highlight the urgency of fighting climate change through supporting low carbon action and education—in an accessible way.
The practical value of Arctic Basecamp is that the organization tries to speak science to power through deep engagement—by establishing pop-up live events in places where people with decision-making power gather and through the development of social media campaigns and bespoke science briefings. They have also begun online campaigns to mobilize scientific support for youth climate activism, including the campaign by Greta Thunberg (Darby, 2020).

A key part of Arctic Basecamp’s impact is the lived experience of camping during Davos which has attracted much support and media coverage. For example, in 2019, Greta Thunberg and her father camped with Arctic Basecamp scientists; US actor Rainn Wilson camped in 2020. Most events are held outdoors—another disruption to Davos’ normal conference setting. The socio-materiality aspect (Leonardi and Barley, 2010) of using the Arctic Basecamp tent for both accommodation and events has helped to break through a crowded forum with low budget—in line with Plowman et al.’s (2007) suggestion that change in complex systems occurs when “leaders disrupt existing patterns of behavior, encourage novelty, and make sense of emerging events for others” (p. 341). Furthermore, the boundary-spanning (Fleming and Waguespack, 2007) basis of the collaboration—across scientific disciplines and business, civil society, policy, celebrity, and academic sectors also—enabled the group to quickly mobilize vastly different networks who came together under one physical roof and a virtual platform during the pandemic. Arctic Basecamp has emerged as an established science communication platform because of the strength of these weak ties (Granovetter, 1985), its boundary spanning (Williams et al., 2019b) foundation for co-creation, the socio-materiality of the event space (Leonardi and Barley, 2010), and its ability to disrupt existing patterns of behavior and help the Davos elite to make ecological sense (Whiteman and Cooper, 2000) of Arctic change in terms of global risk.

This example also faces several limitations. Scientific activism like that which is done by Arctic Basecamp requires a tremendous amount of resources (including social networks and funding) and does not easily fit within academic performance evaluation systems particularly during the trial-and-error years where “failure” is common. It is also difficult to measure success—what are the concrete impacts of such activities aside from changing narratives? Finally, the focus on powerful elites from government and business alongside “celebrity glamour” may be criticized as an attention-seeking device rather than a knowledge-seeking, more traditional scholarly endeavor to make substantive contributions to theory.

Consequently, an outstanding and debatable question is how should this type of activity sit alongside more traditional forms of academic work such as research publication and teaching? And should these activities count in performance metrics within academia and to what degree does theory need to emerge from these activities in the form of an academic publication in order to contribute to management studies? This is not a small point given the significant time commitment it takes to engage in such forms of deep engagement. Given the urgency of the societal issues we face, we argue for an all-hands-on-deck approach. Impact driven activities may not currently be part of our job descriptions as academics nor directly contribute our career advancement. As responsible and engaged citizens we need to leverage our academic skills to create “the change and not just writing about it or thinking about it,” (Walls cited in Hahn et al., 2021). We simply do not have any time to waste. By openly challenging academic norms that do not favor impact driven research, we can create new publishing standards and performance metrics that appreciate positive societal change through rigorous research.

We argue here that a publication is not the ultimate end-point of scholarly activity. Rather, through deep engagement with senior decision-makers engaged in climate action, Arctic Basecamp has been an experiment in new ways to communicate science on planetary risks, which may, in a small way, contribute to increased awareness and commitment to low carbon action among actors that attend the World Economic Forum.
Comparison between our examples

In this essay, we highlight two forms of deep engagement for impact—ethnography and scientific activism. In the ethnographic study, we supported practitioners and simultaneously collected a rich qualitative data. Our engagement with practice shaped the focus of our research and informed our theoretical findings. This example was more research-focused than impact-focused, but the first author was able to contribute to practice as part of the ethnographic study. In the case of scientific activism, the second author created new information flows to bring Arctic science to decision-makers at Davos. This example was more impact-focused and does not currently include a research component. Both examples show the tremendous amount of energy and time that researchers dedicate to making deep engagement work. In both of our cases, there were many hurdles to overcome before the research could gain access and start driving impact. This demonstrates that the necessary pathways are not in place for researchers to easily implement deep engagement projects.

Our examples are different from other methodological approaches for deep engagement such as action research. Action research aims to produce knowledge by putting “knowledge-in-action” to solve practical issues (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 2) and to intentionally design “interventions that may bring about transformative change” (Caniglia et al., 2021: 1). In the case of our ethnography at WBCSD, the first author contributed to WBCSD’s ongoing work without designing an intervention to bring about change. The Arctic Basecamp does aim to bring scientific knowledge into action and drive change but does not necessarily produce any theoretical contribution.

Implications of deep engagement for impact

Driven by personal ambition or institutional demands, many sustainability scholars are now experimenting with different approaches for combining academic excellence with practical real-world impacts, we are certainly not the first or the only to do so. To build on this momentum, organizational scholars can scale-up efforts to impact practice and actively create the future we chose. In this essay, we have focused on impacts with a business-NGO and scientific activism that draw attention to grand challenges. Working directly with businesses, we may be in a position to influence business models and competitive advantages. Ideally, we would co-create solutions that help businesses maintain financial profitability while providing the foundations for a healthy society within the boundaries of the planet (Leach et al., 2013). We now outline two avenues—change agents inside academic and academic change agents outside, e.g. changing information flows, that are ripe for developing a deep engagement research agenda.

Change agents inside academic

The Impact Scholar Community (https://www.impactscholarcommunity.com/) and the Research Impact of Practice Award both hosted by the Organizations and the Natural Environment division of the Academy of Management (https://www.nbs.net/articles/call-for-submissions-research-impact-on-practice-award) demonstrate the growing number of scholars working to engage practice and drive change. We believe that these initiatives are encouraging. However, academic incentives for things like tenure and promotion still weigh heavily on the publication side, and few journal outlets publish impact-driven case studies—unless they also make a contribution to theory or add to an empirical discovery. If implemented at scale in the Academy of Management, the implications of deep engagement for impact are profound and challenge deeply ingrained norms of our academic systems. This is the main contribution of our essay—to make the pleas for new peer-reviewed space for impact work by management scholars.
The criteria used for performance reviews and the tenure process will need to be adapted. As we have shown, deep engagement requires time and commitment that could have been dedicated to research, teaching, or administrative service. The dedication of time and resources to deep engagement is not rewarded by current evaluation procedures in our field. Those in positions to change evaluation procedures and performance metrics can change the process to account for the difficulties of deep engagement and reward successful and unsuccessful attempts. Progress in this area is starting to develop. For example, the UK government has implemented an Impact Case dimension to the national Research Excellence Framework which provides funds for universities based upon certain scoring criteria:

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), on behalf of a steering group representing the UK Funding Bodies, Research Councils and the Wellcome Trust, commissioned Digital Science, working in conjunction with the Policy Institute and Digital Humanities at King’s College London, as well as Nature Publishing Group, to analyse the impact case studies submitted to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). The case studies outline changes and benefits to the UK economy, society, culture, public policy and services, health, the environment and quality of life and impacts in these sectors beyond the UK. (REF2014, 2020)

However, much progress is still needed to streamline this work and to institutionalize it. Eventually, we would arrive in a state where research impact is at the core of academic contributions.

Change agents will also need to break down established methodological norms and create a space for a close engagement with practice. Misconceptions and methodological preference may prevent the mainstreaming of deep engagement. Qualitative studies are often considered less reliable when the researcher is in close proximity to the field of study and the findings (Langley and Klag, 2019). “Concerns may include risks associated with the effect of the researcher on the nature of the phenomena studied (‘reactivity’), concerns about the socialization of the researcher into local practices and beliefs to such a degree that these can no longer be seen clearly (‘going native’), and risks associated with the political alignment of the researcher with one or more groups in the research site (‘alignment’) (Langley and Klag, 2019: 22, citing Barley, 1990; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). However, working closely with practitioners can better position the researcher to make practical impacts on the field they are embedded in. New approaches to co-creation and activities-based research will likely involve practitioners from the beginning of the research design (Jarzabkowski, 2005). We need more discussions, forums, frameworks, and procedures to confront these issues head-on. We need to teach methods of deep engagement to our doctoral students and infuse a movement of future scholars that engage with practitioners and publish impactful research with societal relevance.

Journal editors need to broaden the scope and mission of their journals to encourage the submission and publication of embedded research. To do so, criteria for review need to be established to guide good practice. For example, see the criteria from the UK REF Impact Cases can serve as a starting point (REF2014, 2020). Editors may also establish sections or special issues dedicated to cases of deep engagement. *Journal of Management Studies* recently published an editorial calling for a broader understanding of impactful research in the context of societal grand challenges (Wickert et al., 2021). The editors call for more problem-driven and phenomenon-based research: “What is critical in both of these debates is that a theoretical contribution should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to the end of solving or at least better understanding and raising awareness about an important real-world problem” (Wickert et al., 2021: 303). The editorial also identifies five forms of impact including “scholarly, practical, societal, policy, and educational” (Wickert et al., 2021: 297). More bold calls and actions by journal editors such as the examples we have just illustrated are needed to disrupt dominant publishing trends.

Our experience at WBCSD also demonstrates that the current institutional structures in neither academia nor practice facilitate deep engagement and may even act as a barrier. An exception is in
Denmark where industrial PhDs, Post-docs, and Professorships are commonplace. Industrial based positions allow the researcher to be formally affiliated with a university while at the same time working for and being paid by another practice-based organization. Funding from the government is also possible to cover part of an industrial position (https://innovationsfonden.dk/en/programs/industrial-researcher). In other settings where such arrangements are not common, researchers will have to drive change and establish systems that favor combining research with practice. This will not be easy. Academics in the position to direct and change PhD programs can create positions that allow for a direct engagement with practice.

**Change agents outside academia**

Scholars can also usefully focus on impact outside of academia through scientific activism. One way to do that is by changing or influencing information flows between science and external stakeholders, and curating digestible scientific information into the hands of the right decision-makers. Changing the structure of “who does and does not have access to information” can be a leverage point for systems change (Meadows, 2009: 156). This means that we need to design studies to produce the information that will provide the basis for discussions on building collective resilience. We need to disseminate scientific information in a language and form that can be easily understood in multi-stakeholder settings. The Arctic Basecamp at Davos is an illustrative example of the power of taking scientific insights, and scientists, directly to forums where powerful leaders assess global risks and develop plans to build resilience and address current and future shocks.

**A call for deep engagement for impact**

In this essay, we argued that management scholars can play a key role in this planetary emergency (Club of Rome, 2019). But to do so, we must let go of a theoretical fetish as the raison d’etre for our contributions (Davis, 2010), actively engage in projects with real-world managers and actors who are addressing global risks from a volatile planet, help build new information flows that cross academic boundaries and experiment with impact activities, some of which may fail. We must also pave a path for the scholars that will follow us by challenging the very foundations of our university reward systems.

As Voltaire noted over two hundred years ago with the plague, philosophers can be most useful when they contemplate the reality of the crisis. We further suggest that it is only by engaging deeply with what Voltaire called this “ruin of a world” can management scholarship achieve its full potential. However, to do so, journals, the Academy of Management, and university reward systems must accept impact-driven research as a legitimate mode of academic contribution.

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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