

Climate Action Research: What's Holding Us Back?

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Abstract

Climate change is often described as an existential crisis calling for urgent action, yet there appears to have been relatively low levels of engagement on this issue within management scholarship. Contributors to this article, all of whom have engaged in climate action research, consider why it is that management scholars are generally choosing not to tackle this critically important challenge and argue what might be done to address this. In doing so, we provide new and alternative agendas for developing management research that will positively contribute to climate action.

Keywords

climate change, climate action, management research

Introduction

David Grant and Bradley Hastings

We often talk of saving the planet, but the truth is we must do these things to save ourselves. (Attenborough, 2020, p. 196)

Failure to mitigate the cause of climate change through transitioning the global economy to net zero-carbon emissions by 2050, if not before, presents a significant long-term threat to human civilization (Sevil et al., 2022). The risks of climate change are becoming increasingly apparent. Leaving aside their devastating human consequences, significantly altered weather patterns and more intense weather events are heavily impacting socio-economic activity around the world, presenting an urgent need for government, business, and other community organizations to more effectively plan for and respond to them. At the same time, multiple stakeholders (e.g., employees, shareholders, and customers) are placing organizations and their leaders under increasing pressure to demonstrate that they care about, and are acting on, climate change (André, 2020a, 2020b; Grant & Nyberg, 2011; Nyberg et al., 2022; Wright & Nyberg, 2015).

Management scholars have the expertise and knowledge necessary to identify and help implement the responses needed to address the risks posed by climate change. Doing so offers the discipline a major opportunity to meet the challenge set by those such as Hoffman (2021) of increasing the relevance and impact of its research while simultaneously contributing to climate action.

The extent to which the discipline has responded to this challenge has been the subject of some debate. For example, Nyberg and Wright's (2022a) analysis of 20 top business and management journals identified that only a disappointing 24 (or 0.2%) of articles published in them between 2007 and 2018 were climate-related. These figures lead them to conclude that management scholars have largely avoided engaging with what is perhaps the grandest social and political challenge of our time (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). On the other hand, Wohlgezogen et al.'s (2022) analysis of articles in the top quartile of Web of Science indexed management journals, found that 237 (or 1.1%) of them were climate change related, leading them

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to observe that there is evidence of more widespread engagement with the subject than Wright and Nyberg would have us believe. However, while Wohlgezogen et al.'s study, with its bigger sample size, points to greater engagement with climate change than that observed by Wright and Nyberg, the difference reported is not that great and in our view offers little cause for celebration. There can be no denying that like Wright and Nyberg, they report very low rates of publication. Their study can therefore be seen to support the argument that a significant majority of management scholars are not undertaking climate research.

All this is not to deny that there have been notable efforts by some management researchers to prosecute climate action research by publishing beyond the management journals included in Wright and Nyberg's and Wohlgezogen et al.'s studies. As acknowledged by Nyberg and Wright (2022b), the academic field of "organizations and the natural environment" has spawned several specialist management journals that actively disseminate climate change-related research (e.g., *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, *Sustainability in Management Education*, and *Organization & Environment*). They also note that a number of journals that publish articles in the tradition of critical management, such as *Business & Society*, *Organization*, and *Organization Studies*, have acted as platforms for climate research where they have provided special issues on the topic. Additionally, Wohlgezogen et al. (2022) observe that some business school academics publish research on climate change outside of business and management-affiliated journals, citing, for example, the outlets *Nature Climate Change*, *Nature Sustainability*, and *Global Environmental Change—Human and Policy Dimensions*, but as with those publishing in top management journals, the numbers doing so are relatively low. They find that, during the 2007–2018 period, 4.7% of all climate change-related articles in these outlets (amounting to 83 articles) involved at least one author from a business discipline.

Since 2018 (beyond the period of journal outputs covered in the Wright and Nyberg and Wohlgezogen et al.'s studies), there is some evidence of this interest in climate change among management scholars continuing to grow, although it has tended to be driven by an expanding focus on issues indirectly related to the topic. By way of example, the growth may have occurred, in part, because of a recognition by management academics that they should increase the relevance and impact of their research by turning it into "actionable insights to frame and tackle some of the biggest challenges that we face in our global community" (George et al., 2016). As Wright and Nyberg observe later in this article, these grand challenges include sustainability and corporate social responsibility and addressing them has caused business schools to more routinely genuflect on climate change. That they do so has been driven by criticism that if

they are to maintain legitimacy (Miotto et al., 2020; Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016), they need to better fulfill their stakeholders' changing needs and expectations in respect of these issues. These responses have often involved the adoption of strategies that align with the aims of the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the principles of responsible management Education (PRME). Because both the SDGs and PRME incorporate objectives linked to climate change, implementing these strategies has been fueling the number of climate action-related studies by management scholars in specialist journals. In some instances, this has been actively encouraged by journals and their editorial teams. For example, Bradbury et al. (2019), in a special issue of *Action Research*, seek to reorientate the journal around SDGs and in doing so call on management researchers to critically engage with climate change by adopting action-oriented transformation research. Later in this article and elsewhere, André (2024) observes that as business school educators seek to embed SDG and PRME objectives into curriculum and produce environmentally responsible leaders, there has been a proliferation of articles focusing on what constitutes effective pedagogy in this subject area. She finds that this proliferation has also contributed to a discernible uptick in climate-related outputs in management education and learning journals such as the *Journal of Management Education*.

While these developments are important and indicative of there being a growing community of management scholars who are actively engaging with the issue of climate change, these scholars' publications have, as we have noted, tended to appear in specialist management journals or non-management journals with a particular focus. They do not therefore in our view fix the underlying problem highlighted by both Wright and Nyberg's and Wohlgezogen et al.'s studies, a discernible lack of engagement with climate change by a majority of researchers across management studies more broadly. This is concerning because as Gioia (2024, p. 93) observes, meaningful attempts to address the climate crisis will likely emerge from and be led by business. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that this is starting to happen (Black et al., 2021). If we are going to seize the opportunity to help shape and bring about this transformation, then we need to significantly increase the quantum of climate-related management research. Doing so will entail scholars from right across the discipline—not just those located in specialist domains and the communities that they serve or those publishing their research in non-management journals—undertaking and publishing such research.

Our purpose with this curated discussion is however to go further than providing a simple "call to arms" to management scholars in respect of climate action research. We acknowledge that such a call is important in that it highlights the imperative to conduct research into climate change, its

effects on management and organization, and the need to identify and put in place mitigations and adaptations that might manage the risks associated with it. It does not though provide us with any explanation of why such research is not yet regarded as normal or conventional, that is, “mainstream,” by most management academics. In short, when it comes to climate action research in management studies there is a fundamental question that needs to be answered: “What’s holding us back?”

The work of Nyberg and Wright (2022a) and of Gioia (2024) offers a useful starting point to address this question. In each case, they offer some important clues as to what might be getting in the way of climate action research achieving mainstream status in management studies. For Nyberg and Wright, the relative neglect of climate change in our research is indicative of a siloed business school mentality; one where “the focus on researching managerial priorities of growth, competitiveness, and profit has been reinforced as a dominant view” (Nyberg & Wright, 2022a, p. 717). This focus has led to a situation where management research appears to be in denial not of climate change per se, but of (a) the impact of continued economic growth and capitalist expansion on the climate, and (b) the challenge that climate change poses to dominant thinking among management scholars. In contrast, Gioia (2024) links the lack of climate action research in management studies to a broader societal phenomenon. His focus is on how we (humankind) are guilty of “collective stupidity”; that is our denial of the climate crisis is symptomatic of our knowing that there is a very real and tangible problem, but choosing to do nothing about it, irrespective of the costs of doing so. He speculates that inaction could be attributed to one or more of several issues such as the increasing influence of business over government, putting profit before purpose, lack of information or disinformation about climate change, and basic fear of change. Though he does not explicitly point the finger at them, Gioia’s work effectively says that the relative silence of management scholars is indicative of their being party to the collective stupidity he has highlighted.

The causes of limited climate action research suggested by Nyberg and Wright and by Gioia are useful in that they start to explain why management researchers are seemingly reticent to engage in such work. However, the explanations are incomplete. Obtaining a more nuanced and comprehensive explanation of “What’s holding us back?”—one that might enable us to understand what we need to do to bring climate action research into the mainstream—requires us to inquire more deeply into the issue and in doing so ask some further, more specific questions. Here, we pose five such questions. Addressing them encourages a focus on what we believe are several factors that influence the uptake of climate action research among management scholars. The questions are offered as a provocation and as something for debate and discussion. They may seem obvious, but

it seems to us that management researchers are not giving them sufficient consideration.

In composing our questions, we have leveraged the work of Prichard et al. (2004) who, drawing on the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2000), argue that researchers are likely to encounter a number of important “choice points” in any research project. Navigating these choice points requires them to answer several questions centered on what it means to do management research and be a management researcher. We contend that these questions lend themselves to our aim of identifying what is preventing management researchers from carrying out climate change-related research, thus pointing to strategies for increasing their engagement in such work. At the same time, we are not arguing for every management researcher to undertake such research and make no moral judgment of researchers who ask the following five questions of themselves and find that the answers they come up with do not lead them to do so.

- (i) “*Who am I?*” This question compels management researchers to reflect on and develop an understanding of how one’s own and others’ propensity to undertake climate research is influenced by social background, values, and preferences and the circumstances under which the research is to take place. Arguably, the most significant of these types of issues, and the one requiring most attention would be the impact of personal beliefs and values in relation to climate change and responses to the associated risks. But other factors also come into play here pertaining to academic discipline, intellectual traditions, and publications strategies. They include pressure to focus on what might be termed traditional or conventional topics as well as the perception that engaging in research that sits outside of the mainstream may impact on career advancement and reputation (Mingers & Willmott, 2013). These are pressure issues that may be felt even more acutely by an early career academic.
- (ii) “*Which theory?*” In answering this question, we (management researchers) might well seek to hang our hats on the theoretical knowledge that we, and the discipline we reside in, are most familiar with. Doing so might, as Fleming and Spicer (2014) observe, lead to some incremental advances in knowledge about climate risk and response in organizational settings, but it could be argued that it is exactly this that has prevented management researchers engaging in the kind of transformational and impactful climate action research that those such as Nyberg and Wright (2022a) call for. For such research to occur, management scholars might need to rethink the focus of their work and engage with new and emerging literatures and concepts,

some of which lie well outside of the traditional management disciplines in, for example, the natural and physical sciences.

- (iii) “Which research strategy?” As researchers we have a choice—we can choose to focus on producing research that privileges theory or we can produce work with an emphasis on praxis whereby theory is enacted, realized, or applied to some practical end (Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006). If privileging theory, the strategy entails connecting this to a set of research questions and methodology (Prichard et al., 2004). If emphasizing praxis, this entails engaging practitioners in some meaningful way in the design of the research process and development of practical theory. We propose that this is an important consideration in respect of researching business responses to climate risk and that there are no impediments to adopting either strategy. We might though, given the identified need for management research on the issue that is impactful and relevant (Hoffman, 2021), assume that any increase in the number of studies pertaining to climate action would necessarily reflect more of a praxis orientation.
- (iv) “Which methods of data gathering and analysis?” The choice of data types, methods of data collection, and analytic techniques when studying a phenomenon such as climate risk requires careful thought (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Such choices are likely influenced by the need to align research questions and methodology with whatever emphasis on theory or data one’s research privileges. Added to this, and bearing in mind the observation made under “Which Theory?” that climate action research may call for engagement with non-management disciplines and by implication a more inter- or multidisciplinary approach, a management researcher wishing to undertake climate action research might find themselves required to adopt unfamiliar methods of data gathering and analysis.
- (v) “For what purpose?” In certain respects, this question overlaps with “Who am I am?” and “Which methods of data gathering and analysis?” where these consider how, when, and why a management researcher’s personal values might influence some of the choices they make when choosing whether or not to undertake climate action research. It also overlaps with “Which research strategy?” where it focuses on producing research that privileges theory versus producing work with an emphasis on praxis and contributing to management practice. Notwithstanding these overlaps, consideration of this question may highlight, contrasting and sometimes entrenched worldviews (Hoffman, 2015) that

explain the relatively low uptake of climate action research. By way of example, “purpose” for some researchers might involve challenging the wider societal institutions and systems that act as barriers to climate action and in doing so considering new versions of capitalism, the purpose of the firm, the role of government, and so on. To others, such an approach seems unrealistic and runs counter to the prevailing view in business schools of what kinds of knowledge we should generate and to what end. “Purpose” for these researchers might involve their applying expertise in ways that sustain and develop the very institutions and systems climate researchers might seek to change.

The remainder of this curated discussion presents four essays by management academics who are experienced climate action researchers. They use these essays to consider what it is that is preventing climate action research from being a mainstream focus of management scholars and offer possible strategies and solutions to addressing this problem. As they do so, in various ways they highlight and engage with our five more focused questions and the issues that they raise. In some instances, they suggest other, alternative questions that need to be asked.

In the first essay, “*Never has So Much Been Published by So Many to the Benefit of So Few*,” Hilary Bradbury reflects on our identity and purpose as management scholars. Her concern is that our institutional scholarly systems and the behaviors and attitudes that they inculcate are effectively “frozen.” As a result, mainstream management scholarship is currently focused on producing research that effectively ignores or side-steps the climate crisis that we are facing and in fact helps perpetuate it. Bradbury also notes that these frozen systems and institutions encourage and reward management scholars to orientate toward producing research that is more “about” stakeholders than “for” stakeholders and rarely “with” stakeholders. Importantly, she believes that changing this particular characteristic of management research is key to increasing its relevance and impact in respect of climate issues. She goes on to suggest that such change is possible through the more widespread adoption of contemporary action researching with ecological transformations in mind.

Andy Hoffman and Dev Jennings’ essay, “*It’s Time for a Radical Reset of Business Research and Education*” reminds us that our scholarly impact is achieved through the translation of knowledge into practice that occurs both in the field and through education. However, they do not see this impact occurring in respect to management studies and climate action and ask what is holding us back from achieving this. In doing so, they pose several questions, some overlapping with, others in addition to, those we have outlined in this introductory section. Overall, Hoffman and Jennings’

analysis of these questions and the answers to them leads them to advocate for significant transformation of existing approaches to business research and teaching.

In “*Confronting the Big Picture: Climate Change, Capitalism and Management Scholarship*” Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg observe that while recent years have seen some increase in levels of engagement with climate issues by management scholars, this has come rather late. They also note that the research produced has tended to ignore the fundamental cause of climate risk; namely the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels in order to drive growth in corporate capitalism. Instead, the focus of attention has been on what they describe as more “nebulous” concerns such as “sustainability” or “business greening” as well as to consider and advise what measures business might take to mitigate or adapt to climate risks or to leverage the opportunities that it presents. One problem associated with such approaches is that they simply serve to perpetuate business models predicated on the need for growth and thus continue the need for fossil-fuel exploitation. Another is that they ignore our “embedded relationship” with the natural environment, seeing instead it as a separate and somewhat abstract phenomenon. For Wright and Nyberg, the issue then is not simply about increasing levels of engagement with climate issues among management scholars, it is also about inducing scholarship that moves those that we seek to study and those that we seek to educate away from ideas that perpetuate “business as usual.” They go on to discuss what needs to occur for this to be achieved and the challenges it will involve.

In her essay “*What if Your Goal is to Save the Planet? (And Your Business School Doesn’t Care?)*,” Rae André applies a systems perspective on change to analyze what is holding mainstream management scholars back from making meaningful contributions to climate action. She examines the discipline’s contributions to change at the individual (micro) level, the organizational/business (meso) level, and the societal/systemic/global (macro) level. She observes that, to date, the discipline’s focus has been predominantly on producing research and education that and influences change at the individual and organizational levels. This focus perpetuates existing business models and as such is often contrary to the goal of saving the planet. For André, macro-level change is essential if we are to address the climate crisis effectively. In other words, changes to the societal institutions and systems that others in this article show to be impediments to climate action are crucial avenues to addressing climate change. If management scholars are to make significant and truly impactful contributions to addressing the climate crisis, then they will need to engage in research and teaching that reflects this macro-level focus. André discusses what such a pivot looks like and provides some examples.

Following these four essays we provide some concluding remarks in which we consider some of the themes that emerge from them. We draw on these themes to suggest a pathway forward; one designed to lower perceived barriers to research on climate change among management scholars and bring it into the mainstream of management studies thereby leading to more research that positively contributes to climate action.

Never Has So Much Been Published by So Many to the Benefit of So Few¹

Hilary Bradbury

In 2022, I attended an Academy of Management symposium in Seattle. The topic of impactful scholarship drew me in. This was, after all, the hottest and most fire-ridden summer on record. I wondered what the panel of senior management scholars, past presidents included, might have to say about leveraging scholarship to influence the future of organizational life. I was quickly disappointed. Impact was equated with landing a popular version of an A-level journal article in the mainstream press. During the Q&A period I asked if the members of the panel were aware that the world was, quite literally, on fire. Privately I wondered if scholarship had become a flight from reality and I felt confirmed in deciding to leave my position as full professor of management at a United States university. In doing so, I also grieved the seeming impossibility that something other than “business as usual” is institutionally possible. While I won’t claim that leaving is an especially helpful response to addressing planetary crisis, it does imbue my insider/outsider vantage on academia with a mix of respect and regret.

In the words of Kurt Lewin, progenitor of social psychology and action research, our institutional scholarly systems are frozen. They are the opposite of life giving. Scholarly and managerial systems may be seen as part of a wider ecocidal trajectory. It is time to accept an unpalatable truth: our mainstream approach to scholarship actively co-produces the very opposite of what we need at this time of unsustainability.

There is a reason for institutional scholarly sleepwalking. Management scholars in particular remain beholden to—and personally burdened by—the rewards and targets of a social science paradigm that encourages waste of intellectual time, energy, and resources. To the degree that publication standards enforce a modernist logic in which scholars write *about* stakeholders, not enough *for* and almost never *with* them, mainstream scholars contribute to a chasm between critical thinking and doing. Extractive objectivity is perhaps not so different from colonial and ecological plunder which also arose in late modernity. Aligning with colleagues also writing in this article, I too see a need to break out of the existing straitjacket of management

scholarship by encouraging action-oriented approaches that will engender an ecological turn wherever possible.

How then might scholars walk a new path toward relevance and actionability? My short answer is to orient toward knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work *with* practitioners. An even shorter answer: *action research*. Sibling labels of transdisciplinarity and engaged scholarship are also welcome. I continue to prefer the umbrella label action research because it includes Southern Hemisphere practitioners and points to the decades of action research to be leveraged for this work of change and transformation.

A short while ago I rematriated to Ireland. There, I recently facilitated a world café-styled workshop organized for around 100 Irish university faculty and students. Others are planned. The origins of these meetings lie with faculty members concerned that institutions of higher education are not fully responding to or transforming themselves to be “fit for future purpose” in relation to our worsening climate and ecological crisis. A concerned faculty trio became a catalytic organizing group whose first report (Sheehan et al., 2024a, 2024b) titled, “The Planet is on Fire so why is higher education behaving as if it’s business as usual,” invited others to join in the very inquiry that also animates the other essays in this article.

In facilitating, the action researcher in me wanted to know how we get from our understanding of our problems to creating a path forward. The workshop itself therefore became an experiment in action research: one focused on using sensemaking as a means for action taking with stakeholders. I invited seven faculty members to open a fishbowl dialogue by sharing suggested leverage points that, tested through their own experiences, had already helped with unfreezing their institutions. Regardless of position (some being senior tenured professors, some not, some being well-funded, others not, some community engaged, others classroom anchored, within a diversity of disciplinary background, etc.), each reported, unbidden, on their relational, participative and action-oriented service, rather than say their own published insights. The selected parsimonious tales below, telegraph two key responses to the planetary crisis, namely: (i) opening the walls and windows of the Ivory Tower to the input of practice, and (ii) being willing to (un)learn new personal capacities to better partner with people not previously considered allies:

Partnering With Ego-Awareness

I learned to get over myself and find success with less personal credit through seeding my best ideas with(in) other groups so *they* can own the ideas.

I have learned to be willing just to sit through months of lengthy discussion with the middle layer of faculty and administration. They started first by insisting their syllabus is already full.

This was followed by long debates on definitions and consternation over certain terms. I just hung in. As I think about today, I see we’re slowly speeding up.

Opening Doors to Participation

I bring a co-design approach to syllabus building with my students and would love to see more of this and on a larger scale at the university.

I bring an unlearning—Ivan Illich and Freire informed—approach that has me limit my lectures and increase real dialogue.

I bring in community members and seek to partner the students with community needs.

In these short tales we see the outlines of a new model of academics coming into view; one that has significant implications for action. From the proverbial “sage on the stage,” proactive faculty are observed moving to being “on tap, not on top.” This suggests a more engaged, transformative use of power in “service” where expert knowledge is both shared and mobilized. Under the surface actions, we also see that self-awareness is necessary for this new era of working with others beyond the typical academic skillset of being an individual contributor. Working with others does require developing a wider awareness of stakeholders and of one’s own ego habits of possibly dominating rather than facilitating learning. It means becoming a perpetual learner. For example, in my everyday role as editor of *Action Research* journal, I continue with a vision to develop and publish work that responds to the planetary crisis. We had our first special climate issue in 2019; our first special issue of 2024 was on transforming the poverty field (SDG1). Moreover, we see submission numbers grow.

Just as our icebergs are melting² we can hope for much more unfreezing of our scholarly institutions and academic habits. Hope, unlike optimism, requires agency. For the learning oriented, it’s an invitation to cultivate ourselves continuously. Responding to climate change (with action researching toward transformation in mind!) may well transform us into the someones we have been waiting for.

It’s Time for a Radical Reset of Business Research and Teaching

Andrew J. Hoffman and P. Devereaux Jennings

What is holding us back from devoting our management research and teaching to addressing the climate crisis? The answers are simple to identify and well-established in our literature: organizational inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984)

and reward systems (Kerr, 1975) that feed our discipline's drift. But the ways to address these issues, less so. In this curated discussion, we home in on five key questions that might induce further reflection and change for each of us as scholars.

Which theory(ies) do we use? In the case of research, climate change as a topic does not fit neatly within our academic journals, which focus on theoretical questions aimed at precise academic communities. While theory creates an institutional structure within which we can make sense of the world around us (Scott, 2001), it can lead to a fetish for ever more theory (Hambrick, 2007). It can blind us from "interesting phenomena for which no theory yet exists but which, once reported, might stimulate the search for an explanation" (Hambrick, 2008). This constraining bias hampers climate change research because such research is on a complex phenomenon that often requires multidisciplinary, science-based assessments for which we lack powerful organization theory. As Hilary Bradbury states in her essay: "[O]ur institutional scholarly systems are frozen. They are the opposite of life giving."

In fact, climate change is not, in its truest sense, an environmental issue; it represents an ecological and societal systems breakdown (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015; Rivera et al., 2022). While some conveniently call this breakdown an "externality" or "unintended consequence," it is actually entwined with and a product of our embedded economic models and socio-economic policies. Mirroring themes called out by Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg in their essay, our "research theories must now treat economic systems as intertwined with the primacy of natural ones. Otherwise, by 2030, damage to the global climate will be irreversible regardless of the ushering in of new technologies and business models" (Hoffman, 2023).

To fix wider systems failures, we must modify the systems that cause them. Those are business, the market, and capitalism. But where viewing the issue through existing organizational frameworks may lead us quickly to define climate change in known terms, such as a pricing, distribution, or cost problem, we must adjust our lens to view the issue as a transition problem, one for which we cannot fully know the future, environmentally, economically, or socially (Hale, 2024).

Treating it as a transition requires us to consider future scenarios for cultural enlightenment (Hoffman & Jennings, 2018) and sustainability imaginaries (Augustine et al., 2019). However, given the need for new theoretical models as well as "empirical techniques that allow us to develop more probabilistic knowledge about the future" (Hale, 2024; Mische, 2009), these projections and the underlying data on which they rely do not easily fit within academic journals or gain many adherents.

What is our identity? Even today, much like 20 years ago, publishing work that challenges our established research

norms is less straightforward and reduces the likelihood of tenure or promotion. This puts a greater premium on addressing the question of who am I as a scholar? In the past, that identity question was easily answered by naming the specialized area and group of scholars with which one engages and contributes. But with climate change research, it means considering whether one wishes their contribution to be near-term and expedient for one's career or longer-range and focused on the root of the issues we face. Should one choose the latter focus and its associated academic struggles, it also requires bearing the emotional toll of working on an existential threat to life on earth and our relative powerlessness in dealing with the actualities of the climate crisis. Such burdens can wear down scholars, pushing them back into more mainstream studies or out of the field altogether.

What is our work's purpose? Ultimately, these identity-redefining tensions between phenomenon-focused and theory-building pursuits require addressing questions about purpose. In the case of climate change, purpose usually entails trying to make a practical difference. A common response to this climate change conundrum of simple answers and difficult to implement solutions is to maintain that increasing our efforts, cumulatively and collectively, will eventually have an impact on the social, political, and natural worlds, furthering society's transition. Alas, that assumption is debatable. It presumes coupling where there is actual decoupling. Academic reward systems focus on metrics like citation counts and journal impact factors for measuring impact. Whether there is any real-world impact is rarely if ever discussed.

Another common response is to engage in more applied research. For the most part, people in the business and policy worlds are not generally interested in our work because they have never heard of the academic journals in management much less read them. Efforts to increase the relevance of business school research, such as through the Responsible Research in Business Management network (RRBM), are noble and important. But if these efforts are not accompanied by a parallel effort of changing research norms to reward faculty for bringing that research to the public that needs it and in a form in which they can use it, the effort will be for naught (Hoffman, 2021). Taken to the extreme, such applied research is viewed by many as a waste of time and distraction from scholarly "real" work—what is commonly referred to as the "Carl Sagan effect" (Martinez-Conde, 2016).

Is our teaching central to practice? One could argue that one of the most profound and important domains of academia, where real-world impacts might be attained, is the classroom. Rae André in this collection thinks so. However, climate change as a topic does not fit neatly within our teaching pedagogy. That pedagogy is still organized around the 50-year-old notion of shareholder primacy (Friedman, 1970) and a variant of the "greed is good" mentality

(Polowy, 2017). Curriculum building is then about fighting for “shelf-space” with finance, accounting, operations management, and marketing to build out these pedagogical notions. But merely adding a new course on climate change or grand challenges within a curriculum that teaches the purpose of the corporation is to make money for the shareholder, that government has a limited role in the market, that efficiency is always good, that consumption and growth are virtually unbounded, and that nature is nothing more than an unlimited source of materials and unlimited sink for wastes—and any number of other misguided notions—will *not* properly address the issue (Hoffman, 2024). It will just improve university rankings and garner accreditation accolades, adding to more goal drift. Our students will still be left without the proper tools and models for solving a problem for which they will bear the brunt.

In the case of teaching, we think that the problem of climate change requires a fundamental alteration of the curriculum in order to call into question many of the “bad management theories that are destroying good management practices” (Ghoshal, 2005) and “rejuvenate the intellectual and moral training of future business leaders” (Khurana, 2010). Business academics and society at large need to embrace the idea that the corporation’s purpose is to craft a flourishing society (Magnuson, 2022) and the models we apply within business education should seek to improve human welfare (Deaton, 2023). In such a curriculum, we must amend our models of capitalism to address the challenges of the 21st century (Jacobs & Mazzucato, 2016) and our models of corporate purpose that emphasize the *Net Positive*: “improv[ing] well-being for everyone it impacts and at all scales—every product, every operation, every region and country, and for every stakeholder, including employees, suppliers, communities, customers, and even future generations and the planet itself” (Polman & Winston, 2021). Until we do this, we will continue to sharpen and churn out the very graduates who are enabling the damages we seek to stop (Phillips et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, here again, rewards feed inertia. For the scholar, teaching is a distant second to research in the list of reward priorities. As a result, the incentives to develop new and innovative courses are low, if not negative, as such time spent on developing new courses is time taken away from producing more research (Webster, 2022). For the school, the rankings overshadow any effort at reform, placing schools in a “commodity trap,” homogenizing content and structure in ways that influence the number and quality of applications, the types and prestige of recruiters, the desirability among faculty, and the influx of contributions from donors (Bachrach et al., 2017). If a business school Dean were to pursue radical reforms that resulted in a drop in the rankings, they would find themselves out of a job. A profound transformation of business education is an

institutional challenge, one that requires a coordinated shift in the entire ecosystem—school accreditation, corporate recruiting, faculty hiring, journal review, faculty reward criteria, school rankings, student admissions, curriculum design, and more. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for one school to do all that alone.

Are there new directions for our efforts? In the end, business schools know about these problems (Carlile et al., 2016; Dameron & Durand, 2011; Datar et al., 2010), and management scholars have recognized them for decades (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). To finally fix them, we need to transition our own models of research and teaching into new forms that incorporate today’s wider systems problems, ones based on different versions of capitalism, relying on socio-culturally informed policies and reaching wider audiences. To do that, business schools and their scholars need to engage in contemporary debates over the purpose of the firm, the future of capitalism beyond shareholder capitalism, the role of government in establishing proper guardrails for that future variant, and to examine the ways we can rethink growth, consumption, waste, and other taken-for-granted ideas within business.

It is intriguing, if sad, to note that these conversations have been engaged in domains, primarily outside the business school (such as the Business Roundtable, World Economic Forum, World Business Council for Sustainable Development and others). While some might argue that these entities strive to maintain the status quo to protect the interests of their members, we must acknowledge that these are also where change must occur. If the market, as one of the most powerful institutions on Earth, is not turned to solving our grand challenges, they will not likely be solved.

We as business school scholars need to take a stand by making an aspirational statement and commitment about the kind of world we want to create through our research and our teaching. As all the other contributors in this discussion note, we need to create the next generation of climate leaders and equip them with the tools, models, and “honest conversations” about alternative approaches to tackle climate change or we are doomed. It is time to stop kicking this can down the road.

Confronting the Big Picture: Climate Change, Capitalism, and Management Scholarship

Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg

The neglect of climate change in business and management research has been a long-term trend (Goodall, 2008; Nyberg & Wright, 2022a). Yet, in the last few years it seems management scholars have finally recognized climate change as an issue of concern. Climate change now

features in the pantheon of “grand challenges” that management scholars increasingly profess to address (George et al., 2016), and most business schools now routinely genuflect toward the discourse of “sustainability” and the colorful iconography of the UN SDGs (Miotto et al., 2020).

The irony of this is somewhat stark given how late in the day it really is. After all, the science of the greenhouse effect and anthropogenic climate disruption is centuries old (Weart, 2011), American presidents were being warned of the existential implications of global warming from the mid-1960s (Nuccitelli, 2015), and oil companies’ own internal research had established the link between their products and global warming during the 1970s (Supran & Oreskes, 2017). From the late 1980s, climate change became institutionalized within annual international climate negotiations, yet as the scientific data increased on the dire threat facing humanity, greenhouse gas emissions and atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane continued to grow (Heede, 2014). As the world heats to unprecedented levels and the tipping points of Greenland, the Amazon and the west Antarctic ice sheets become reality, it now seems management scholarship has finally woken up! But to what, one might ask?

Despite the growing attention to the climate crisis in management research, there is a notable failure to come to grips with the phenomenon itself. Much management writing on climate change defaults to the more nebulous concerns of “sustainability,” “business greening,” and the discursive fashion of “net-zero.” But missing from most of these accounts is any understanding of the fundamental nature of the problem the developed world has created. The exploitation of fossil energy in the form of coal, oil, and gas, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries facilitated the dramatic expansion of industrial activity and the “Great Acceleration” of globalized corporate capitalism (Steffen et al., 2015; Wright & Nyberg, 2015). Fossil energy enabled the fantasy that the human species was now free from the constraints of the natural world and could exist somehow independent from its physical limits (Malm, 2016). Humans could, it seems, conquer nature, extracting from it endless productive inputs, while also using it as a sink for capitalism’s ceaseless waste (of which greenhouse gases are perhaps its most profound legacy). A small proportion of the human species could now live as gods, free from the hardships of food and energy scarcity and consume at a scale beyond the imagination of their forebears. However, it was always a mirage, a form of magical thinking, and now in this age of consequences we are finally becoming aware of the huge cost of such hubris.

Yet it is our embedded relationship to the natural world and the web of life; the endless complexity of interrelated species and elements that we call “nature,” that is largely absent from management scholarship. Perhaps shaped by the underlying influence of neoclassical economics,

management researchers and business schools view the natural environment as something of a distraction from the process of economic value creation. From our earliest days in undergraduate lectures, it was drummed into us that the economy was where the action was, and nature was defined out of the equation, an “externality” that we need not concern ourselves with. As Rae André points out in this current exchange, this myopia has been compounded for management and business scholars through the obsession with the micro functioning of the business organization (in terms of the strategy and structure of the firm and its functional specializations). If climate change is to be acknowledged, it must be incorporated within the logic of the firm; a “business case” of risk and opportunity (Lash & Wellington, 2007). Unsurprisingly, when climate change is considered, the discussion moves toward the reduction of these business risks resulting from climate disruption and the capture of monetary opportunities (new products and markets) in a changing physical world (Nyberg et al., 2022). This focus on “risk,” of which this curated discussion is themed, is itself problematic: risk for whom and what? Clearly not all of humanity have equally contributed to the current climate crisis, nor are its impacts equally shared (evident in the huge climate inequalities facing the Global South and future generations!). Invariably, the “solutions” that corporations and their advisers promote emphasize corporate innovation, new technologies and market mechanisms as the focus of climate response, ignoring the fact that it is these very activities that have generated the current crisis. Given then that climate change now threatens not only the near future of organized human civilization, but also much of life on the planet, what should management scholars do?

First, there is a need for us as management scholars to recognize and better communicate the true nature of the problem in our research and teaching. Human-induced disruption of the climate is a direct result of a global capitalist economic system reliant on compound growth *ad infinitum* and dependent upon the continued extraction and combustion of fossil energy. Indeed, coal, oil, and gas still provide more than 80% of total global energy consumption, a figure only marginally less than was the case 50 years ago (IEA, 2021). This extends across the production of energy, into manufacturing, transport, food, and agriculture (IPCC, 2023). Thus, calls for “greening” business, greater eco-efficiency, and managing risk miss this basic truth, implying that it is sufficient to simply tweak a global economic system which is destroying the very life-support systems of the planet. Here, we would take issue with Gioia’s (2024) argument, noted in the introduction to this exchange, that climate change is an expression of “collective stupidity” and that business will lead in responding to it. The climate crisis is, we would argue, not an expression of stupidity, but rather the result of conscious planning by corporate and political leaders who view this as

the desired reality; what Fisher (2009) has termed “capitalist realism.” Moreover, the current political responses to the climate crisis reveal that business is “leading,” however it is doing so in ways that lock in the continuation of business as usual and obfuscate the need for a far more radical alternative imaginary (Nyberg et al., 2022; Wright & Nyberg, 2017).

Second, having recognized the fundamental nature of the climate crisis, as management scholars we need to start having honest conversations about alternatives to our current economic and political system; a fundamental rethink of how our societies could be organized differently. As André and Hoffman and Jennings argue in their essays, this means going beyond the narrow theories of business studies and engaging with a truly multidisciplinary perspective, drawing on insights from political economy, geography, climate science, and the broader humanities. We need to expand our intellectual horizon beyond just stakeholder theories of existing business models to a more fundamental recognition of the planetary boundaries humanity must work within and the complex political processes implicit in a more equitable sharing of the basic needs of human and non-human well-being (Raworth, 2017). It means challenging the assumptions of economic growth and seriously considering how issues of “degrowth” and “sufficiency” can inform social organization (Hickel, 2020). It involves taking seriously calls for greater deliberative democracy that extends beyond the façade of political representation and involve communities in making decisions about their lives and futures free from the malign influence of oligarchic power (Willis et al., 2022). As the other contributors have noted, there are institutional reasons why this is difficult in our universities given the siloed nature of expertise and how this is rewarded and incentivized. University collaborations across disciplines are further hampered by the influence of the fossil-fuel industry in higher education (Lachapelle et al., 2024). So, while climate change provides a viable setting for challenging these disciplinary boundaries as well as an opportunity for new insights and learning for ourselves and our students, it also requires challenging the financialization of universities and their dependence on special interests.

Of course, these are huge, consequential social agendas, but they are also the issues that now matter the most if humanity is to have a future. Moreover, these are the concerns that management and organizational scholars should be addressing if they are to have any relevance in a world in freefall. Continuing to address the intricacies of corporate activities and shareholder value maximization is a comforting illusion, however maintaining business scholarship as usual simply perpetuates an economic and political system that is locking in our creative self-destruction, as scholars, as societies, and as a species (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). We need to dream bigger!

What If Your Goal Is to Save the Planet? (and Your Business School Doesn't Care?)

Rae André

If we were to teach only what's in our top-tier journals, we management scholars would soon be unemployed. Standing in front of a class of students one clutches at relevance like a cold draft on a hot day. We reach for cases, guest lecturers, experiential exercises, and internships to create content that matters. Miraculously, we often succeed. We succeed because indeed we do find knowledge out there—in other disciplines, in other types of research, and in real life—that can make a difference in our students' lives.

Living in a time of rapid climate change makes it easy to be relevant. My particular interest is in how society—what I often refer to as team humanity—can organize to solve the climate crisis (André, 2020a). I approach this challenge as an organizational psychologist who has explored a variety of social sciences to see what they might contribute to solutions. Adopting a systems approach to change, I think in terms of individual (micro) level change, organizational/business (meso) level change, and societal/systemic/global (macro) level change. I believe that macro-level change is essential if we are to address the climate crisis effectively.

Of course, not everyone has the same perspective on what's relevant. What most management scholars are trained for, are most comfortable with, and are rewarded for is to research and teach individual- and organizational-level change, for example, change to protect companies by reducing their risks. Yet, if we want to address the goal of saving the planet itself, we must exit that silo.

How does the business sector conceptualize change for climate change—the process by which people, organizations, and systems are reacting to climate change and making decisions about how to address it? In a series of articles on business purpose Landrum and partners investigate how companies set their goals along a continuum of organizational purposes that range from weak to strong environmental sustainability. These are defined respectively as sustainability for companies alone (meso-level change) and sustainability for the planet (macro-level change). In a content analysis of corporate sustainability reports Landrum and Ohsowski (2018) found that the dominant worldview of businesses is to pursue weak sustainability. Further, in a sample of American companies, Demastus and Landrum (2023) found that sustainability guidelines set by their external evaluators establish only weak, business-focused goals; not one organization adopted the goal of achieving strong sustainability. In part corroborating these findings, in an analysis of curricula from the Financial Times's top 100 global MBA programs, Shantz et al. (2023) found that only about 5% of the identified courses (86 of 1,688) teach content at the macro level of “leading in complex and uncertain

environments,” and that where they do, they tend to focus on short-term solutions to economic and technological challenges and do not highlight moral issues.

The business school accrediting agency AACSB also demonstrates a lack of interest in planetary sustainability. Its 2020 guidelines for societal impact require only that business schools make “a positive impact on the betterment of society, as identified in the school’s mission and strategic plan. Societal impact can be at a local, regional, national, or international level” (AACSB, 2023, p. 62). Sticking close to its business-oriented mission, AACSB guidelines for curriculum development require that “the school provides a portfolio of experiential learning opportunities that promote learner engagement between faculty and the community of business practitioners” (p. 43). They ignore engagement with any other stakeholders, such as communities, society, and the natural world. So, if the question is what’s holding us back from doing research on change for climate change, in the words of the inimitable cartoon character Pogo, “We have met the enemy and he is us” (Kelly, 1972).

Recently I’ve been taking a deep dive into what selected pedagogical journals have been publishing on climate change. Quite a lot, as it turns out. I’ve observed in this literature an emphasis on systems. In particular researchers describe the importance of specifying system levels when talking about change for climate change. Some point out that teaching individual- and organizational-level material doesn’t adequately address climate change: you can’t solve a macro-level problem with micro- and meso-level tools.

For instance, it’s not enough to teach students to *think* in terms of systems (a micro-level process). We need to teach them how to act (lead, follow, influence) within systems at the macro level, and to accomplish this we must emphasize systems *knowing* and systems *leadership* along with systems thinking. Systems knowing means learning about processes like managing business–government relations, engaging in energy sector competitive dynamics, and developing energy policy nationally and internationally. Understanding degrowth and donut economics is of particular interest (Wright & Nyberg, this article).

In this pedagogical literature the UN SDGs (United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, n.d.) are criticized because they do not offer strategies for change (Parkes et al., 2017; Thérien & Pouliot, 2006). SDGs are seen as revealing categories, and perhaps values, but they do not promote action. Given the limited time in any curriculum, studying them in-depth can easily drive out learning about such complex processes as how power works within the macro system—how particular stakeholders influence policy, for example. Such critics argue that if we never teach about societal power and how it influences climate policy globally, we are effectively colonizing our students.

An important factor holding back research on macro-level change is that in our particular intellectual niche we simply do not have the tools (facts, theories, models, research methodologies, direct experience) to address it. Many scholars who would like to do macro-level research cannot readily apply their current knowledge base. The good news is that although management scholars don’t do much research on societal change, sociologists and political scientists and legal scholars do. A recent article in this journal on reimagining entrepreneurial capitalism research describes the types of societal-level research we might pursue (Weiss et al., 2023; see also Bobulescu, 2022).

This brings me to the unoriginal but perennially pertinent idea that researching and teaching change for climate change should be, must be, an interdisciplinary effort across the university. It is the university (perhaps led by the business school, as in the example from MIT discussed below) that must undertake a review of how climate change is being researched and taught to students across the curriculum with an eye to actually *solving the climate crisis*. The university might cede to business schools their focus on helping businesses survive in the Anthropocene and highlight elsewhere how governments can hold businesses accountable for their environmental impacts while encouraging product and process innovations. Universities could encourage accrediting agencies like AACSB to reward such interdisciplinary efforts, and they could ensure that interdisciplinary research is rewarded across their institution.

It may be that to address climate change and other wicked problems universities should attempt to reclaim their historic role as places of engagement, learning, and debate. Can they do this expeditiously? Will they? I can understand why climate activists pursue work elsewhere that is more likely to create the kind of change we urgently need. But there is some hope (see Bradbury, this article).

For example, recently MIT initiated a policy-oriented cross-curriculum approach that bears watching. Among its goals are to “collaborate with existing climate efforts across MIT, working with all faculty, departments, centers, and initiatives engaged in climate policy research and outreach and be a central resource for students, providing them with opportunities to engage more deeply with, and to affect, public policy” (MIT Sloan Office of Communications, 2024). Researchers might follow this and similar university-wide curricular innovations to see whether and how they meet the goal of addressing macro-level change.

What you believe is preventing management scholars from doing climate action research depends on your purpose. My “aspirational statement” (see Hoffman & Jennings, in this article) is that I am pursuing macro-level research on change for climate change and I am introducing my students to agency and leadership in both meso- and macro-level systems (André, 2020b). Similarly, Bradbury

(in this article) advocates for both “disciplined voice” and “actionability.” In contrast, the business sector is pursuing mainly meso-level risk management, and this affects what management scholars themselves are able and willing to work on.

Most likely we cannot address a macro-level problem with traditional individual- and organizational-level tools, tempting though it is to try. At the same time, for climate scholars the lack of systematic knowledge about macro-level change is a roadblock. We can remove the roadblock if we join with other disciplines who know at least as much about macro-level change—and probably more about it—than we do. The alternative is to continue to spin our wheels and, as others have noted in this article, “kick the can down the road” (Hoffman & Jennings), “lock in our own creative self-destruction” (Wright & Nyberg), and “actively co-produce the very opposite of what we need at this time of unsustainability” (Bradbury).

Concluding Remarks

Bradley Hastings and David Grant

Essays within this curated discussion (André; Bradbury; Wright & Nyberg) point to a fundamental flaw within management scholarship, which is that historically we have tended to overlook the fact that organizations are embedded in the natural environment and instead have seen nature as an abstract and separate phenomenon. Perhaps it will only be when we are confronted by the immediate prospect of mass organizational mortality, with nature as the perpetrator, that we will recognize that businesses need to view and interact with the environment very differently to the way they do at present, and that there will be a corresponding and dramatic rise in climate action research within our discipline.

By that point however, efforts to address the climate crisis may be too late. We need to act now. In the case of management studies, this entails identifying and removing the barriers preventing us from engaging with the crisis. In line with this aspiration, essays in this curated discussion have explored a range of reasons why management scholars are generally choosing not to engage with climate issues and offer strategies and alternative agendas for developing management research that could contribute to climate action. While each essay is distinct in its approach to answering the question “What’s holding us back?,” there are some shared themes that are also discernible. We use these closing comments to highlight them.

Combined, the essays in this article paint a broad picture of the systemic issues that are holding back management studies as a whole. As such, they underscore Bradbury’s observation that our scholarship is frozen in a place that is the very opposite of what the world needs right now. In short, the norms and institutions that currently prevail in

the discipline are not conducive to encouraging a significant increase in climate action research among management academics; they inhibit it.

How then do we unfreeze and move toward a position where researchers can make an uninhibited choice to engage with climate issues? As a starting point, all of the contributors to this article agree that we need to encourage open, honest conversations among the various actors in our field, framed around the systemic factors that are holding us back. These conversations will entail a re-evaluation of existing theories, research strategies, and teaching paradigms and will likely point to a need for what will be uncomfortable shifts in subject focus and ambitious new research agendas.

Such meaningful reflection involves asking ourselves questions such as the five specific ones posed in the introduction to this article. The essays that followed show that the answers obtained can be vexing and provocative. Finding answers to the question “*Which Theory?*” will, for example, force us to re-evaluate a historic infatuation with shareholder primacy and the associated theories underpinning shareholder value, such as ad infinitum economic growth and ever-increasing consumer consumption (Hoffman & Jennings; Wright & Nyberg). In other words, do we want to challenge the assumptions underpinning these theories and prosecute new ways of thinking about our global economic and political systems, or continue business as usual with our heads stuck in the sand? As several of the essays point out, doing this will require us to adopt multidisciplinary perspectives, and draw on insights from climate science and the broader humanities (André; Hoffman & Jennings; Wright & Nyberg). Are we though prepared to move outside of our comfort zones in order to achieve this? Are the rewards and incentives in business schools and within our discipline itself sufficient to encourage people to take such an approach? Doing so could, for example, be seen as risky because multi- and interdisciplinary research, whether the topic is climate change or some other issue, is difficult to have published in management journals (Knights & Willmott, 1997). Furthermore, it might be perceived as something that impinges on the advancement of one’s career.

Turning to the question “*Which research strategy?*,” Bradbury’s essay can be seen as suggesting that achieving an increase in impactful climate action research involves adoption of a strategy emphasizing praxis. For Bradbury, this involves our being willing to unfreeze research paradigms in a way that can facilitate engagement with practitioners in the design of research that can be applied to some practical benefit. She acknowledges that this is not easy. As others have argued, business schools, and by implication the management scholars within them, have moved away from an applied focus to a more theoretical approach such that the connection with praxis has been weakened (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011). Are we willing to roll back this

emphasis, or do we want to run the risk of increasing our lack of relevance to the world at large?

When it comes to tackling the question “*Which methods of data gathering and analysis?*,” André’s essay is perhaps the most relevant. In her view, we need to move away from producing research that purely analyses and influences change at the individual and organizational levels toward research that looks at effecting macro-level changes to the societal-level institutions and systems that others in this curated discussion have noted are major impediments to addressing the climate crisis. Such research would, for instance, meet the call from Wright and Nyberg in their essay for more research which draws attention to the causes and impact of climate change not being equally shared by humanity and which addresses matters of climate justice. André’s concern is that the management studies discipline does not have the requisite methodologies and expertise to undertake this kind of macro-level societal research. Instead, we will need to engage and partner with other non-management disciplines that do. As noted elsewhere in this article, where we have considered “*Who am I?*” and “*What theory?*,” there are several challenges and risks attached to undertaking an interdisciplinary approach such as this.

Conversations stimulated by asking questions such as “*For what purpose?*” will, as Wright and Nyberg and Hoffman and Jennings observe in their essays, also raise some confronting issues. Not least, they will necessitate a recognition that the climate crisis is a direct result of a global capitalist economic system in which management research and teaching are complicit. Are we comfortable with this situation? Should universities, and business schools in particular, re-evaluate the nature of their relationships with those in whose interests it may be to continue with “business as usual.” Additionally, consideration of “purpose” may also promote inward reflection on one’s personal career choices. Here, Bradbury, in her essay, has reflected on her view that academia had become a flight from reality, which prompted her own decision to leave it. For management studies as a discipline, are we comfortable with additional academics—potentially early-career—coming to a similar realization that the best way to achieve impact is to depart academia?

All the contributors to this article recognize the magnitude of the task we have described, but that is not to say it cannot be fulfilled. This brings us to the question “*Who am I?*” We have deliberately left this to last as it ties into our final set of observations. As we noted earlier, this is a question that encourages management researchers to reflect on and develop an understanding of what it is about themselves that shapes their choosing whether or not to engage with climate issues.

Choosing to answer the question “*Who am I?*” by personally engaging with climate issues is one thing, turning that

engagement into discernible action and therefore revealing one’s authentic self, is another. As Wright and Nyberg and Hoffman and Jennings note in their essays, starting difficult conversations such as those advocated in this article often requires having the courage to lean into them and to take the lead. These are attributes that implicitly feature in all the essays, coupled with suggestions about how they might manifest. For example, Hoffman and Jennings believe that changing research norms requires the conversation to include not only individual researchers but also those responsible for shaping and controlling the system, meaning, for example, ratings agencies, journal editors, accreditation agencies and academic leaders. They go on to suggest that these actors need to each make “an aspirational statement and commitment about the kind of world we want to create through our research and our teaching.” Along these lines, André describes her pedagogical work as “I am introducing my students to agency and leadership in both meso and macro level systems.” In Bradbury’s essay, we see researchers generating such statements using an action research-oriented approach. The approach involves them reflecting on and publicly committing to learning new ways of partnering with industry and other actors so as to develop impactful climate action research. We also see Bradbury and her colleagues, as editors of the journal *Action Learning*, make a public commitment to develop and publish climate-related research.

These statements of intent serve as an important guide for researchers in that they explain where we want our field to be and open up space for them to contribute to that aim. Moreover, such narratives have an important demonstration effect in that they signal to others that meaningful change is occurring and that we are moving to a place where the benefits of choosing to engage in climate action research are beginning to outweigh the drawbacks. Thus, it is critically important that such statements proliferate. The essays in this article suggest that if the answer to “*Who am I?*” points to our choosing to our undertaking climate action research, then that might well extend to our being prepared to play a role in this proliferation.

Overall, this curated discussion highlights a need for us, across our research and teaching, to expand climate action from being an activity of the few to being one taken up by the many. This transition, as Hoffman and Jennings highlight, will be difficult for one business school to stand tall and lead on their own. Instead, collectively we must address the systemic factors that are holding our discipline back, with the dual aims of creating a research environment in which undertaking climate action research is seen as a normal and acceptable feature of mainstream management studies, while also providing educational experiences that produce a new generation of business leaders equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to tackle climate change.

Taking action to instigate greater engagement with climate issues in our discipline will, as the essays in this article show, involve two interrelated forms of action. First, and bearing in mind that rather than being something that is cheap or worthless, a distraction, or a waste of time, “talk *is* action” (Marshak, 1998), we need to initiate and engage in purposeful conversations. Doing so will facilitate the identification of mutual interests and enable the construction of shared goals. As noted elsewhere in these concluding remarks, contributors to this piece have, in response to the questions posed, provided guidance on the context and topics of the conversations that need to be undertaken. The areas include discussions with accreditation agencies aimed at expanding present notions of social impact to more explicitly focus on issues such as planetary sustainability and climate justice, together with encouragement for top-tier management journals to actively encourage and create opportunities (e.g., special issues) for management scholars to publish climate change-related research. Conversations should also extend to an explicit debate within business schools that examines the ongoing relevance of theories and pedagogies based on the notion of shareholder primacy and economic growth. The contributors also remind us that prosecuting these conversations within the academy, although vital, are not enough. We need to make the effort to better engage and converse with key stakeholders outside of the academy—government, business, and other community groups—so as to identify research agendas where management expertise can show intellectual leadership, play its part in influencing policy and practice, and contribute to tackling the climate crisis.

Second, we will need to individually commit to taking action. Some may choose to draft their own aspirational statement about the type of world they want to live in and contribute to and then seek to put this into effect through one or more of the actions arising from the conversations listed in the preceding point. Others may choose to take the initiative and directly undertake climate action research, simply because having engaged in such conversations, they uncover an issue or research question that piques their interest, enables them to apply their expertise, and merits attention. Getting to this point is not without its challenges. Not least, it will involve us all having the courage to “lean in” to these conversations and be prepared to engage in what will be open, honest and sometimes robust exchanges. Unless we do this, we will be unable to successfully challenge the institutions and norms that currently contribute to so many management scholars choosing not to engage with climate issues.

We believe that taking these two forms of action will support the proliferation of climate action research across the discipline and will, in turn, create a momentum of their own. We can all contribute to this agenda in various ways, at the individual, organizational, or societal levels, using

the various networks and governance structures that we inhabit as researchers, educators, and academic leaders. In closing their essay, Wright and Nyberg write that we need to “dream bigger.” The dream is achievable, but only if we take these first important steps.

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Notes

1. Paraphrasing Churchill who commended the British pilots of World War II whose courage benefitted many.
2. Scientists stationed on Antarctica reported a “mindboggling” rise in temperature of 38.5°C in early 2024. Simultaneously they noted that the emperor penguin population had suffered a 90% death of their next generation because sea ice had melted before the chicks’ wings had become waterproof.

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