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Trust the Evidence, Not Your Instincts

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CONSIDER this hypothetical situation: You have a serious illness. Your doctor prescribes an intrusive, painful and costly treatment. What she doesn't say — because she hasn't consulted the research — is that most studies find the treatment ineffective and fraught with negative side effects.

You go through the procedure, which doesn't work. You later find the research your doctor failed to consult. When you ask why, she answers: "Who pays attention to studies? I have years of clinical experience. Besides, the protocol seemed as if it ought to work."

Does that sound like malpractice? It does to us. Fortunately, pressures to practice evidence-based medicine are reducing preventable errors.

That isn't the case, however, in most workplaces, where failure to consider sound evidence repeatedly inflicts unnecessary damage on employee well-being and group performance. It doesn't have to be that way.

Consider the issue of incentive pay. Many people believe that paying for performance will work in virtually any organization, so it is used again and again to solve problems — even where evidence shows it is ineffective.

Recently, New York City decided to end a teacher bonus program after three years and \$56 million. As The New York Times reported in July, a study found that the effort to link incentive pay to student performance "had no positive effect on either student performance or teachers' attitudes."

But that bad news could have been predicted long before spending all that time and money. After all, the failure of similar efforts to improve school performance has been documented for decades.

Here is another example: Research has shown that stable membership is a hallmark of effective work teams. People with more experience, working together, typically communicate and coordinate more effectively.

Although this effect is seen in studies of everything from product development teams to airplane cockpit crews, managers often can't resist the temptation to rotate people in and out to minimize costs and make scheduling easier.

For example, the National Transportation Safety Board once found that 73 percent of the safety incidents reported on commercial aircraft occur on the first day a new crew flies together.

Hiring is another crucial workplace decision. Many studies show that unstructured, face-to-face interviews are biased; interviewers prefer candidates who are likeable, similar to them, and physically attractive — even if these qualities are irrelevant to performance.

Many other selection methods are superior. Among the best is simply to determine whether the candidate can perform the work. Still, interviews remain the primary route to hiring.

Another workplace danger is excessive self-confidence, which can help people rise to positions of power but can also render them less effective leaders. Overconfident decision-makers may acknowledge that they use a practice that is ineffective for most others — but they believe they are so talented that the usual findings don't apply to them.

Fortunately, some organizations are moving toward evidence-based management. A recent study at Google shows the power of accepting and acting on evidence, even when it clashes with ingrained beliefs. For most of its history, Google's leaders believed that deep technical expertise was the most important quality in a manager. They thought that the best bosses pretty much left their people alone, and that their main role was to help with technical problems when people got stuck.

Yet when Google examined what employees valued most in a manager, technical expertise ranked last among eight qualities. Deemed more crucial were attributes like staying even-keeled, asking good questions, taking time to meet with people and caring about employees' careers and lives.

Google found that managers who did these things led top-performing teams and had the happiest employees and least turnover. So Google is making many changes in how it selects and coaches managers, devoting particular effort to improving its worst managers.

We applaud Google's leaders for overcoming their biases. But note that the attributes of great managers were evident in hundreds of previous studies, so such improvement efforts might have started years earlier.

IN medicine, the evidence-based movement arose in response to thousands of deaths and billions of wasted dollars that could have been averted by applying proven practices.

Similarly, in other fields, the growing pile of studies on the human and financial costs of employee disengagement, management distrust, poor group dynamics, faulty incentive schemes and other preventable damage suggests a need for an evidence-based management movement. Some organizations are leading the way. It's time for many more to follow suit.

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