ABSTRACT. This paper will build on a recent article appearing in the Harvard Business Review that blamed the alleged crisis in management education on the scientific model that has been adopted as the sole means of gaining knowledge about human behavior and organizations. The solution, they argue, is for business schools to realize that business management is not a scientific discipline but a profession, and deal with the things a professional education requires. We will expand on this article and discuss its implications by looking at the scientific model from a philosophical perspective and dealing with the issue of whether management is a profession. Our discussion of these issues has implications for our understanding of business in society and the design of the business school curriculum.

KEY WORDS: management, education, science, profession

The unholy alliance of business and science

In a recent article appearing in the Harvard Business Review, Bennis and O’Toole (2005) analyze the reasons for the alleged failure of business schools to adequately prepare their graduates for the world of business. In the beginning of the article they enumerate recent criticisms of MBA programs including failing to impart useful skills, failing to prepare leaders, failing to instill norms of ethical behavior, and even failing to lead graduates to corporate jobs. These criticisms come from many different groups including students, employers, the media, and deans of some of the country’s most prestigious business schools. Attempts to address this problem have resulted in many efforts to revise the curriculum to be more relevant to the business world. Bennis and O’Toole believe, however, that the curriculum is the effect, and not the cause, of what ails the modern business school.

The actual cause of today’s crisis in management education, they believe, can be traced to a dramatic shift in the culture of business schools that has taken place over the past several decades as many leading business schools have come to measure their success solely by the rigor of their scientific research rather than in terms of the competence of their graduates or how well faculties understand important drivers of business performance. This scientific model, they argue, is predicated on the faulty assumption that business is an academic discipline like chemistry or geology, when in fact it is a profession akin to medicine and the law. Business schools should be professional schools, and this distinction between a profession and an academic discipline is crucial, and in their view, no curricular reforms will work until the scientific model is replaced by a model that is...
more appropriate to the special requirements of a profession.

The rest of the article discusses how business schools came to embrace the scientific model of physicists and economists rather than the professional model of doctors and lawyers. The problem is not that business schools have embraced scientific rigor, but that they have forsaken other forms of knowledge that are relevant to business organizations. To regain relevance, business schools must realize that business management is not a scientific discipline, but a profession, and they must deal with the things a professional education requires. There must be a balance between rigor and relevance.

We believe that this paper raises some important issues for business education, and in particular ethics education, which needs further exploration. In our paper, we will first discuss the scientific model and point out its limitations in advancing our knowledge of how humans behave in organizations and how organizations function in society. In doing this we will discuss the rise of modern science and the problem it created relative to our understanding of humans and nature in the modern world. Business schools ignore this problem at their peril in their wholesale adoption of the scientific model as the only way to advance knowledge.

Secondly, we want to discuss the issue of whether or not management can be considered a profession like law and medicine, or whether there are crucial differences that have led to a crisis of management education. We believe this issue is central to the argument of Bennis and O’Toole since they argue that business schools need to recognize that business management is a profession and not a scientific discipline. In what sense is business and management a profession? The answer to this question has important implications for curriculum design and the purpose of business in society.

Business as a science

The scientific model was adopted in response to two studies sponsored by the Ford (Gordon and Howell, 1959) and Carnegie (Pierson et al., 1959) foundations respectively that were extremely critical of business school education at the time, characterizing business schools as little more than glorified trade or vocational schools. Most professors dispensed practical wisdom through the telling of stories based on experience or other methods that lacked the academic rigor of other subjects. To gain academic respectability and promote rigor in the business school curriculum, business schools turned to the scientific paradigm, and over time switched their primary focus from educating practitioners to conducting scientific research to push back the boundaries of knowledge. They adopted a model of science that uses abstract financial and economic models, statistical analysis, and occasionally laboratory psychology. The practical implications of this research were not always obvious particularly to practitioners themselves.

Business schools in general did gain academic respectability using this approach and have by and large eliminated the vocational stigma that once was attached to business school education. But in the process, many believe that they have lost relevance, in that scientific research techniques that require considerable skill in statistics or experimental design calls for little insight in complex social and human factors that are involved in business decisions and minimal time in the field discovering the actual problems facing business managers. When applied to business, which is essentially a human activity in which judgments are made with messy, incomplete, and incoherent data, statistical and methodological wizardry can blind rather than illuminate (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005).

An important consequence of the adoption of this scientific model is that evaluations of faculty are heavily influenced by the number of articles they publish in approved business research journals. To get published in these journals, scholars must focus on narrower and narrower subjects chiefly of interest to other academics, not practitioners. Professors who publish in highly quantitative journals are much more likely to receive tenure and promotions while those who publish in the pages of a more professional journal like the Harvard Business Review, which is much more likely to have an actual influence on business practices, risk being denied tenure and promotion.

This scientific culture likewise generates pressure on fields of study in business schools to adopt the scientific model in order to gain academic respectability. The field of Business and Society, for