

A review of
Hard Fact, Dangerous Half-Truths, & Total Nonsense
by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton
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Rating: 10

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Discarding anything lower than 6 produces a net five-point scale from 6-10.)

Have you ever heard an idea that seems, on the surface at least, to make sense? Someone who attended a conference (or just read an in-flight airline magazine) became instantly converted and brought it to your organization. Then, as you try to implement the idea, or even just reflect on it more deeply, you realize that it has more sizzle than steak?

Pfeffer and Sutton wrote *The Knowing-Doing Gap* some years ago. Briefly, that book had this premise: if we *know* something works, why don't we *do* it? This book takes essentially the opposite position: much of what organizations *do* driven by what they *know* will fail because what they 'know' has only part of the truth.

The authors take a hard look at actions taken by leading organizations. They conclude that

“Business decisions ... are frequently based on hope or fear, what others seem to be doing, what senior leaders have done and believe has worked in the past, and their dearly held ideologies – in short, on lots of things other than the facts.”

They offer as a remedy adopting the practice of evidence-based management. Try something in your organization on a suitably small scale as a pilot. Measure the results objectively. Really – measure the results. Then if it seems to work, scale it up conservatively. And if it does not work then stop doing it and try something else, based on the evidence you gathered from the failure – and you *did* gather evidence, right?

They identify six half-truths and devote a chapter to debunking each. These truths include

- the best organizations have the best people
- strategy is destiny
- an organization must change or die

Look at *change or die*, for example. Many organizations, of course, change *and* die. So consider these questions before undertaking that major change: Has someone demonstrated that the new practice works better? Can we cope with the disruption? Can we make just a symbolic change and achieve the same effect? Will the change benefit the company as a whole rather than just a few key players (i.e., their reputations as 'change agents')? What other changes underway might overwhelm people? If it does not work, can we stop it?

Here's their justification for evidence-based management:

“[It] proceeds from the premise that using better, deeper logic and employing facts to the extent possible permits leaders to do their jobs better.”

Take a current topic outside of the for-profit world to show that these half-truths also infect other sectors of the economy. How about *pay-for-performance for teachers*, an idea all the rage in some political circles ... In order for that to make sense as a preferred direction, we should require evidence to support four key assertions:

- teacher motivation (not competence) is the key determinant of student achievement
- teachers are motivated by financial incentives
- learning can be accurately measured by a standardized test given once a year
- teachers operate alone with no interaction with peers.

Of course, the evidence supports *just the opposite* of these four assertions. Have you ever heard someone say, “I think I’d like to get rich quick, so I’ll become a ... first-grade teacher!”? Evidence furthermore shows that effective schools depend not on solo activities but rather on professional learning communities to share knowledge and practices that work.

A reasonable person might ask at this point, “Gosh, isn’t that the essence of the old Shewhart / Deming Cycle – plan, do, check, act?” I suspect the authors would answer in the affirmative. A reasonable person might ask, “Golly, isn’t this a lot like systems thinking, trying first to figure out why you’re getting the current *unacceptable* performance before intervening to attempt to get *acceptable* performance?” I suspect they would once again in the affirmative. Then they would point to failures by HP and NASA. And they would point to success stories such as Google, Amazon.com, SAS Institute, and the U.S. civil aviation system.

Then they might pose a question for that reasonable questioner. “Does your organization actually use the PDCA cycle deliberately and routinely, including the *check* element: objective measurements? Does your organization actually use systems thinking before implementing some ‘reform initiative’? And even if your organization did it once, has it continued to gather evidence and use the new facts to update the practices?”

How does an organization move toward a culture of evidence-based management? It can start anywhere within the organization with committed leadership. They point out

“Leaders breed ... curiosity by having both the humility to be students and the confidence to be teachers. And the best leaders know when and how to switch between these roles.”

These leaders exhibit what Pfeffer and Sutton call wisdom: acting on your present knowledge while doubting what you know, moving forward with confidence and also with humility. One of their nine implementation principles captures the essence of this idea: *Treat Your Organization as an Unfinished Prototype*. I think it was football coach Lou Holtz who said, “We aren’t where we want to be, but we aren’t where we used to be either.”