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The Pursuit of Excellence: A Commentary

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This paper shares a profound conclusion with us, namely that we're fucked. We are drowning in trivia, smothered by jargon, we write for no reason other than to boost our CVs, we avoid important issues, we only read papers when we need a citation for our own work, and even then we mostly just read the abstract and conclusion. This, you understand, is a best case scenario. Plenty of times we just cut and paste references without even looking at the source material. I strongly suspect that many people who cite Foucault haven't gotten beyond the entry for his name in Wikipedia. But does this bleak analysis hold up?

A glimpse into my day might help to answer this. It begins with an email ping notifying me of another journal contents alert. I open it without hope, and I am not disappointed. The title reads: "A Contingency Analysis of Precarious Organizational Temporariness". WTF? I look to the abstract for illumination: "Analysis of the case extends existing understanding of organizational temporariness and points to an extension of existing theorizing by highlighting the contingent nature of temporariness." The case "extends", and also points to "an extension"? I give up.

Nor is this the worst example. Like *The Terminator*, "I have detailed files." A personal favorite, written by two leading scholars, reads thus: "Specifically, we argue that the dominant 'building' mode of strategizing that configures actors (whether individual or organizational) as distinct entities deliberately engaging in purposeful strategic activities derives from a more basic 'dwelling' mode in which strategy emerges non-deliberately through everyday practical coping. Whereas, from the building perspective, strategy is predicated upon the prior conception of plans that are then orchestrated to realize desired outcome, from a dwelling perspective strategy does not require, nor does it presuppose, intention and purposeful goal-orientation: strategic 'intent' is viewed as immanent in every adaptive action." So far as I can figure, this means that managers wing it on the hoof. Hardly profound, yet published in "a top journal".

There seems to be four golden rules for academic writing these days. Firstly, never use a short and familiar word where a long and unfamiliar one will do. Secondly, never use one word when you can stretch to four. Thirdly, bamboozle the bastards with jargon. This paralyses their critical senses. Those who can't understand can't respond - mission accomplished. It means that jargon, clichés and bad writing are your friends. Fourthly, fresh metaphors, humour and irony are the enemy. They should be avoided like the plague.

It is impossible to believe that people who write like this (critical scholars prominent amongst them) have any motive other than publication. They are not interested, at least

not primarily, in shaping public discourse, addressing important issues and certainly not in changing the world. They have internalised the performative norms of research assessment, and are numb to the stupefying effects their prose has on others. After all, many of us now say, publishing is just a “game” and we best get on with it.

I beg to differ. What we do matters – or it should. There are big issues out there that need answers. Where is the analysis, for example, of the banking crisis in our “top” management and organization journals? Let me know if you find it. It seems like we just can’t be bothered. We have a research strategy, and we’ll be damned if we are going to let events in the outside world interfere with our plans. Best to talk instead about “Precarious Organizational Temporariness”.

Yet we have a choice. None of us came into academic life driven by a passionate desire to be boring. We have learned it, and we best unlearn it damn quick before we all display advanced symptoms of narcolepsy. We need much less talk, please, of rankings, league tables, the “publishing game” and who has published where, without any reference to what they have said. More talk of ideas. And more fun when we do it. I once wrote a paper in which I observed that there wasn’t much humour to be found in academic papers. The editor responded frostily that there was a great deal of research in organization studies on humour and that I should consult it. Hmmm. It is not yet illegal to smile, and I believe there is some research to show that it unsettles authority. It might even improve our morale.

So, maybe we are fucked¹. But I like to think we can unfuck ourselves too. Writing such as this is as good a place as any to start.

About the Author(s)

Dennis is Professor of Leadership and Organization Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is Director of Research for the School of Management. Dennis is the editor of the journal *Leadership*. His most recent book is *The Dark Side of Transformational Leadership: A Critical Perspective* (2013).

¹ By the way, we need fewer footnotes in academic papers.