

Reflections on Engagement
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In many ways the notion of engagement was the foundation for my return to graduate school. After completing my master's I entered the corporate world armed with fistfuls of theory and the passion to implement "new approaches" to decision making and human resource practice. I thought, now is my chance to give back, to use my education (which I deeply valued) to improve the world, or at least one company. The years went by and I found my theories and ideas gathering dust at the bottom of an endless To Do pile, deeply buried under Urgent To Do!, To Do Today, Upcoming Projects, Don't Forget To Do, and Create a Plan For... Instead of spending my time reflecting on what I had learned in school and developing ideas for how to bring that knowledge into my troubled work place, I spent far more time recounting deeply distressing incidents, inconsistent procedures, time-wasting meetings, ineffective employee communication and abusive management practices.

Needless to say, my dissatisfaction with my work organization was mounting. However, the answer for me was not to enroll in another management class or to re-read the latest in motivational business-leader books. I felt I had *engaged* the corporation with little success. I returned to a doctorate program with the intention of finding a better way to build the connection between workers and organization—a better way to organize communication so that employees and the corporation could mutually benefit.

Now, as I near the end of this academic stage, I wonder what it might mean to unite my desire to research communicative practices and organizing processes with my ultimate hope to improve employees' work experiences in a meaningful way. I did not find satisfaction or success the last time I bounded from the academic world into the corporate one. My academic analyses, knowledge of theory, and toolbox of "applied models" did not enable me to make the difference I strived for. Today I contemplate how to make this bridge. To say I want the work to *matter*, feels trite and obvious. When I think 'I want to *engage* practitioners in the applied outcomes of organizational communication research,' I hear the echoes of hearty laughter bouncing off the boardroom walls. But, if I devote myself to studying the experiences of grieving employees, I want the knowledge that emerges to benefit others who have similar experiences. I suspect that current standardized funeral-leave policies privilege particular groups of people while marginalizing others, and I want to shed light on these inequities. I want people who are faced with the challenge of creating bereavement leave policies to have the outcomes of my research as a resource. But, the process for giving academic research the legs to move into the trenches remains unclear. The consultant model is tantalizing: I enter the organization as an expert, they seek my advice; they implement my strategies for more democratic practices—voilà. But the sound of Darth Vader's ominous breathing is never far away as someone consultancy feels like the dark side. How exactly do I manifest my moral obligation to do good with scholarship? How do I work to improve the experiences of bereaved workers and those around them?

As I consider these questions it strikes me that perhaps these questions emerge from a conception of “engagement” that is too uni-directional. I have been focused on how to bring the knowledge produced through my work *to* others. I had the same approach when I first entered the corporate workforce, I wanted impart my approach *to* the company. (And, if I’m honest, I find this urge surface in my teaching as well.) I conclude these reflections by suggesting that maybe for myself and others the notion of engagement could be reconceptualized as a conversation. Not as one where I (the academic) bring resources to others. But, one closer to a genuine conversation where knowledge and resources are shared in a way that is transformative for all involved. I look forward to having the opportunity to mature and diversify my own thoughts about what engagement can be at the conference.