DEVELOPING A TEACHABLE POINT OF VIEW

Kim Cameron
University of Michigan

As professors of management and organizational behavior mature in their teaching, they should begin to develop a teachable point of view. In this article, the author describes several attributes of a teachable point of view. Based on his own teaching experience, the author outlines five criteria for the content of the material taught—the what of teaching—as well as the pedagogical approach to engendering learning—the how of teaching. These criteria are offered as illustrations of what it means to be a full professor.

Keywords: teachable point of view; abundance; competency development; full professor

It makes sense to me to think of the titles we receive in academia as being metaphors for our level of expertise in teaching. Assistant professors, as newly appointed teachers, need assistance to know what to profess. Associate professors become associates, partners, or collaborators in the content and process of teaching. Full professors, on the other hand, should own the content and the pedagogy of their teaching. They should have a fully developed teachable point of view (Tichy, 2004). The question is: How do people reach such a point as teachers? How can faculty members entering the field of teaching, especially in management or organizational behavior departments, grow into full professors—that is, individuals who are fully capable of professing? How do people come to develop a teachable point of view?

Excellent advice regarding such questions has been provided by a variety of insightful and masterful teachers (Palmer, 1997; Tichy, 2004), and this brief essay does not claim to adequately address these questions. However, as a maturing teacher, albeit one who long ago was granted the title of full professor at my institution, I shall share a few insights about what I have learned about teaching and professing. These observations are not intended to be right answers or prescriptions for excellent teaching. I don’t claim to be a role model or an especially effective instructor. Rather, what I will
share are simply some rules of thumb that work for me and that have emerged as I have progressed in my own teaching career. Some of these rules of thumb relate to the content of what I teach, and some relate to the pedagogical procedures on which I rely.

**What I Teach**

A few years ago, I was asked to write an article for the *Journal of Management Education* (Cameron, Ireland, Lussier, New, & Robbins, 2003) articulating my philosophy about authoring management textbooks. Reflecting the philosophy that my coauthor, David Whetten, and I adopted in our text *Developing Management Skills*, I took a stance in that article that reflects my own bias about teaching in my management, leadership, change, and organizational behavior classes. This is admittedly a restricted, maybe even narrow-minded, viewpoint and is heavily biased by the approach to teaching reinforced in my own institution. It summarizes my philosophy about the responsibility of professors to develop a teachable point of view:

Management [professors] ... should take seriously their roles as scientists and scholars when disseminating information upon which students will base their own knowledge and judgments of the field, not to mention their practice when they find themselves in managerial roles. [Professors] have an obligation to make valid and reliable information accessible to students. That said, I do make a distinction between content and style, or between substance and pedagogy. . . . Couching valid and reliable knowledge in case studies, exercises, or parables is perfectly acceptable so long as the scholarly basis for the prescriptions or the management principles being espoused is clear. . . . [Teaching] may be entertaining, in other words, and may contain stories, anecdotes, and propaganda, but the knowledge base upon which these stylistic features are based must be scholarly research. (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 741)

This paragraph sets a standard that I try to follow in my own teaching. It highlights five criteria I try to apply in my role as a professor in courses with undergraduates, MBAs, executive MBAs, and executive education participants.

**VALIDITY**

First, I believe that professors must maintain integrity and credibility. This means that the content we profess should have empirical validity. Evidence must exist that what I am teaching is authentic and accurate. This means that I don’t usually teach material taken from some recent airport
paperback book or the latest fad that has captured the attention of popular consultants. This doesn’t mean that I directly teach from academic journal articles or that I ignore the fads that come and go in the field of management. I try to stay up to date and relevant, but I care a lot about validity, credibility, and integrity. If I teach, for example, that compassion among employees produces higher organizational performance than do inconsiderate employees, I am obligated to know the empirical evidence that supports my claim. I try to be careful about the definition of the concepts I teach (e.g., I must be clear about the precise definition of compassion in organizations—Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002) and cognizant of the evidence that confirms the relationships that I claim to be true.

**EXPLANATION**

A second criterion for my teaching is that a theory must exist to explain the principles or prescriptions that I teach. It can’t be magic thinking. There must be an understandable theory or rationale for why the relationships being explained or the principles being espoused produce results. Using the example above, I must be able to explain why compassion in organizations is more productive than the norm in addition to merely claiming that it is. This is a difficult challenge for me, and I have wonderful colleagues at my school who continually push me to make sure that this criterion is in place. The competing values framework (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Cameron, Quinn, DeGraff, & Thakor, 2006) and the abundance framework (Cameron & Lavine, 2006) have been developed as a result of the urging I have experienced from my colleagues to conform to this criterion.

**UTILITY**

Third, and this is admittedly difficult for newly appointed teachers, I must have applied, or seen someone else successfully apply, what I teach. In other words, what I teach needs to have practical utility. This kind of experienced-based knowledge, of course, emerges over time. It comes from consulting assignments, research projects inside organizations, interviews with practicing managers, reading or writing of case studies, and involvement in executive education. This implies that one who aspires to profess must, over time, actively engage in what is being taught. Developing a teachable point of view is a conscious choice, in other words, and emerges from application, intervention, and experimentation. I am currently assisting the president of a university and the CEO of a major corporation, for example, who want to apply some principles that I have taught in their organizations. I am more conscious of what I can and cannot profess when the stakes for failure are high in the real world.
OWNERSHIP

The fourth criterion flows out of the third and from my search for practical utility. I have learned that I cannot teach someone else’s material. I have to make it my own. Periodically, I have been asked, for example, to “teach Bob Quinn’s material” or to “cover what Karl Weick covered.” I have discovered that I cannot effectively do that. This does not mean that I teach only my own research or that I never refer to Quinn’s or Weick’s work. It also does not mean that I avoid team-teaching situations where more than one instructor coordinates material and several of us teach separate sections of the same course. Rather, I have learned, sometimes painfully, that if the material does not become mine, I simply cannot teach it very well. Becoming mine means that I have to possess my own stories, examples, and personal experiences with the material. It has to resonate with me, and I have to be able to tell a personal story—which may include examples of other people or organizations that I know—where the material has become personally relevant. This is a difficult standard to achieve, but I think it helps distinguish between times I have succeeded as a professor and times I have not. It also is inherently part of my definition of developing a teachable point of view.

ABUNDANCE

My fifth criterion related to professing is perhaps the most controversial and requires the most explanation and illustration. It is purely idiosyncratic and is probably inconsistent with the most popular approaches to management education. It also represents a relatively recent discovery for me. Although I, like most instructors, have enjoyed encouraging students to struggle with problems and difficult dilemmas—which are typically presented in Harvard-type case studies, where students analyze the issues, identify alternatives, evaluate options, and make recommendations regarding an optimal solution—I have recently begun to alter the core content of what I teach. I have begun to focus on material that uplifts people, creates positive energy, engenders personal and organizational flourishing, and focuses on optimistic perspectives. Although I used to spend a lot of time identifying things that were wrong with a situation—the problems, the challenges, the dangers, the obstacles—I have begun to realize that I am more effective when I place at least equal emphasis on what is right, what is best, what uplifts, and what helps people flourish. This may sound a bit saccharine and syrupy, so let me explain.

One way to illustrate my recent shift in content is to consider Figure 1, which represents a continuum of deviance (see Cameron, 2003). This continuum contains three points—one anchoring the left end (negative deviance), one
The top line of the figure refers to physiological functioning. When it comes to physical health, the large majority of medical research, and almost all of a physician’s time, is spent helping people move from the left point on the continuum (illness) to the middle point (health). The middle point represents an absence of illness or injury, or the normal condition. Much less is known about how to get people from the middle point on the continuum to a state of wellness and vitality. Once people feel well, they usually don’t see a doctor, and few medical scientists study them.

Psychologically, the same phenomenon is typical. More than 95% of psychological research published in the past 50 years has focused on closing the gap between the left point on the continuum and the middle point—that is, focusing on how to overcome depression, anxiety, stress, or emotional difficulties (Seligman, 2002). Little is known about how to get people from a condition of mental and emotional health to a state of flourishing, positive energy, or what’s referred to in psychology as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Even less is known about how to help get organizations to a state of flow.

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<th>Approach:</th>
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<th>Abundance gaps</th>
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Figure 1: A Continuum Illustrating Positive Deviance
In organizations, change is usually motivated by ineffective, inefficient, or unprofitable performance, mistakes, unethical decisions, conflict-ridden or rigid relationships, or problems being encountered—the left side of the deviance continuum. Leaders in organizations are usually astute in diagnosing key challenges, major obstacles, and important difficulties. The manager’s job is usually defined as defining, diagnosing, and overcoming obstacles and closing deficit gaps. Effective managers are typically defined as effective problem solvers.

The gap between the middle of the figure and the right-hand side, however, illustrates an abundance gap—the difference between successful performance and spectacular performance. The organization moves from being profitable, effective, efficient, or reliable in performance, for example, to being extraordinary, flawless, generous, or benevolent. Outcomes produce positive benefit for more than the organization itself, and a condition of abundance makes possible the flourishing and success of others outside the organization as well.

Focusing on abundance gaps leads to change in organizations based on the pursuit of a greater good and an opportunity to achieve positively deviant results. Benefits extend beyond the immediate time frame and beyond the advantage of those directly involved. The results often possess profound purpose because they are connected to important personal values and to the core meaning of the organization. The abundance approach assumes that human flourishing, virtuousness, and the best of the human condition are the outcomes being achieved (see Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003).

These are outcomes that I believe in and care about, so I have begun to give equal time in my classes to abundance phenomena and to an abundance approach to traditional topics (e.g., culture, motivation, leadership, teamwork, change). I base this shift on recent empirical findings that support an abundance perspective.

That is, recent research in the field of positive organizational scholarship has provided evidence that focusing on abundance gaps produces learning and performance outcomes that cannot be achieved by focusing on problems and deficit gaps. For example, one study found that top management teams perform substantially better (i.e., they produce higher levels of productivity, teamwork, employee engagement) when members use from 3 to 5 times as many positive statements as negative statements in their communications (Losada & Heaphy, 2004). A positive statement is supportive, approving, appreciative, or helpful. A negative statement is contradictory, disagreeing, disapproving, or critical. The highest performing organizations in one study of 60 organizations were characterized by a 5 to 1 ratio of positive communication compared to negative communication.

In another study, elementary school students achieved substantially higher math and reading scores, had higher satisfaction levels, and had
lower absenteeism and dropout rates when they had developed a sense of positive efficacy regarding their classmates—that is, when they had confidence in their collective capability to succeed—compared to normal classrooms (Goddard, Hoy, & How, 2003). This sense of positive collective efficacy was more important in predicting student outcomes than race, size of classroom, socioeconomic status, gender, or urban–rural setting.

In still another study, individuals in organizations were rated by colleagues on the basis of the extent to which they “positively energized” other people. A network map was produced—similar to a map in the back of an airline magazine—showing those who were at the hub of a positive energy network and those who were on the periphery (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003). Individuals who were the most positively energizing to others performed substantially better than did normal employees, and they also helped other people perform better by just being around them. Positive energizers affected both their own and others’ performance. Moreover, the highest performing organizations had 3 times more positive energizers than did normal organizations.

In a set of studies of physiological health, life span, resistance to major diseases (e.g., heart attack or cancer), recovery from hospital stays, and immunity to illness, a significant positive relationship was found between positive outcomes and the presence of virtuous conditions in people’s lives—forgiveness, gratitude, loving relationships, the opportunity to demonstrate compassionate service to others, and so on (for references, see Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Heaphy & Dutton, in press). The more people were exposed to or engaged in virtuous experiences, the healthier and more resilient they were physiologically, intellectually, and mentally.

These dynamics have also been found to characterize organizational performance and individual outcomes. A fifth set of studies should be sufficient to make my point. In several investigations of organizations that performed at extraordinarily high levels—sometimes called positively deviant performance, or performance that reached levels well above even the most optimistic expectations (see Cameron, 2003; Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Gittell, Cameron, & Lim, 2006)—these organizations were all engaged in pursuing abundance gaps in addition to, or sometimes rather than, deficit gaps. They institutionalized positive, virtuous, uplifting practices to a substantially greater degree than did normal organizations, and their extraordinary performance was found to be significantly related to positivity. Extraordinary outcomes were significantly associated with abundance dynamics.

My point in recounting these studies is to illustrate my fifth criterion for the content I have begun to include in my teaching. In my experience, teaching students with a balance of material that is positively energizing, uplifting, engendering personal and organizational flourishing, and focusing on optimistic perspectives helps unleash the heliotropic effect in students. In brief, the heliotropic effect is the inclination of all living systems toward
positive energy and away from negative energy—toward that which is life giving and away from that which is life depleting (Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Cooperrider, 1990). When students are exposed to abundance topics, they tend to be more creative, learn faster, and pursue more self-learning than when the majority of the content in class focuses on standard problem-based case studies or experiential exercises (Cameron, 2003).

In my classes, therefore, I often include exercises that engender positive feedback, recognition of admirable qualities, or supportive communication in addition to problem-solving activities. I have students read cases illustrating positive deviance as much as cases illustrating problem solving or difficult challenges. I include the Reflected Best Self instrument (Quinn, Dutton, & Spreitzer, 2004)—focused on individuals’ strengths—as much as 360-type instruments or assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator—focused on weaknesses or styles. We analyze enablers of extraordinary performance or flourishing outcomes as much as resistance to change and obstacles to improvement (e.g., Cameron & Lavine, 2006). I include topics such as virtuousness, positive energy, meaningfulness, and authenticity in my syllabus as well as conflict management, power and influence, resistance to change, and competitive strategy. Traditional topics such as motivation, leadership, or culture are approached from the standard point of abundance indicators as well as more traditional models.

My point is, I have gradually developed a point of view regarding what makes for effective teaching for me and what it means to be a full professor in our discipline. My content criteria may not work for every instructor or in every classroom, but I am becoming more and more convinced that regardless of the subject matter being taught, developing a teachable point of view helps explain differences between those who are fully capable of professing and those who need assistance to know what to profess.

How I Teach

I also have developed some criteria regarding the way in which I teach—that is, a pedagogical approach to professing. As I mentioned above, some wonderful resources are available, including at least a score of academic journals. I would like to share one useful pedagogical approach to teaching that is grounded in empirical work, is based on theory, and has worked for me—and others—in the classroom. It represents one more step that has helped me develop a teachable point of view in my own teaching.

KNOWING–DOING GAPS

This pedagogical approach does not apply to all courses in organizational behavior or management, and it may be too narrowly focused for
some teachers. I apply it in my courses on leadership, change, management skills, and organizational behavior, but in other subject areas it may not be appropriate. It is driven by my own personal bias toward trying to affect the behavior of my students, not merely to enhance their understanding. I sometimes describe this as paying attention not only to the gaps between *not knowing* and *knowing* but also between *knowing* and *doing*. The first gap—*not knowing* and *knowing*—is much easier to close than the second gap—*knowing* and *doing*. I usually establish an objective in my classes to help students close the second gap, that is, to enhance their effectiveness as employees, leaders, partners, parents, or just human beings. My preferred outcomes are behavioral as well as cognitive.

In pursuing this objective, my colleague David Whetten and I have developed a learning approach that has been shown to be especially effective in helping students enhance their behavioral competencies in, particularly, leadership and management (Whetten & Cameron, 2007). This approach is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and it marries the presentation of rigorous conceptual knowledge with opportunities to practice and apply observable behaviors in the classroom. This learning approach, as originally formulated by Bandura (1977), consisted of presenting behavioral principles or action guidelines through traditional instruction methods supplemented by a demonstration of the principles using cases, films, scripts, or incidents. Students are given opportunities to practice the principles through role-plays or exercises, along with receiving feedback from peers, instructors, or experts.

Dave and I have become convinced—based both on personal experience and on several scientific investigations (for references, see Whetten & Cameron, 2007)—that two important modifications are necessary for Bandura’s (1977) learning model to be most effective in management teaching. First, individuals must be aware of their current levels of knowledge and competency and be motivated to improve on those levels. We help students understand what behaviors to improve or build on and why, by including an assessment activity associated with each topic area. Because most people find change uncomfortable and, therefore, avoid taking the risk of developing new behavior patterns, an assessment activity that illuminates strengths and weaknesses helps encourage students to change. Working on weaknesses builds competence, working on strengths builds excellence, so we focus on both areas as a result of the assessment. In my classes, these assessment activities usually take the form of self-evaluation instruments, case studies, or experiential exercises that highlight personal strengths and weaknesses related to a particular management competency area.

Second, we have found that an application component occurring outside the classroom environment also strengthens the Bandura (1977) learning model. Most management teaching takes place in a classroom setting where feedback is immediate and it is relatively safe to try out new behaviors and
make mistakes. Therefore, transferring learning to an actual job setting is often problematic without specific assignments and follow-up. In my classes, application exercises often take the form of an outside-of-class intervention, a consulting assignment, self-analysis through journal writing, a coaching or sponsorship relationship, or a team intervention (in which students try out behaviors in an outside-of-class setting, receive feedback or support for these behavioral experiments, and then analyze the reasons for success or failure).

A FIVE-STEP LEARNING APPROACH

In other words, empirical research confirms that a five-step learning approach is particularly effective in helping individuals develop or improve behavioral competencies, and Figure 2 outlines this approach. Step 1 involves the assessment of current levels of behavioral competency and knowledge of the behavioral principles. I include this step in every topic area that I teach. Students always get some kind of data feedback regarding their understanding, their capability, their strengths, their attitudes, or their style as it relates to the topic we are covering. I always have a comparison database available on which students can compare their scores so that they have access to a standard that helps them interpret and draw implications about their own data. (These instruments range from individual leadership competencies to organizational culture to positive energy networks.)

Step 2 consists of the presentation of validated, scientifically based principles and guidelines for effective performance. In the five content criteria above, I explained the rationale for the principles and guidelines that I include.

Step 3 is a demonstration-and-analysis step in which models or cases are made available to students to examine behavioral principles in real organizational settings. As mentioned above, I include both problem-centered and mistake-ridden examples as well as abundance-centered and positively deviant examples. The intent is twofold—to demonstrate how the behavioral guidelines can be adapted to different personal styles and circumstances so that students can see how things work in a real setting, and to provide examples of when and under what circumstances the principles work and when they don’t.

Step 4 consists of practice exercises in which experimentation can occur and immediate feedback can be received in a relatively safe environment. Students are almost always given a chance to try out, to apply, or to teach certain principles in the safe environment of the classroom. They can receive immediate feedback in a supportive environment, and behavioral experimentation can occur when risks of failure are not high. These activities include role-plays, one-on-one teaching dialogues, team problem solving, and coaching.
Step 5 consists of providing opportunities for students to apply the competencies or the information being taught to a real-life setting outside the classroom. Specific assignments are given to students, and follow-up activities are always included to foster accountability and to stimulate reflection and learning from the application activity.

I try to use the various steps in this learning model in almost every class period, although if class periods are short (I much prefer 3-hour teaching blocks), it becomes very difficult. If not applied in every class period, I always make certain that these five learning activities are designed into my overall course objectives and are covered more than once during a semester class. My intent is to close the knowing–doing gap as well as the not knowing–knowing gap. My teachable point of view includes the objective of affecting students’ behavior in addition to their awareness and understanding.

In sum, having a well-grounded pedagogical approach is, in my view, an important distinguishing feature of those who possess a fully developed teachable point of view and those who require assistance in knowing how to teach. For me, this means always keeping in mind the core objective of my teaching, namely, to affect students’ behavior or foster the development of

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<tr>
<th>Components</th>
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<th>Objectives</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Behavioral assessment</td>
<td>Survey instruments</td>
<td>Assess current level of behavioral competence and knowledge; create readiness to change.</td>
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<td>Role plays</td>
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<td>2. Behavioral learning</td>
<td>Written text</td>
<td>Teach correct principles and present a rationale for behavioral guidelines.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Behavioral guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Behavioral analysis</td>
<td>Cases</td>
<td>Provide examples of appropriate and inappropriate performance. Analyze behavioral principles and reasons they work.</td>
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<td>Demonstrations</td>
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<td>Simulations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Role plays</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Skill application</td>
<td>Assignments (behavioral and written)</td>
<td>Transfer classroom learning to real-life situations. Foster ongoing personal development.</td>
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Figure 2: An Approach to Behavioral Competency Improvement
competencies. The pedagogical methods I have chosen to pursue in my teaching, therefore, are aimed at most effectively accomplishing that objective.

Summary

What I am trying to suggest is that, over time, most faculty members in management and organizational behavior departments can, and should, develop into full professors. This means that the content and methodology used in teaching is a product of careful consideration, personal application, and conscious choice. Developing a teachable point of view is the indicator that a teacher has reached this stage of teaching competency. Such development takes time, of course, and almost no one begins his or her career having developed a teachable point of view or being able to fully profess. Moreover, the process is an ongoing one inasmuch as circumstances constantly change and evolve, and the challenge of fully professing requires constant updating and constant personal application. The title of full professor is not a stable state but is a process of constantly renewing and refreshing one’s teachable point of view. In the end, however, our students will be deeply affected as we develop the ability to become fully engaged and deeply affected by what we teach and how we teach it.

Notes

1. I think that this distinction among assistant, associate, and full professors was first discussed many years ago by my friend David Whetten.
2. Some syllabi of organizational behavior courses that have been designed with a positive bias or an abundance approach can be found on the Positive Organizational Scholarship Web site, http://www.bus.umich.edu/positive.
3. Research has been conducted in which this learning approach was compared to a variety of other learning approaches in management and leadership classes. The results found that this learning model produces results superior to those based on more traditional lecture, discussion, case method approaches. That is, to approach teaching in a systematic way—with the objective of enhancing the development or improvement of behavioral competencies and cognitive understanding and to pursue that objective in a systematic way, based on a proven learning model—has proven to be very effective. This learning approach produced longer lasting retention, greater ability to apply, and higher cognitive test scores than did other teaching methods that primarily relied on a single approach to teaching—for example, case studies, experiential exercises, or lecture-discussion methods (references can be found in the introductory chapter in Whetten & Cameron, 2007).

References
