

## EDITORS' COMMENTS: SENSE AND STRUCTURE—THE CORE BUILDING BLOCKS OF AN AMR ARTICLE

"There's more than one way to skin a cat," the old saying goes.<sup>1</sup> Even as we write that, we're imagining coming across a future conceptual exploration of the subject, perhaps in an academic journal devoted to all manner of cat studies. We note the title of this imagined article—something like, "Equifinality in feline pelt removal: A critical examination"—and begin reading. The authors invite the reader in by laying out a noncontroversial starting point. We nod our heads in agreement with the authors as they describe the *common ground*. Yes, cats can be skinned in different ways. That's intuitive, and the authors emphasize the common wisdom of that idea by describing how it has been developed in the academic literature. But, after establishing that common ground with the reader, the authors proceed to throw in a *complication*. They say, "Although that idea about cat skinning is taken for granted, little thought is given to what good it would do you or your cat to separate it from its outer covering." Aha; now we're intrigued. We're beginning to imagine how little utility—and compassion—there would be in a skinless cat, and feel further drawn into the story.

The authors proceed to point out why the complication they've raised is of concern. They note that the cat skinning literature, with its increasing emphasis on process over outcome, has become divorced from the real-world considerations of people and cats. The authors have now set the table; the reader is primed and ready to learn the authors' *course of action*—how they plan to solve the important complication they've introduced. The authors then describe that course of action, which involves developing criteria for assessing different approaches to cat skinning and for deciding how and why cat skinning would even be called for. Finally, the authors give us well-reasoned arguments about how their approach, which ultimately throws into doubt the whole idea of cat skinning equifinality, is an important *contribution* to the literature.

<sup>1</sup> No cats (or catfish, to which the idiom actually refers) were harmed in the making of this article.

We close our imagined article and note to ourselves how it featured the five core building blocks that we recognize in virtually all *AMR* articles. We have alliteratively named them—common ground, complication, concern, course of action, and contribution—and will elaborate on them below. We call these the core building blocks, because, simply stated, an *AMR* article, or any quality scholarly article in our field, cannot be complete without them. In making that contention, we note it is not an idea original to us. Rather, we are drawing on work by Davis (1971), Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997), Huff (1999), Minto (2002), and Grant and Pollock (2011), among others, who have talked about how academic writers must find a starting point that will be understandable and agreeable to the reader, and then proceed to challenge the reader's thoughts and assumptions. What we can offer here is a distillation of these ideas and an application of them to effective writing in *AMR*.

We start by providing further explanation of the five core building blocks. We then discuss how those building blocks fit into the structural elements of an article. Following that, we illustrate the building blocks in action in a set of exemplary *AMR* articles. We conclude by describing some ways in which these building blocks could be useful for authors submitting to, or reviewing for, *AMR* or another academic journal.

### THE FIVE CORE BUILDING BLOCKS

Management theory development can seem daunting, both hard to write and hard to structure. Authors may find it difficult to know where to start—or, once started, how to proceed—feeling that the seemingly boundless possibilities for developing arguments and structuring an article make choosing one approach difficult. Yet the experienced and successful writer recognizes that there really is only one way to skin a cat. An *AMR* article must establish all five of the core building blocks in a convincing and compelling way. These building blocks will appear in an abridged form in the article's abstract, in an enticing way in the article's introduction, and in

a fully elaborated way in the article's theory development.

### Common Ground

Davis wrote, "All social theories which are found interesting involve a certain movement of the mind of the audience who finds them so" (1971: 342). To move the mind of your readers, you'll need their interest and tacit consent. Now, if you are setting about moving something, you should know not only where that something is being moved to but also where it is currently located. It follows that you should describe that current location to your readers in such a way that they will concur with you. If you fail to get your readers nodding their heads in agreement with you initially—if you cannot establish *common ground* with your readers—it is likely they will dismiss your work as untethered to reality or simply find it irrelevant to anything they can relate to or wish to read more about (Davis, 1971; Minto, 2002).

Huff (1999) employed the very useful metaphor of joining a conversation when she described establishing common ground with readers. We build on this metaphor by visualizing entering a conference room in the midst of an academic discussion. The discussion could be heated and contentious, or there could be a relatively high level of agreement in the room. It could be that there are multiple discussions related to the same subject going on within subgroups in the room, yet the subgroups are not interacting with each other. You (the aspiring author) have entered the room with your readers. Your initial task is to orient the readers to the discussion in a way that is accessible to them and relevant to their interests. If it so happens that a reader is one of the parties actively engaged in the discussion, your job remains the same—orient, don't alienate, the reader.

In the process of establishing common ground with your readers, you identify the primary literature you are contributing to and communicate your knowledge of that literature. Common ground means that you have laid out the basic assumptions, boundary conditions, and prescriptions of the literature, forming an agreeable starting point with your readers that gives them confidence you are a reliable guide. Common ground means not only that you have convinced the readers that you have brought in the relevant citations and areas of the literature but also that you have synthesized and presented that literature with accuracy and

efficiency. Once you have established a common ground with your readers, you can then illuminate the limitations—or complications—of the current conversation.

### Complication

By now you've entered our metaphorical conference room, and you've oriented your readers to the nature and nuances of the academic discussion you wish to join. But how do you join the conversation? How do you pique the interest of those involved? How do you get them to turn to you and listen to what you have to add? You do all of that by pointing out to your readers some kind of *complication* to the common ground that you've already established (Minto, 2002). The complication will be a problem, puzzle, or twist in the ongoing academic conversation. Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997: 1040) referred to this task as "problematizing the situation" and described your options as identifying how the current academic conversation is inadequate or incomplete. Davis (1971) described this task in terms of challenging the assumptions of your readers and presented his "Index of the Interesting" (1971: 313) as a guide for doing so. Practical examples from the world of management and organizations can also help you make your point. Whatever your approach, if you are able to introduce a compelling complication, you will inspire your readers to continue following the story you are laying out. As Grant and Pollock (2011) pointed out, your readers will not be inspired if you are too tentative in challenging their assumptions, but your readers also are likely to be turned off by a scorched-earth attempt to overthrow their assumption base.

In the process of identifying a complication to the current academic discussion, you expose its limitations. You capture your readers' attention and direct their interest to some missing element or failure in the literature. To do so successfully, you must negotiate the trade-off between novelty and incrementalism. The greater the complication's novelty, the less anchored it may be to the current literature and the more challenging it may be for your readers to understand and accept. In contrast, a more incremental complication may strike your readers as trite and mundane. It follows that after introducing a complication, you must then make a compelling case to your readers that the complication is of concern—that it is important.

## Concern

Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) and Grant and Pollock (2011) joined many others in noting that simply pointing out a gap in the literature—that something has gone unstudied—is insufficient in motivating a study unless you are able to explain to your readers why the gap matters. Whatever complication you have identified in the literature, you must convince the readers that the complication is of *concern*. That need for a compelling explanation of the complication's importance is a high hurdle, since inconsistencies, contradictions, and missing pieces are often relatively easy to identify in academic literature but readers may judge attention to these kinds of gaps as trivial, pedantic, or simply needless.

Again, imagine that you are standing in our metaphorical conference room appealing to the very scholars engaged in the discussion and that you are attempting to convince them you have an important point. Your readers must believe in the relevance of the complication you have raised to issues they are concerned about. If you describe shortcomings in the literature, such as how the literature is incoherent, misleading, contradictory, or incomplete, you must further describe how and why those shortcomings matter. For the purposes of *AMR* in particular, how do those shortcomings limit our theoretical and practical understanding of organizations and management?

In the process of explaining to your readers why the complication is of concern, you justify your search for a solution. When your readers are truly convinced that the complication matters, they will be eager to learn what you intend to do about it. Thus, having established common ground with your readers, shown them the complication to that common ground, and convinced them why the complication is of concern, you have set the stage for introducing your unique contribution to the literature—your course of action.

## Course of Action

Your job, in describing your *course of action*, is to explain to your readers how you will be addressing and resolving your paper's central complication. For the purposes of an *AMR* paper, how will you be developing or refining theory? Will it involve explicating new constructs, modeling relationships among constructs, exploring

a theoretical process, or developing a typology? Will you be laying out argumentation challenging dominant theory? Will you be synthesizing existing theoretical perspectives to shed new light on a problem? Will you otherwise be identifying a novel approach to the theoretical topic?

Clearly, there are different paths to theory development and refinement. Our purpose here is not to describe those different paths in detail, since that subject has received a great deal of attention elsewhere. (See, for example, Cornelissen's [2017] recent article on the "challenges of writing theory without a boilerplate" and the other articles cited on the *AMR* Theory Building Resources page at <http://aom.org/Publications/AMR/Theory-Building-Resources.aspx>.) Instead, our purpose is to point out that you will need to identify and explain your chosen path.

In the process of laying out the paper's course of action, you work to convince your readers that the course of action is both relevant and effective. To be convincing, the logic in the course of action must be tight, well explained, and clearly directed at the central complication of the paper. Naturally, the course of action building block is the heart of the paper, but it is a building block that is interdependent with, and cannot be effective without, the four other building blocks. Having described a convincing solution to a compelling complication, you will now be in the position to highlight how the paper has influenced the academic conversation—how it makes a valuable contribution to the literature.

## Contribution

Returning to our metaphorical conference room, you now are at the table—your ideas are now part of the ongoing conversation—but it is up to you to describe to your readers how and why that is so. This entails explaining how your work will shape or change the conversation—how it makes a distinct *contribution*. This doesn't mean that you should exaggerate or puff up your contribution to the literature. Doing so will undermine your credibility with your readers. Rather, your job now is to highlight the ways in which your work may create "a certain movement of the mind of the audience" (Davis, 1971: 342). How might your work influence how prior literature is interpreted and understood? How might your work influence the trajectory of related scholarship?

In the process of describing the paper's contribution, you work to explain to the readers how the ideas in the paper are novel and meaningful, and how they take the readers beyond what they think they know from received theory. Ideally, you will describe in a convincing way how the paper may lead to further theoretical exploration and empirical investigation, as well as to insights that will influence practice in organizations and management. It is only by being effective with the other four building blocks—common ground, complication, concern, and course of action—that you will be able to make this convincing culminating argument about contribution.

As you can see from our description of the five core building blocks, their explication is intertwined with a paper's structure. Whereas the building blocks are *not* structure, a paper's structure should complement and convey the building blocks in a logical way. Below we outline this relationship.

### STRUCTURING THE CORE BUILDING BLOCKS

The five core building blocks, as we described above, are common ground, complication, concern, course of action, and contribution. These represent the content of your paper, and they typically follow a logical sequence reflected in your paper's structure. As you design your paper, you should consider how the structure incorporates the building blocks and facilitates communication of them to the reader.

Two of the structural elements of your paper, the abstract and the paper's introduction, should contain all five building blocks. The abstract should therefore convey the state of the literature (what we know), the literature's limitations (what puzzle exists), the importance of those limitations, your intended solution, and the value you are adding to the literature with your solution. Space in the abstract is limited (about 200 words), so you will necessarily have to deliver the building blocks in an abridged fashion. The introduction, at about three to four pages, mimics the abstract but describes each of the five building blocks in a more elaborated way.<sup>2</sup> You can even think of the building blocks as you are coming up with a title

for your paper. A catchy title that highlights more than one of the building blocks will help convey the nature of your paper to prospective readers. The structural signposts in your paper, including headings and figure/table labels, will help you further orient your readers to how you are explaining the building blocks.

In the body of the paper, you will elaborate on the common ground, complication, and concern that you mentioned in the introduction. For example, in the second section of the paper, which typically spans about five to seven pages, you could elaborate on the common ground, or what we know from the received literature. This could include a review of the relevant literature, a description of your context, and an explanation of any boundary conditions or assumptions for your arguments. Keep in mind that typical *AMR* papers involve a theoretical synthesis of a given body of literature, not just a basic descriptive review. That is, your literature review should be a means to an end. It is not feasible to review all the received literature in the space you have available, so you must focus on those areas of the literature that speak directly to your research question and core audience. Use your literature review to show how your theoretical contributions begin at the point where the literature falls short.

You could end the second section by highlighting the complication and concern—that is, by explaining the limitations of the current literature and their importance. You then can foreshadow the remainder of the paper, which will entail your course of action and contribution. Have a figure that's a roadmap? The end of section two can be a good place to insert it.

You then can use the rest of the body of the paper, about ten to fifteen pages, to develop that course of action and how it represents a unique and valuable contribution to the literature. The paper's final section, the discussion section, can be devoted to elaborating on the contribution of the paper. A useful way to structure your discussion is to offer an opening summary paragraph that reflects the key contributions you laid out in the introduction. You can then elaborate on each of these contributions in a separate subsection, followed by a section on practical implications of your theory, as well as any limitations and future research directions. For an initial submission, we suggest a discussion section of about three to five pages. Taken together, then, an initial submission should be about thirty pages, with an abstract on

<sup>2</sup> We recommend these page lengths based on our experience as authors, reviewers, and editors, as well as the information on the *AMR* website. They are not written in stone but may be useful to you as general guidelines.

page 1, an introduction ending by page 5, the second section ending by page 10 or 12, the core of your theoretical development reaching page 25, and the discussion culminating about page 30.

As we mentioned above, theoretical contributions come in many forms (see Cornelissen, 2017), but all of them reflect the five building blocks, conveyed and highlighted through the paper's complementary structure. In practical terms, a reader should be able to read your title, section headings, propositions (where applicable), and figures/tables and have a good understanding of what your paper is about, how you are extending the current literature, and what your key contributions are. Each of the major parts of your paper should then reflect the relevant building blocks.

In our final section we look at a set of exemplary articles that emphasize the value and complementary nature of an article's five building blocks and related structure.

### SENSE AND STRUCTURE: THE CORE BUILDING BLOCKS IN ACTION

To illustrate how authors employ and structure the five core building blocks, we set out to identify them in a select set of *AMR* articles. We decided to focus on the winners of the annual *AMR* Best Article Award since they have been judged as exemplars, but the building blocks will be evident in virtually all *AMR* articles. We looked at the Best Article winners from each of the past five years (i.e., Mainemelis, 2010; Sitkin, See, Miller, Lawless, & Carton, 2011; Afuah & Tucci, 2012; Ashcraft, 2013; Furnari, 2014), particularly the articles' introductions (the text following the abstract and preceding the first major heading).

#### "Stealing Fire: Creative Deviance in the Evolution of New Ideas" (Mainemelis, 2010)

**Common ground.** In the first sentence of this article, Mainemelis works to establish non-controversial common ground with the reader: "In recent decades organizational science has witnessed a proliferation of research on workplace creativity and workplace deviance" (2010: 558). As we read on, the author makes clear what he means by the terms *workplace creativity* and *workplace deviance*, and he distinguishes between the two. Mainemelis explains that the relationship between the two constructs hasn't received a lot of research attention, but there has

been some preliminary consideration of how tolerance for nonconformity could be positively associated with creativity. In his short opening paragraph he has set the stage for the complication.

**Complication.** The complication, then, is that the academic discussions on deviance and creativity are largely taking place separately, even though those discussions are highly relevant to each other.

**Concern.** Is that complication a trivial "gap" in the literature? Mainemelis builds the case that it is much more than that—this lack of interplay between the deviance and creativity discussions ignores how often and importantly those constructs are interrelated in the real world. To make that case, he touches on five different empirical examples, all described within a reasonably short second paragraph of the article.

**Course of action.** Mainemelis is now ready to describe the solution that he will develop in the article. In these next few sentences he transitions from explaining the complication to introducing the course of action, which he then describes further in about four paragraphs:

The evolution of new ideas often entails a dynamic transition: when first proposed, new ideas are often rejected because they are perceived as weird, inappropriate, unworkable, or too risky, but these same ideas may later result in an outcome that the social context accepts as useful and breakthrough (Staw, 1995). The five cases I list above suggest that deviance—specifically, the violation of a managerial order to stop working on a new idea—plays a role in that transition. In this article I refer to this individual-level nonconforming behavior as *creative deviance*, and I propose a theory about its general rate in organizational contexts (Mainemelis, 2010: 558–559).

**Contribution.** Concluding the introduction, Mainemelis lays out quickly but effectively how this work is apt to change the scholarly conversation. He does this by describing the implications of his theory development:

I argue that the organizational conditions that creativity research has long portrayed as stimulants of creativity induce structural strain, which, in turn, increases the rate of creative deviance. In addition, I argue that when the organization places a relatively higher emphasis on creativity than on conformity to orders, it is likely to employ selective, inconsistent, and dissociative normative enforcement, which regulates (maintains up to a desirable degree) the rate of creative deviance. I suggest that creative deviance mitigates some of the tensions of the social structure in which it occurs, fosters the

evolution of radical new ideas, and allows the organization to respond in a flexible manner to the inherent uncertainty that both creativity and deviance entail (Mainemelis, 2010: 560).

**“The Paradox of Stretch Goals: Organizations in Pursuit of the Seemingly Impossible” (Sitkin, See, Miller, Lawless, & Carton, 2011)**

**Common ground.** Sitkin et al. start this article by refreshing the reader on the tension between exploration and exploitation in organizations. “An organization can ensure continued survival only by performing well in the near term while positioning itself for strong performance in an uncertain future” (2011: 544). The reader can easily agree with the authors when they point out that exploration is crucial for the health and survival of an organization, but for a number of reasons, exploration is often crowded out by pressures for exploitation. Sitkin et al. go on to describe some approaches that organization theorists have proposed for promoting organizational exploration and then focus on how the pursuit of “stretch goals”—goals that are seemingly impossible—can stimulate exploratory learning in organizations.

**Complication.** Having used the majority of the article’s introduction to lay out the above common ground, Sitkin et al. then proceed to efficiently introduce the complication in a few provocative questions about stretch goals. The complication is that it isn’t yet clear whether and why stretch goals could “increase learning or performance in some circumstances but decrease them in others” (2011: 546), and it isn’t clear if the organizations likely to pursue stretch goals will be the ones most likely to benefit from them.

**Concern.** Although the building blocks often appear in articles in somewhat linear progression, this article represents a good illustration of how they can be presented otherwise. Here discussion of the value of addressing the complication actually precedes the introduction of the complication, since Sitkin et al. have interwoven concern and common ground. The reader joins the conversation understanding not just that exploration and exploitation are in tension, and not just that stretch goals can help resolve that tension, but also that exploration efforts (and, thus, stretch goals) are critical to the success and survival of the organization.

**Course of action.** Sitkin et al. conclude the introduction by describing their course of action

briefly and efficiently. That course of action includes defining stretch goals, examining “the underlying cognitive, affective, and behavioral mechanisms through which stretch goals might positively or negatively influence organizational learning and performance outcomes,” formulating “propositions around recent performance and slack resources as the key contingency factors determining when stretch goals will facilitate versus disrupt learning and performance,” and offering “propositions concerning how these same contingency factors also determine the likelihood that an organization will be drawn to using stretch goals” (2011: 546).

**Contribution.** Again, shaking up the linear progression of the building blocks, in this article the explanation of the contribution precedes the description of the course of action. In one paragraph Sitkin et al. lay out how their work will make a number of contributions to the literature, including providing new insights about the relationships between stretch goals and crucial organizational processes and outcomes, such as exploration of new practices, risk taking, learning under conditions of ambiguous feedback, and developing dynamic capabilities. As Sitkin et al. list the contributions of the study, they highlight a key implication of their study: “We suggest that as goals become extreme, there are complex yet predictable organizational effects that are likely to be negative except under a limited set of specifiable circumstances” (2011: 546).

**“Crowdsourcing As a Solution to Distant Search” (Afuah & Tucci, 2012)**

**Common ground.** *Crowdsourcing*, the central construct in this article, is a term that, according to the article’s introduction, was coined only about ten years ago (although the idea behind the term has existed and been in practice for centuries). To establish common ground with the reader—to give the reader an accessible entry point to the conversation—Afuah and Tucci provide a clear definition of the construct and some of its variants. The authors further build the common ground by offering a number of examples, both contemporary and historical, of how crowdsourcing has appeared in practice.

**Complication.** As a result of the common ground work, the reader understands that crowdsourcing is a type of outsourcing by the firm for the purpose of problem solving. Crowdsourcing stands in

contrast both to the firm doing the problem solving itself and to the firm outsourcing the problem solving to a non-crowd (to a designated agent). The complication is that the literature provides no clear answer as to why crowdsourcing would be a better mechanism for problem solving than the alternatives.

**Concern.** As in the Sitkin et al. (2011) article that we discussed above, Afuah and Tucci interweave the value of addressing the complication—the concern building block—with their introduction of the common ground. They do this through their use of examples, illustrating the effectiveness of crowdsourcing. One example they give is of Facebook's need to translate internet content from English into other languages: "It turned to the public. A crowd of translators worked together on the translation and completed it for Facebook in record time—from English to French in a few days, from English to Spanish in two weeks, and so on" (2012: 355). The implication of this and the other examples is that crowdsourcing can be a very effective means of organizational problem solving, and it is therefore important to understand the conditions that allow it to be so effective.

**Course of action.** To make the case for their chosen course of action, Afuah and Tucci first explain why transaction cost economics, a predominant theory for understanding insourcing versus outsourcing decisions, is not satisfactory for the question of when and why crowdsourcing will be effective. Afuah and Tucci instead draw on the behavioral and evolutionary theories of the firm. They write, "In particular, we argue that under certain circumstances crowdsourcing transforms distant search into local search, thereby enabling firms to enjoy the many benefits of distant search without having to endure many of its costs" (2012: 356).

**Contribution.** Afuah and Tucci wrap up their introduction by describing the promise of the article—that the reader will gain an understanding of when solutions require distant search, and therefore when crowdsourcing will be a superior mechanism relative to insourcing or designated contracting:

Specifically, the probability a focal agent (individual, group, or organization) will use crowdsourcing to solve a problem is high when (1) the problem is easy to delineate and broadcast to the crowd, (2) the knowledge required to solve the problem falls outside the focal agent's knowledge

neighborhood (requires distant search), (3) the crowd is large, with some members of the crowd motivated and knowledgeable enough to self-select and solve the problem, (4) the final solution is easy to evaluate and integrate into the focal agent's value chain, and (5) information technologies are low cost and pervasive in the environment that includes the focal agent and the crowd (Afuah & Tucci, 2012: 356).

### "The Glass Slipper: 'Incorporating' Occupational Identity in Management Studies" (Ashcraft, 2013)

**Common ground.** The introduction in this particular article is the shortest of the five articles we are examining, taking up only four paragraphs. Yet it is not surprising that the five core building blocks are clearly identifiable and introduced with efficiency. That starts with the common ground, delivered essentially in the first three sentences of the article:

Management scholars have long split the study of work and diversity, based on the assumption that it is reasonable for "mainstream" research on the nature of work to proceed apart from "diversity" research on the allocation of social groups to certain lines of work (Ridgeway & Correll, 2000; Weeden, 2002). Although scholars in both areas acknowledge such phenomena as gender- and race-segregated occupations, we regard these as the purview of diversity studies. Meanwhile, we assume that the content, value, practice, and administration of work have little to do with issues like race or gender (Ashcraft, 2013: 6).

**Complication.** Ashcraft then argues that management scholars are not recognizing important evidence from other bodies of literature that contradicts that common ground. The complication, then, is that "it is not tenable to theorize work and diversity separately because we judge the nature of work by the gender and race of associated practitioners" (2013: 6).

**Concern.** Ashcraft then immediately addresses why the complication should be of concern to the reader:

Theories of phenomena in which we take keen interest—such as professional identity and professionalization; contemporary work practices; work meaningfulness; recruitment, hiring, and promotion; occupational prestige; wage differentials and the distribution of wealth; and the diversification of occupations and organizations—may reflect serious distortions based on the erroneous assumption that so-called diversity issues play a peripheral, rather than constitutive, role in the organization of work (Ashcraft, 2013: 6).

**Course of action.** The course of action proposed by Ashcraft is to foster a “bilateral view” (that people derive identity from work *and* that work derives identity from associated people). She writes that she will theorize “the glass slipper—a metaphor that encapsulates how occupations come to appear, by nature, possessed of central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics that make them suited to certain people and implausible for others” (2013: 7).

**Contribution.** Finally, Ashcraft highlights how her theorizing will influence the literature. In particular, she writes that “the glass slipper exposes systematic forms of advantage and disadvantage, in this case stemming from alignment between occupations and social identities” (2013: 7).

### “Interstitial Spaces: Microinteraction Settings and the Genesis of New Practices Between Institutional Fields” (Furnari, 2014)

**Common ground.** In this article Furnari establishes a noncontroversial starting point with the reader by describing the early days of the computer industry in Silicon Valley:

Small-scale settings hosted informal, occasional interactions between people from distant institutional fields, such as hippie anti-war activists and “serious engineering types,” becoming “perhaps the oddest of cultural and technical intersections” (Markoff, 2004: 265). New practices emerged from these apparently inconsequential “interstitial spaces” between fields, bearing the “imprinting” (Stinchcombe, 1965) of the early-stage moments in which different cultures first met in these transitory settings. . . . Such situated microinteraction dynamics, and their important effects on the genesis of new practices, are not unique to the high-tech world but characterize several important phenomena at the intersection of fields (2014: 439)

**Complication.** Furnari then describes the complication to this common ground, which is that we don’t know much about these “early-stage, transitional periods when ‘the possibility of a new practice first emerges and is recognized as an opportunity for some social groups’ (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007: 994)” (2014: 440). And there hasn’t been a lot of research attention to “transitional *situations* in which actors from different fields interact, and to how these situated microinteractions between fields

can affect the emergence of new practices” (2014: 440).

**Concern.** Furnari describes how the complication is of concern, since the initial early-stage transitional periods “turn out to be fundamental in explaining how new practices emerge,” and the “genesis of new practices has remained relatively undertheorized in institutional research” (2014: 440). Furnari argues further that taking the

microinteractions into account is important because, ultimately, it is through situated interactions that institutions acquire their “local force and significance” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006: 213), shaping how meanings are encoded into practices “on the ground” (McPherson & Sauder, 2013: 2; see also Binder, 2007, and Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006) (Furnari, 2014: 440).

**Course of action.** Having established the common ground along with the complication and its importance, Furnari next lays out his course of action. He will investigate the research question, “How do situated microinteractions between individuals positioned in different institutional fields affect the genesis of new practices?” (2014: 440).

To understand how new practices can emerge in interstitial spaces, I develop a model linking the features of these interaction settings, the microinteraction dynamics that can occur in them, and the genesis of new practices. Specifically, I illustrate how the three defining features of these settings facilitate the individuals interacting in them to temporarily break free from existing institutions and experiment collectively with new activities and ideas, which can, in turn, constitute new practices (Furnari, 2014: 441).

**Contribution.** Furnari concludes the article’s introduction by highlighting three ways the article contributes to the literature, including extending research on positions between fields, contributing to research on microlevel processes of practice emergence, and adding to the stream of research on microfoundations of institutional theory.

Incidentally, in *AMR*’s new video library, you can watch Furnari talking about the process of writing his article (<http://aom.org/videos/amr/>).

### FINAL THOUGHTS ON HOW YOU MIGHT USE THIS FRAMEWORK

We have deliberately presented this framework simply, at the risk of seeming too derivative of the more nuanced writing advice given by others. Yet we think the simple nature of the five core



building blocks framework can make it easy to remember and valuable to employ. Here are four occasions when you might find it useful to think in terms of the core building blocks.

### Idea Finding

How does a prospective *AMR* writer come up with a great idea? We expect that the worst way to do so is to sit in front of a blank computer screen, with the cursor blinking at you incessantly, while your mind searches for some way you can start writing and make a contribution. Instead, we suggest you might have more success and enjoyment in your quest if you follow the five core building blocks as a linear guide. The *common ground* and *complication* building blocks require you to immerse yourself in a body of literature of interest. You must become an expert on the nature and nuances of a particular academic discussion. By doing so you'll start to get a sense of the gaps. What problems, puzzles, or twists in the ongoing academic conversation become evident? Further, why are they of concern? What is possibly incoherent, misleading, contradictory, or incomplete about the literature, and how do those shortcomings distort or impede our theoretical understanding of organizations and management? How is current theory or the current literature limited in its practical relevance to and prescriptions for the real world of management and organizations?

By being clear on the problem you are trying to solve, you can then move on to your solution, to your *course of action*, and you can create it with an eye toward the *contribution* you will be making. How will your paper influence the academic conversation? This linear approach to idea finding is in contrast to what we would call the backward approach: thinking up a cool solution and then trying to figure out a problem that it might address. Whereas scholars may use the latter approach successfully, we see it as riskier than an approach rooted in common ground and complication.

### Writing for Scholarly Publication

In writing the actual article, you likely will fail if you miss one of the five core building blocks. While reviewing *AMR* papers in the past, and in our current roles at associate editors, we have constantly noted that authors fall short on one or

more of these basic points. We recommend that as an exercise in paper development, you deliberately write out answers to the five core building blocks, as if they were questions. Much of your paper development work will entail thinking about, writing, and repeatedly refining those answers. When you have them all well thought out, you can condense them into a paper abstract, write them enticingly in the introduction, and develop them in a fully elaborated way as you craft your complete paper. Of course, a caveat is that even if you think your five building blocks are in place and coherently connected, *AMR* reviewers may not find that you have made a persuasive argument on your issue of concern. Our point is that a focus on the building blocks will help you be successful but cannot ensure your success in the difficult endeavor of theory writing.<sup>3</sup>

### Reviewing for Scholarly Journals and Conferences

We find that the core building blocks can be a valuable tool to organize our thinking when reviewing others' work. We ask the following: Did the author present the five core building blocks in a compelling way? Did we enjoy a clear systematic orientation to the pertinent academic discussion? Were we then intrigued by the author's challenge to that discussion? Did the author convince us that the challenge is nontrivial and requires resolution? Did the author offer a well-thought-out plan of action and make a compelling case that it resolves the paper's central conflict? Did the author convince us that the paper is likely to influence the academic discussion in a meaningful way?

We would typically refrain from talking about the building blocks per se in our reviews, since that might seem overly schoolmasterish. But we think it is important to give comprehensive and constructive feedback on their content to authors. We would remark on how well the authors did, or on how a paper might need improvement, on one or more of those basic points—doing so in

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<sup>3</sup> We remind readers that *AMR* papers must make a clear theoretical contribution that builds on the existing literature. Manuscripts need to account for received theory and research while also offering a novel perspective that sheds new light on the focal phenomenon and guides future research. The paper must be grounded in an appropriate set of assumptions with clear boundary conditions, and it also needs to offer a coherent and consistent set of arguments (<http://aom.org/amr/>).

a developmental way to help authors address these issues.

### Reading and Remembering the Literature

A fourth possible use of the framework is as a guide for quickly and efficiently digesting a scholarly article. Along the same lines, the framework can be a good tool for organizing notes on articles or otherwise retaining them in your memory. For example, a student working to learn a body of literature in preparation for a comprehensive examination might read academic articles with an eye toward answering the five core building blocks as if they were questions. Jotting down quick notes about each of the building blocks would create an efficient summary of the article. The result of a series of such notes might look something like the article analyses that we did above on the five *AMR* Best Article winners.

### CONCLUSION

Returning one last time to our metaphorical conference room, it is ultimately the job of a scholar to find a way to sit down at that table, to join the academic conversation, and to shape the discussion into the future. Maybe your grateful, skin-intact cat will be there to purr you on. We hope you find the five core building blocks framework useful as you do so, or as you mentor others in their learning about scholarly writing.

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