

Are you an evidence-based manager?

>> Managers are regularly called upon to make decisions in order to resolve business problems. The effectiveness of those decisions shapes how successful a manager is.

To make these decisions they will draw on many types of available evidence, but will often struggle to gather and use the best evidence when making decisions. When decisions are founded on dubious evidence, the consequences can be catastrophic.

We use evidence to inform every decision that we take. Evidence, defined broadly as the grounds for belief, includes any piece of information that supports a conclusion. Evidence-based management involves taking what can be the rather automatic and unconscious use of evidence and making it more explicit, mindful, critical and systematic. In this article I will explain four key sources of evidence and offer a new way of approaching managerial problems and decisions.

What's the problem?

Prior to considering what evidence is relevant to help resolve the problem, it is important to make sure you are asking the right question. The presenting problem may not be the actual problem.

The '5 Whys' technique can help you to get to the root of a problem quickly. For example the problem of absenteeism might be a symptom of other underlying issues. Asking 'why' might unearth issues such as workplace stress or job satisfaction, asking 'why' again might reveal factors such as under-trained supervisors, low pay, poor benefits or high workloads and so on.

Write down the problem and ask others to challenge it. Ideally the problem should specify: what is the problem; for whom; in which circumstances and why? The accuracy of the problem should be questioned and tested by a range of different stakeholders so that it can be articulated as clearly and explicitly as possible.

Once the problem has been framed, evidence-based management is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of four sources of information: practitioner expertise and judgment, evidence from the local context, a critical evaluation of the best available

research evidence and the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision. All four types of evidence play a role in evidence-based management, but they are often weighted differently depending on the problem and the situation.

Practitioner expertise

Judgement is an essential management skill, especially where time is short or the circumstances sensitive. To what extent do you draw on intuition, experience, and engage in logical, rather than empirical analysis of the situation?

Local evidence

It is important to gain a rich picture of the current situation by collecting and analysing internal organisational evidence. To what extent do you gather data about what is working or not working and what to try next? Do you question and ask for evidence about a new practice, innovation, recommendation or service (particularly those offered by consultants) and ask how the effects of such may be measured and evaluated?

Existing research evidence

Very few business problems are novel or unique and there is a wealth of research that can be mined for practical use. To what extent do you invest time in reading around your issue and learning about particular approaches and how they might apply practically to your situation?

Opinions, choice and ethics

Managers can be unduly influenced by deeply held values and beliefs and often resist conflicting evidence. To what extent do you identify the perspectives and concerns of those people who might be affected by the decision? Do you allow opinions to be heard? Do you consider the unintended consequences of your decisions?

Mapping the evidence

Think about a key decision that you recently made. For each of the four types of evidence, map the extent to which it informed your decision. Score 0 if that form of evidence did not play any role and 5 if it was absolutely central to the decision.

Was your use of the four forms of evidence appropriate for the decision? How could you have gathered and utilized other forms of evidence?

Evidence-based management is fundamentally about searching for and using the best available evidence. Exercising reflection and professional judgment about the validity and value of all four forms of evidence can improve the effectiveness of managerial decisions. **[MF]**

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