Strategically reactive and maybe not thinking big enough

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Industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists have much to offer individuals and organizations as they attempt to adapt and respond to COVID-19. However, when it comes to *anticipating* important organizational and societal issues, history would suggest that we often miss the boat, or rather, are not very good at predicting what boats are likely to sail (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). In other words, I-O psychology is strategic, but we tend to be "strategically reactive." The COVID -19 global pandemic is a good example. The focal article (Rudolph et al., 2021) notes several great streams of research that I-O psychologists can marshal to address the challenges that COVID-19 presents such as health and safety, virtual work, and work–family issues.

But I-O psychology is a little less effective at envisioning future societal issues where we could take the lead. We are not alone. Only recently has the Academy of Management begun to discuss the grand challenges that the world faces and the role that researchers should play in addressing societal issues such as poverty, climate change, and decent work for all (George et al., 2016; United Nations, 2020). This is not to say that I-O psychologists have ignored these challenges. Members of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) are leading voices in workplace justice, climate change, and gender equality to name but a few. But in other areas, I-O psychologists can inadvertently harm systemic progress. At the same time, our profession tends to focus on efficiency (Lefkowitz, 2008) and in turn often reinforces processes that replicate past systems that could perpetuate the "haves" and "have nots," such as separating the world into "high potentials" versus all of those other people that I-O pyschologists categorize as, well let's be honest, "less valuable" in organizations (Yost & Chang, 2009). SIOP's official stated tagline is "Science for a smarter workplace." Noble, but it seems like we could perhaps aspire to something a little bigger. Maybe we should be asking the tougher questions like, smarter *for the sake of what*? Is our goal to help organizations head in any direction they choose but with our help do it quicker and more efficiently, or could we help direct our research and practice toward organizational systems that promote societal good? If the latter, we should consider and identify the big challenges that should make the short list and our role in bringing them to fruition.

Our profession has long had a healthy dialogue between researchers and practitioners, and about the dangers of favoring one side over another (Olenick et al., 2018; Ones et al., 2017; Rotolo et al., 2017; Ryan & Ford, 2010). Over a decade ago, Cascio and Aguinis (2008) found that the publication of research that addressed important human-capital trends has historically trailed behind practice except in a few noteworthy areas such as selection. They extrapolated that as a result of this time lag, I-O psychology was not really leading efforts in organizational and societal change. COVID-19 is a case in point. Although we and other researchers are writing about and responding to this challenge, another shockwave has hit the United States with antiracism awareness and protests exploding into the headlines. Given our history, we'll certainly write strategically reactive articles on this topic in upcoming journals, marshaling scattered research from

our profession to address these concerns. But it will be a reaction. Which begs the next question: What *else* is happening right now that I-O psychology is missing? Can we get ever get ahead of the curve? To paraphrase Wayne Gretzky, Can we learn how to skate to where the puck is going to be?

If we simply focus on making workplaces smarter and more efficient, then we overlook the great potential that this crisis has illuminated, to focus on the larger societal insights and solutions we can offer. The far-reaching effects of COVID-19 and other potential crises necessitate that I-O psychologists work across disciplines (e.g., political science, education, business, health care) and demonstrate a willingness to collaborate and to pursue complementary research. I-O psychologists have the potential and the obligation to ensure that our future direction, in response to COVID-19 and to a wide range of societal issues, aligns with our long-standing humanist tradition (Lefkowitz, 2008).

Mapping the Future

We propose that scenario planning (Schoemaker, 1995; Schwartz, 1996) is one potentially valuable tool that can be used to guide I-O research agendas and get ahead of the curve. One distinct advantage of scenario planning is that it is not designed to perfectly predict the future but to explore *possible* futures that increase one's capacity to adapt to whatever it may bring (Schwartz, 2011). For example, we recently facilitated a scenario-planning workshop for practicing and future I-O psychologists where they were challenged to envision the role of I-O psychologists in three potential COVID-19 futures: COVID-19 continues and dominates the world in the next 2 years, the world economy enters a second great depression, and/or a world where innovation reigns and the capabilities are developed significantly improve society. This provided the space for participants to move beyond dominant narratives and, instead, imagine, prepare, and adapt to potential best- and worst-case scenarios to come. Scenario groups identified the challenges that will be faced, actions to be taken, counteractions that will occur, and counter-counteractions that will emerge. They identified I-O skill sets that would be in demand in each of the scenarios and then came together to identify the skill sets that would be critical across all three scenarios. Of course, all three groups missed the emergence of antiracism protests, but the flexible thinking and adaptive capabilities they identified also increased their ability to pivot if needed. Participants were equipped to both take on the challenges they predicted and be more strategically reactive.

Just as businesses use scenario planning to increase their adaptability in the face of obstacles and envision opportunities to sustain their competitive advantage, so too can I-O psychologists. For example, what if I-O psychologists considered future scenarios for each of the UN's grand challenges? What if the profession identified the capabilities that would allow the profession to help organizations and individuals to address these challenges?

Maybe it is okay for our field to be strategically reactive in a crisis like COVID-19, but it seems like it is not enough: We also need to be able to anticipate the future and proactively focus our efforts to promote the common good. After all, the world is at a critical tipping point where our vision and endeavors could make a real difference.

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