To illustrate the connection between my philosophy and my tactics, I’ll briefly share a “mystery story” that I use routinely at the beginning of my courses to great effect. Mystery stories refer to brief narratives that require students to engage with the content by trying to explain a puzzling observation (Cialdini, 2005). This particularly story focuses on the effectiveness of ibuprofen on pain reduction (adapted from Erez & Grant, 2014) and serves a useful metaphor for much of what I teach (i.e., how to make work not suck). The structure of the exercise and approach are replicated (more or less exactly) each class to warm my students up to the content that will cover. I’ll ask you to play along so you can see how the exercise works and sets the stage for my work as an instructor.

**Pedagogical Demonstration**

If you are like most people, you’ve taken ibuprofen (or some pain reliever) to reduce pain in your life – but have you ever stopped to think about how effective ibuprofen is? Try it now by guessing what the correlation is linking ibuprofen to pain reduction in the general population. For the student who is a bit rust with statistics, I remind them that a correlation coefficient is a standardized statistic (varies from +1 to –1; 0 means no relationship) that is used across the sciences to quantify the relationship linking two variables (here, ibuprofen and pain reduction). A positive relationship means that ibuprofen leads to pain reduction whereas a negative relationship means that ibuprofen backfires (i.e., ibuprofen = more pain). I ask students to guess this effect and publicly share their guess with the class. As is often the case when I run this exercise, students guess that ibuprofen is very effective (*r ~* .65).

With their guesses made clear, we discuss criteria for fairly evaluating ibuprofen’s effectiveness. Pain needs to be measured in some agreed upon manner (e.g., self-report, neurological scans) and involve controls for bias (e.g., use of randomized placebo-controlled designs over a case study). Also, we can’t trust the results from a single case because of bias and so using large samples helps understanding what works in the general population. Here, I’m inviting my students in on establishing fair standards for evaluating information, which both helps increase their receptivity to evidence that can challenge their beliefs and help them to talk themselves into making evidence-based changes in their own lives (e.g., careers, organizational settings). Notably, I teach my students what the best evidence looks like (e.g., systematic review and meta-analysis of experimental, field studies) and how the best evidence can differ from the best *available* evidence (e.g., longitudinal studies, surveys, case studies), each of which has key limitations that I explain. I revisit these standards several times throughout my course to encourage students’ commitment to high standards of evidence and to applying these standards consistently, which helps them to cultivate an attitude of wisdom.

After an initial discussion, I reveal that the best estimate we have for the effect of ibuprofen on pain reduction – which comes from a meta-analysis of over 9,000 people subjected to randomized control trial – is *much* smaller than students’ guesses: *r* = 0.14 (Meyer et al. 2001).[[1]](#footnote-1) Students are almost always surprised to see how wrong they are as a class. Herein lies the mystery: why is the effect so small? Well, it turns out that a number of factors explain the small effect and we discuss a few that are important for the content that we cover: (i) we often think medicine is more effective than it is (and the same can apply to our decisions about how to best manage organizations), (ii) we have biases that impact our beliefs (i.e., we can all think about times when we took medicine and our conditions faded; the same goes with personal anecdotes or case studies), (iii) ibuprofen works better for some forms of pain than others and may not work for everyone (i.e., there are boundary conditions on the effects that we study), and that with time pain fades. Lastly, I tell my students that just because the effect size is small doesn’t mean it is meaningless (e.g., the correlation linking smoking to lung cancer is .07, but I would still avoid smoking because it is the leading known cause of lung cancer; see Meyer et al., 2001). Crucially, however, I’ve helped my students call their beliefs about something they take for granted into question, which I use to foster their curiosity about other taken-for-granted beliefs they may hold as related to the course material.

**Theory behind the teaching approach**

There are four reasons why I teach this wat. First, in all of my classes I aim to present a compelling case for rigor by discussing standards of evidence that allows students to recognize when rigor underlies data. By applying (and modeling) the social influence principles of commitment and consistency (Cialdini, 2008),[[2]](#footnote-2) I reinforce their application of these standards for accepting evidence and forming conclusions in class discussion, which helps my students to think more critically about phenomena in our world.

Second, by connecting research evidence to students’ personal experiences (e.g., asking students to explain why a relationship exists), I can trigger the process of self-persuasion (Aronson, 1999)[[3]](#footnote-3), which is critical for spurring behavior change (citation for motivational interviewing). While students are willing to do what we tell them because we are the experts, a more lasting approach is to spur students’ commitment to using evidence to inform their decision making. I aim to spur such commitment.

Third, my teaching approach allows students to reflect on and their own experience; to consider it as a valuable but biased source of information. I want to validate my students’ experiences as a meaningful–albeit incomplete–source of knowledge. Even the experience of professionals such as myself or other practitioners is but one source of information from an evidence-based management perspective (Barends & Rousseau, 2018)[[4]](#footnote-4). Once they recognize such biases, they can start to bring their beliefs in alignment with the evidence while still leveraging their own experience (i.e., acting with the best available information on hand while doubting that which you believe to be true).

Fourth, I ultimately want to inspire my students to become evidence-based professionals so they can be wiser employees, managers, and leaders in our community.

**Why do I teach in this way?**

There are two key reasons. First, I want my students to leave equipped with the knowledge that there are small decisions they can make that can have large positive impacts on organizations and, therefore, their careers. For instance, structured hiring processes (e.g., structured interviews, work samples) are over twice as effective as unstructured hiring processes (Sackett et al., 2021).[[5]](#footnote-5) Although hiring managers occasionally prefer the latter (see Highhouse, 2008), switching to the former can provide tremendous gains for an organization.[[6]](#footnote-6) As another example, organizations that effectively cascade higher-level goals (e.g., improvements in profit, reductions in costs) down to lower-level goals (e.g., departmental objectives and key results, employee performance expectations) – i.e., management by objectives (MBO) – on average perform over 50% higher than organizations that fail to do so. However, the benefits of MBO most strongly materialize for those organizations whose leaders are genuinely committed to their goals (as opposed to feigning commitment) (see Rodgers & Hunter, 1991).[[7]](#footnote-7) Second, by placing everyone in a context where they can *enjoy being wrong together*, I hope to create a climate where students appreciate collaborative problem solving (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008).[[8]](#footnote-8) Being an evidence-based manager means participating in a broader collaborative effort where we try to understand what works (so we can keep doing that) and what doesn’t (so we can avoid it or stop it all together). I invite all of my students to find ways to contribute to this broader dialogue throughout my class.

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