

IFSAM 2023 Award

IFSAM Award Excellence in Societally Relevant Management Scholarship

Winner: Prof. Simon Dolan

Interviewed by Ying Ying Zangh Zang

So, Professor Dolan, could you share with us your journey in this field of management scholarship and produce scholarly, especially socially relevant works? What inspires you to focus on research that aims to serve the society in general?

A very good friend of mine, psychoanalyst, once told me that using a psychoanalysis perspective, I probably am not aware of, but I was born to try to make the world better.

Because my parents used to be Holocaust survivors, Jews that survived six, seven years of Holocaust, so I'm the first generation of Holocaust survivor. And some people call it Holocaust survivor syndrome. I believe that I'm a little bit what we call kishot or kichote of modern world.

And my arm of trying to change the world is my writing. And relatively in early age, I made it to become full professor in very prestigious universities. And at the age of 40, I said, never, I'll never write with people that don't share my passion and competence, of course, to do research.

And I will never write about something that I consider it irrelevant to society. So if you want to become a change agent, I'm talking about a new type of influencer, but it's an influencer that connect research and the need that we have in society. And I reached the conclusion that if you want to become an effective change agent, you need to have three legs.

You need to have a theory or a concept, but it's theory and a concept that's not only clear to you, but when you talk about it, it sounds like music to people that listen to you. In other words, they like it because otherwise they will not change, but this is not sufficient. The second leg is methodology.

You need also to describe how do you apply your concept. And the third one that we suffer a lot in the, at least the social science that I'm involved. And this is what we call tools. We lack tools. We need to have tools. So what we need, I call it a triangle.

I call it theory or concept, methodology and tools. So I've dedicated my last, I would say 30 years to develop these three concepts. I always start with a concept.

But from there, I'm trying to convert it into something that is more parsimonious, that people in the street can use it professionally. So I did it in the world of values. In addition to the fact that I co-created an international society, like IFSAM exists today, I created ISSWOV, which was the International Society for the Study of Work and Organisation Values.

So my reference is the people in the world. I know it sounds a little bit like cliché, but I really believe in it. I really believe that if you train professionals and you give them the concept, the method and the tool, you can change the world.

You know, here in the back, you can see some of my manual tools that are very based on principles of gamification. Because the child in us likes to come out, and I work with top executives, but I use principles of gamification. They love it.

And by the way, just to think that I'm not a dinosaur that is not using the latest tools, digital tools. Every single tool that I work on also has an online interactive digital tool.

And I decided not to do things and not to spend my time on things that I'm bored. So the three themes that today I'm trying to bring some values are values, stress, or stress is negative. So from positive psychology, I borrowed the concept of resilience.

I also decided, and this is for fun. I decided to develop because I need to play. I need to do things that are serious, but playfulness. So I decided to come up with a new brand, especially when I deal with stress. And it's called Dr. Simon. Why Dr. Simon? Because when you deal with stress, it's mental health, people attribute a little bit more seriousness to title. This is new. This is started last year. So don't be surprised if you see Dr. Simon.

So amazing. Can you tell us some of those or even some, you know, kind of hidden story or you already have told some story to us?

Well, it's not a hidden story, except that I will not get into details because the list is going to be very long. So I'm blessed, honestly, to have friends that I made them through the academia that are some of the leading people in our field.

And I'm blessed to have published with them books or articles. And I'm blessed to learn from them, because for me, the process of publishing converts into a process of learning. So I am an eternal learner. I learned from young people. I learned from my peers. I learned from older people.

I have social network that is so, it makes me feel so good that I can write to these people.

And the day after they respond to me, not because they feel like, because they know what I'm trying to do, they appreciate. So I think my social relationships, those are the key in my work, because to be around people that you keep on learning. And today, for example, as we talk, I just finished a book that I hope will make a big difference because I'm very visionary also about the academic world.

So I, in my office many years ago, a digital platform to teach was born. And this was way before the pandemic, way before. It's called My Educator.

Now, I have, because I created also a foundation, it's called Global Future of Work Foundation, that is an extension of the chair that I had in the ESADE Business School before, I care also about the future of work.

What I'm saying is that those are innovations in the academia. And last but not least, to show what's happening to me, I retired from ESADE about four or five years ago.

And I decided to dedicate 50% of my time to the foundation. And the other 50%, I decided just to pick and choose some project, to pick and choose things that I want to do. And listen, two years ago, they brought me back to the academy, because they created a new school of management in Madrid. It's called Advantere School of Management.

The vision of the school is very much close to my vision about training in higher education in the future. I accepted to be there only 50%.

I'm surrounded with young people when I teach, and I love it because I learn from them. And many times when I teach there, I feel like I should pay them, not they should pay the tuition, because for the learning that I'm having. So this is my perspective about the highlights of my life.

Yeah, with all this amazing and, you know, exciting, passionate project that you are doing and contributing to the society and making the research, not just research, but also societally relevant. I guess you also have found some challenge.

So what was some of those most significant challenges you have faced and how did you navigate those challenges? Or do you have any kind of strategy to make it?

My biggest challenge, and I'm failing, I have to admit that I'm failing so far, is to combine my professional life with my personal life. I think that I am part of what we call, I'm not workaholic, but I'm work, almost work addict, you know, I, even when I sleep at night some of my dreams are about new project, new, you know, so I don't know how to relax.

I don't know how to balance, you know, and maybe it's good, maybe it's bad. I'm teaching and I'm telling people how important it is to do it, but I don't manage to do it. I'm happy, by the way.

But I think I should become a little bit more spiritual. So I'm in the search of becoming of spirituality and spirituality, by the way, has many dimension. One of the dimension is that I did something that some of my colleagues will probably criticise me for reason, because I also write tales for children.

Because what I learned is that parents and educator do not have tools to teach values to children. So I just finished these days, my second tale and the second tale embeds something about spirituality. How do you teach spirituality to children? So maybe from my research and my writing, I'm going to apply it to myself.

I'm failing in this, you know, so this is my challenge. I don't want to call it, you know, failing telling, but it is a challenge. My other challenge is not to become overambitious. I want you to know that, so I'm learning how to say no to project and to people. I'm learning how to scale down bigger vision to lower vision. Because my vision is that corporations are not ready to the new world of work. Higher education institutions are not ready for the new future of work.

And we in general, we are lost. So we need some sort of compass to help us. And the compass is going to be complex because we need to have internal compass, external compass element to start into some of the speeches they give about the future of work.

My challenge is to have what we call reasonable success and not to abandon my passion and my playfulness. This is the key. And then to keep on learning. And to keep on learning, I'm doing it, for example, my latest book on trust. I taught myself how to use some elements of artificial intelligence because this is the future. I talk about it and actually I'm becoming very good in it. You know, I'm becoming very, very good. I even learned how to use in my tale for children. I use artificial intelligence to generate some of the illustrations for the tail. So I, but I'm enjoying it.

I learn and I enjoy and I have one motto that is the motto of my life. And I recommend to people to listen to me to adapt it because it will make their life much better. Whatever you do, do with passion and obviously with competence.

We all have competence, but competence without passion doesn't get you far away. Competence will get you to be okay, but not excellent. Only passion will get you nowhere.

So try to combine your competence and know what to do with your passion and have a touch of playfulness in whatever you do. We like to play and touch it. This is a configuration that will help people live.

I learned. I surround myself with competent people that I learned from them. And I always have passion and touch of playfulness. This will be my message.

So for this research in socially relevant management, would you have any say on, how do you assess this impact on your research? Any recommendation again for measuring or enhancing the influence of many scholars in the future?

Yeah, I do. I do. I do. I believe in, you know, the different streams of research.

I am a strong believer in what we call action research. And for me, action is doing research that is relevant and needed by society. Otherwise, we will not create a better world.

Society needs us scientists to think out of the box, to create things that will make the quality of our life better. So I really believe in action research. I don't believe in pure research. We need to incorporate the criteria of the value, the contribution to society as part of the promotion criteria. We cannot keep on just using what we call the traditional impact factor.

This is the past. There will be no paradigm. And the new paradigm will be what will be the positive values that they added to society.

This is my call. This is my dream. And this is what I believe will actually happen to make our world better.