Foreword 1

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I am well aware of the line of research that goes by the name of collaborative inquiry. I share its epistemological approach and practical utility, having collaborated with one of the scholars who co-authored this book in two companies of which I have been and was the CEO during the research. As part of the managerial profession, it should be natural to feel the need to carry out one's own business with great openness towards the experience of others, drawing the most appropriate suggestions from scientific research to identify which are the best tools to face and solve problems at the company where you work.

Just as a doctor must necessarily know the research and studies that are published in his field, in order to have the most advanced medical-surgical, diagnostic and pharmacological techniques, a manager should do the same. But the analogy ends here. In fact, managers often do not feel they have to continue studying to do their job better. Often, especially those who have always dedicated their professional lives to the same sector do not believe that there is much new to learn in light of the experience they have accumulated.

In partial exculpation of the managerial profession, it must be said that frequently, however, managers do not find the tools and approach they need in academic research. In fact, in the context of business economics studies, it is very easy to remain frustrated with how little they can be used in the daily life of a manager.

In my experience I have encountered disciplines, such as corporate finance or accounting, where the manager is given positive knowledge, that is, a series of elements and tools with which to face problems and decide what to do; in other cases this seems more rare to me – I refer to disciplines such as strategy or business organization or change management. In these fields of study, the nature of research is mainly taxonomic: it classifies and organizes the possible situations that a manager is facing, but very often it does not tell her what she should do. Unfortunately, there are many studies that belong to this category; very useful for

accumulating academic publications, but irrelevant to those who run a company and, above all, responsible for a furrow between academia and managerial profession which still seems to me very broad.

We know very well that the life of an organization does not have the determinism on which scientific disciplines can rely. But this does not exempt us from finding a method to be able, however, to define a set of knowledge that allows us to identify which is the best way for a given company to make strategic decisions, to define its organization or effectively measure its performance.

The instrument of collaborative inquiry goes precisely in this direction. It is an approach in which the scholar, aware of the problems that managers and operators daily experience in the field, sets up a collaborative study of these needs through engagement and active involvement of organization members and collaborative interaction with management. In such an effort, the organization is invited to participate in the framing and re-framing of the study, its methodology, data collection and data interpretation. Using tools like questionnaires and direct interviews it discusses and analyzes the results of these surveys with those directly involved, thus initiating conversations with organization members about what the data means. The study teams collected the data and interpreted the data following basic scientific rigor. It is therefore a setting that can also allow academic research to move in the right direction and generate useful and relevant knowledge. I have had direct experience of it.

I met the colleagues from the Polytechnic de Milano and California Polytechnic State University for the first time as part of a project on creativity, which is of fundamental importance for a company like the one I was managing at the time, that is, a fashion design and textile company. Understanding our business and our know-how about creativity was an important step forward. We all spoke of creativity as an essential quality of our work, only to find out that this concept within our organization did not always have the same meaning. Here is a fundamental result of the work inspired by the collaborative inquiry project. It allowed us to get to use the same language, leaving behind the babble that is often the source of endless discussions and few concrete actions in companies. Let us always remember – the biblical passage teaches us – that nothing is more complicated to manage than an organization where the same language is not spoken. From there we went ahead and understood what the best conditions were to create a habitat in the company that was conducive to the development of professional ideas and practices which could direct

creative talent towards creative collectives that translated into economically and commercially appreciable results.

I resumed the collaboration with the external researchers a couple of years later. We returned to work together on a different project in the context of a different company – a company operating in the real estate funds sector, born two years earlier from a merger between two competing companies, one based in Rome and the other in Milan. This was, in effect, a new company, formed from the two very different companies from which it originated, looking for its identity. Inspired by collaborative inquiry process we realized that the main challenge for enhancing our success had to do with multiple and distinct mini subcultures. We moved forward to develop a “common culture” and engaged most of the members of the organization in crafting the “ideal culture.”

Our study team, after careful examinations of the scholarly literature recommended to follow the Cameron and Quinn model proposed in their book, *Diagnosis and Changing Organizational Cultures* (2011) and – incredible but true – we applied it to the concrete case of our company. We were thus able to understand what our managers’ and employees’ perceptions of the corporate culture was, discovering that we thought we were a company focused on stability and control, built on procedural and organizational rigor to be a market leader. From the work done internally and always guided and inspired by external researchers, we came to realize that we would like to be more flexible in our approach to organization and the market. From these results we began to understand what we wanted to be. It is the next phase of the research which will lead us to analyze the gap between what we are and what we should be. Above all, we intend to identify what actions to take to bridge this gap. We have therefore identified nine phases of a work program, which moves towards the things to do: from the so-called small wins, which allow rapid changes, to the agenda in terms of leadership style and communication strategy.

To conclude, the strength of the approach presented in this book is that it goes beyond empirical research alone, that is, the collection of data or the examination of business cases. Thanks to the direct and interactive exchange and collaboration of company members and externally, through honest collaboration, while following rigorous analysis methods, the practice of collaborative inquiry manages to combine the strength of academic deduction with that of induction of managerial practice.

In other words, thanks to it, my colleagues and I have managed to do our job better.

NOTE

1. Massimo Brunelli has served as a CEO of Mantero and IdeaFimit. This foreword was written for a book, *Collaborative Management Research: Teoria, Methodi, Esperienze* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2014). We are grateful to Raffaello Cortina for permission to publish this translation here.