

## Connecting academia and society

**As an academic, you divide your time between research, teaching and ancillary activities. But how can you contribute to society in other ways? What would this involve? Naomi Ellemers, Distinguished Professor at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences and head of the Organisational Behaviour research group, recently held a lecture on connecting with society for researchers at Dynamics of Youth. Here are the highlights.**

### **Why would you want to work with civil-society partners?**

There are plenty of pretexts to avoid working with civil-society partners: you are busy, it is unfamiliar territory, you will get asked the wrong kinds of questions... However, organisations will always develop activities, whether academics are on board or not. Academics are familiar with the relevant literature and are therefore well positioned to offer advice to civil-society partners. This means that academics have a great deal to contribute to the public debate, backed up by well-founded and proven arguments.

### **So what can academics contribute?**

Eye-openers for daily life. For example, Ellemers spoke with several business professionals who struggled to understand why their staff were not doing what they wanted. After all, their tasks were clearly defined. Ellemers referenced the “founding father” of her own discipline: Kurt Lewin. Lewin developed a number of basic theories that are relevant to everyday problems. He elaborated his dynamic field theory in the 1950s and 1960s. Lewin developed the following formula: Behaviour = Person x Environment. He was also known for saying: if you want to push people in a certain direction, but something is blocking their way, there is little point in pushing them harder. This will merely make them more stressed. Therefore, it might be useful to examine what is blocking them and eliminate the opposing force. As it turns out, a seventy-year-old theory still applies in practice today.

### **So how are academics supposed to attract assignments?**

Academia revolves around expertise, competition, content, funding and publications. Outside the academic world, however, other aspects play a more important role when it comes to securing assignments. A title of researcher or professor helps to ensure that the provided expertise is taken seriously. The aspects of trust, a strong network, appearance and outcomes are even more important.

### **Tips for working with civil-society partners**

The academic and non-academic worlds communicate in very different ways. For example, an academic writing an article for a newspaper should start with the conclusion. Explaining how you actually arrived there comes later. This is the reverse of the structure of a scientific article. It is also important to reiterate the points that are clear to you as an academic and leave little room for interpretation. In other words: the more concrete, the better. Offer specific examples and use short sentences. Quotes, visuals and infographics can also help make the knowledge you share more accessible to a broader audience. Your choice of words matters as well. For example, Ellemers asked supervisory board members whether they ever experienced “bias”. No one answered in the affirmative. When asked to name their biggest pitfall later on in the session, the majority mentioned “tunnel vision”. Sometimes, a different choice of words can help you connect to your audience more effectively.

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