

# The Thought Leader Series: Michael A. Hitt on Ethics in Research

**KEY INSIGHT:** Michael A. Hitt is one of the world's most respected and prolific management scholars. In this blog, Professor Hitt discusses the ethics of research based on his many years of working in collaborative groups and with PhD students. This blog posting is the first of a series of interviews of thought leaders in our profession, asking them about their views and experience with ethical issues.

## THOUGHT LEADERS

Thought leaders, according to [Jim Nichols](#) (VP Stern + Associates), are “experts in their field, whether through extensive experience or academic research”. The term “[thought leader](#)”, introduced in 1994 by Joel Kurtzman (Editor-in-Chief of *Strategy + Business*), was originally used to identify invited guests who were interviewed about their opinions. We now use the term more broadly to encompass individuals who -- by their thoughts, words and actions -- can lead, mobilize and inspire others in the same profession.

Nichols' article, “[Are you cut out to be a thought leader?](#)” published on FORBES.COM on 29 September 2012, argues that thought leaders have certain traits that make these individuals stand out in their professions:

- **Active Sharers:** They actively share their research, theories and ideas, and are comfortable with people questioning them and their work.
- **Outgoing:** They like people; that is, they enjoy networking and interacting with people, they freely share their ideas and engage with others.
- **Confident:** They are confident in their work and intelligence.
- **Write:** They like to write and use writing as a primary form of communication.
- **Conversations:** Thought leaders are often the subject of other people's conversations; people care about what thought leaders think, say and do.

With this blog post, THE ETHICIST begins an occasional series on ethics based on interviews with key thought leaders in the Academy of Management. The idea behind this series of interviews arose out of the caucus session on “THE ETHICIST: The informal economy and scholarship, teaching and professional life ethics,” held at the Boston AOM meetings in August 2012. By broadening the trio of editors responsible for writing blog posts to include thought leaders, we hope to enrich content, stimulate conversations, and build impactfulness for THE ETHICIST, with the long run goal of making ethics part of the everyday conversation and experience of Academy members. [\[1\]](#)

## MICHAEL A. HITT: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

I can think of a no more fitting individual to launch this series on ethics in our profession than Michael (Mike) A. Hitt. Mike Hitt is a Distinguished Professor and holder of the Joe B. Foster

Chair in Business Leadership at Texas A&M University. A recent article in [Mays Business](#) about Mike lists some of the many honors he has received over the years.

AOM members will know that Mike Hitt is a former editor of *Academy of Management Journal* and founder and former co-editor of *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*. He is a Fellow and a former President of both the Academy of Management and the Strategic Management Society. A 2012 *Academy of Management Perspectives* article by Aguinis, Suarez-Gonzalez, Lannelongue and Joo, "Scholarly Impact Revised", ranked Mike Hitt 15<sup>th</sup> in terms of number of citations and 9<sup>th</sup> in terms of Google pages among the 384 high-impact management scholars included in the study. In terms of overall impactfulness, Mike Hitt tied for first place with James G. March (Stanford, emeritus) among the 384 high-impact scholars. Calling Michael A. Hitt a *highly influential thought leader* is therefore a fitting designation.

Mike is particularly well suited to be the first interviewee what we hope will be a series of interviews with thought leaders in our profession. Mike is well known for launching ventures of his own (for example, as the co-founder of *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*) and for studying and writing about new ventures and entrepreneurship. Who better to launch this new venture?

After the August 2012 AOM meetings, I approached Mike about being interviewed on research ethics for THE ETHICIST and he readily agreed. I then developed in cooperation with several volunteers (Kathy Lund Dean, Dan Li, Stewart Miller and Paul Vaaler) a list of questions to pose to Mike. This list was sent to him in mid-September and we met in early October for 90 minutes to discuss his answers. Our discussion was wide-ranging, partly following the questions. I took notes during our meeting, which I then re-organized into themes, and sent to him for editing. His very lightly edited text appears below, and is followed by the list of questions. I then circulated the draft posting for comments to the advisory board for THE ETHICIST: RESEARCH. The blog was finalized after one more round of revisions and posted on THE ETHICIST in time for November 1, 2012.

I hope that you enjoy reading Mike's responses to these questions, and encourage you to continue this conversation in your own organization with your colleagues, coauthors and/or students.

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## LOOKING AT RESEARCH FROM AN ETHICS PERSPECTIVE BY MICHAEL A. HITT

### Managing the Team-based Research Project

Managing a team of authors involved in a multi-paper project can presents several challenges, including who does what, how work is shared, handling differences in ideas.

I have had very few projects collapse (that is, not come to fruition in terms of publication). The reason is being committed to seeing it through (not wanting to let go of a project that I see as having value). When I perceive a project to have value and I have an ownership stake in it, I will push it to fruition. In the rare cases where that hasn't worked, I did not have ownership and so could not push the project forward and had to leave it to the individual who was lead on the project.

Every author on a research project should have a role to play and should add value to the project. I have seldom had a coauthor drop off a project, but have occasionally added coauthors when they added value.

One case where an author might be added is the situation in which the research project requires access to a unique database that a faculty member has invested time, energy and possibly financial

resources developing. In this case, the faculty member's investment has value and I would expect that individual to be included on the project as a quid pro quo for providing the data. In many such cases, these colleagues add value in other ways as well.

## **Order of Authors**

Order of authors may not always be an ethical issue, but it can be one. My informal rule – which has worked for me – is the following. I believe the first author on a paper should be the one who had the original idea and largely directs the project. Second, that person should also take the lead on writing the paper, and/or the lead on key parts of the paper such as the theory development. Certainly, all coauthors should take an active part in the project and paper development thereby adding value.

There are some exceptions to my general rule.

For example, when a senior scholar has an idea for a paper, s/he might ask a junior scholar to take the lead on the project (and become the lead author), for a variety of reasons, and if the junior scholar accepts the responsibility, s/he would move into first author position.

Another example is the following. If a senior author is working with one or more PhD students and is concerned that the PhD student(s) would not receive full credit for the paper if the senior author's name is listed first on the paper. In that case, I have occasionally decided to drop back in terms of author order so my coauthors would have more prominence.

Another exception is when there are two co-authors working on multiple papers on which they are both co-equal partners and they decide to reverse the order of authorship on every other paper (so, for example, on paper 1 the order could be alphabetical, on paper 2 in reverse alphabetical order, paper 3 would be alphabetical, etc.).

A problem arises when the original order of authors on a paper does not reflect relative contributions to a paper, for example, when the lead author on the first draft of the paper no longer is directing the project nor leading the development of the paper. Even though this presents a problem, but I would probably only move to address it by confronting the lead author if I felt that another co-author deserved more recognition. In that case, I would speak directly to the first author about the order of authorship and explain my concern about another co-author not receiving appropriate recognition for his/her contribution.

## **PhD Dissertations and Subsequent Publications**

I believe the PhD student who designed and conducted the research and wrote the dissertation is the owner of the dissertation. As such, s/he should always be first author on any paper that is published out of the dissertation. If a PhD student were to ask me to be the lead author on a paper out of his/her dissertation, I would refuse (and I have refused).

When I agree to chair a dissertation, I tell the students that it is their dissertation. I am generally willing to be involved, but will not impose my name, on any papers coming out of the dissertation. If the student wants my help with a paper, I will agree to co-author but not as the first author.

However, I do recognize that some professors ask to be co-author on at least one paper coming out of the dissertation because of the workload involved in chairing a dissertation. I do not have a problem with that – although it is not my practice – as long as this issue is discussed between the student and the faculty member in advance of the dissertation. In my opinion, this should not be a condition imposed by the chair after the dissertation process has started or has been completed.

I do not want my own research program to depend on PhD students. I have my own research agenda and want to pursue that. I am pleased to help PhD students, but their dissertations should be based on their own research agendas. I do recognize that some faculty members have their

research agendas directed by their students' dissertations, but I have chosen not to do that.

I want to add two caveats to my comments on dissertation chairs being co-authors on one or more papers coming out of the dissertation.

The first caveat is the case where the faculty member has developed a unique and proprietary dataset and makes that dataset available to a PhD student for his/her dissertation. In this case, I would normally expect to be included in papers coming out of the dissertation. I would discuss this in advance with the student so that we both had a clear understanding. The key here is to be transparent; that there is an open discussion between the faculty member and student about what the expectations are.

Normally, however, I believe a PhD student should develop his/her own dataset and I encourage that. Creating the dataset gives the student independence which can be important for a student's career development. Still, there may be cases in which using a dissertation chair's dataset makes sense.

The second caveat is the situation when an author includes another author's name on a paper without telling him or her; for example, the dissertation author including the chair's name without asking them in advance. This could happen either in terms of submission of papers to conferences or in terms of an actual publication. In both cases, I would be very unhappy about my name being included without my consent and would so inform the author. Doing so can create problems for the author, for example, causing him/her to violate the "rule of three" submissions to a conference.

It seems to me that the key here is transparency; to be upfront with one's co-authors and in supervisor-PhD student relationships.

### **Managing the Sequencing of Projects**

How to handle the scheduling and management of multiple projects is a challenge. I nearly always move R&Rs (revise-and-resubmits) to the top of the queue. R&Rs are both a blessing and a curse. They are closer to the end of the publication process, but need to be attended to quickly and require careful attention. Second, deadlines will move a project up in the queue, for example, if a Special Issue has an upcoming submission deadline.

### **Ethical Violations in the Research Process**

I think we are all more aware of ethical violations now than in the past. Several examples have been in the newspapers and more has been written on this problem in our journals (editorials). There is also much more pressure on junior faculty to publish and we must be sensitive to these pressures.

Where a team of researchers is involved in a project, more often than not one researcher will handle the analytical work. If the other co-authors do not examine the data nor examine the analyses, there is always the possibility of errors, most often simply by mistake or occasionally they may be deliberate in order to obtain "better" results. I trust my co-authors to be professionals and believe that almost all of them share my professional ethics. Still, if there was a concern, asking to see the models and results of the analyses (e.g., regression results) is one way to check for errors. Looking carefully at the descriptive statistics can also be very useful.

Another way to do this is for the team of researchers to divide up the work among themselves, and for each lead author on a particular stage of the project to have one or more back-up individuals to double check the work. So, for example, if one person is primarily handling the data analysis, another one or two members of the team could also look over the data and analyses to provide additional checks.

Other ethical violations such as self-plagiarism and “slicing and dicing” (maximizing the number of papers out of a research project) have also received a lot of recent attention in the journals. I worry that perhaps too much attention is paid to these issues. First, in terms of self-plagiarism, it is time consuming to rewrite the methods section when much of the methods section applies to two or more papers. I worry that the journal editors are becoming oversensitive about these issues.

Where two papers share the same dataset, I do believe the papers need to “stand alone” on their own merits and are normally submitted to different journals. The only caveat here might be where the two papers should be merged into one; for example, one paper had the main analysis and the second a moderator analysis. Even though the paper would be longer, integrating them into one paper would make the paper stronger. I recognize that junior scholars often want to separate their research project (or their dissertation) into multiple papers, but they must take care not to weaken the papers’ contributions. These cases may lead to several publications in lower tier journals rather than a single publication in a top tier journal. Even though many institutions count “numbers” rather than “quality” of publications, I believe it is in the author’s best interests to focus on the long term and go for the strongest paper, even if that means fewer publications.

When two papers are submitted to different journals, I believe the authors should be transparent, and explain to the journal editors how and why the two papers are distinct from one another. However, I do worry that sometimes there is over sensitivity about this concern, leading to extra caution by journal editors.

### **Last Piece of Advice**

My last piece of advice is that authors should look to the long term. Make sure the data are accurate. No games with the data or the analysis should be played. Do quality research. Authors should feel good enough about their work that they can easily defend what they have done to their peers. I recognize that the pressures to publish are very high, but the costs of engaging in inappropriate actions are even higher. I believe that if you do good research that fits with your personal values – and look to the long term – you will realize positive returns.

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### **THE QUESTIONS**

*This is the list of questions that I used to jump start Mike’s and my conversation on ethics in research. I include them here in case other scholars would like to use these questions to jump*

*start their own conversations, either with other faculty or with PhD students.*

1. Order of authors on a paper – who goes first and why. When should the order change?
2. If someone only provides data to a project ...how do you deal with authorship ? With authorship order?
3. What do you recommend in the following situation? A colleague provides data to a project, but he won't share the data with the rest of the team. Instead, the data provider performs all the methods and shares the results with the team.
4. Bringing on a new author or dropping one off on a paper/project.
5. What is a "sufficient enough" contribution to include someone as an author on a paper? What is too little? For example, a colleague is struggling with moving on to another project without a co-author because the co-author "only" did the lit review for that particular paper, and the (lit review co-author) is insisting he be included on other paper.
6. Who "owns" the dataset on a project. Can one author impose restrictions on another author (or a dissertation chair on a student) in terms of subsequently using the dataset on another project without the first author.
7. Do all members of the team have to do everything or can the project be compartmentalized and divvied up among the team so that one person does all the empirical work, one writes the paper, etc.
8. With your co-authors, how do you manage the moral dilemma of working on new manuscripts, rejected papers, and revised and resubmits? How do you convey your approach to co-authors? Does your approach depend on the journal for the R&R or do you have a universalistic approach?
9. Can you think of situations in which you removed your name as an author ...even for a revise and resubmit? Without identifying co-authors, what were the conditions underlying the decision?
10. During the dissertation, what are the expectations for the chair in terms of helping a student develop the dissertation? How about other members? For other committee members, what are your thoughts on authorships of papers stemming from a dissertation?
11. The role of a dissertation supervisor as an author on papers that come directly out of the dissertation. More generally, the power dynamic between supervisor/student or senior/junior faculty.
12. How do you manage the R&R process in groups? That often seems so difficult to manage and allocate equitably. I would think that more issues arise in the re-making rather than making of research.
13. Do you have any thoughts on reviewer behavior? Given the critical role that reviewers play in our profession, this seems like an important topic also.
14. What would you consider to be unethical behaviors? Could you comment on those you have seen in others, or experienced yourself, rather than just 'objective' no-no's? For example: quid pro quo sexual harassment is unethical and we know that. Are there dicey situations particular to the two overall topics you have direct knowledge of, and can perhaps even offer examples/scenarios and what happened/resolution?

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[1] In August 2011, the AOM Ethics Education Committee interviewed several journal editors on the ethics of research and teaching. These videos, which are available on YouTube, are a highly useful complement to this blog post; see <http://aom.org/Content.aspx?id=798>. Mike is one of the editors interviewed in the video series.