Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton are both professors at Stanford University. They also co-authored *The Knowing-Doing Gap* in 2000. *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense* is subtitled “Profiting From Evidence-Based Management.” Taking their cue from the rise of “evidence-based medicine,” Pfeffer and Sutton offer a sobering, wise, caution to today’s business leaders and managers: don’t just buy into the “latest thing,” or turn your thinking over to a consultant to do for you, or let your pet theories and ideas get in the way of the facts and the evidence.

All too often business leaders grab on to fads and theories without enough critical thinking. Sometimes we fall victim to total nonsense. Sometimes the mistake is to elevate a partial truth into a global theory and strategy. “Reengineering the corporation” may have had some helpful insights but the evidence is that it failed in most cases. Jack Welch’s forced ranking of employees (and culling the bottom ten per cent) does not always work. Even the widely lauded business studies *In Search of Excellence*, *Built to Last*, and *Good to Great* receive some critical cautionary (and convincing) comment in *Hard Facts*.

Pfeffer and Sutton devote extended attention to six dangerous half-truths in particular: (1) Work is fundamentally different and separable from the rest of life. (2) The best organizations succeed by hiring the best people (and eliminating many of the rest). (3) Financial incentives most reliably drive company performance. (4) Strategy is the critical focus in business success. (5) Change is essential. (6) Great leaders control the directions of their companies. With each topic, Pfeffer and Sutton provide a careful, nuanced examination of the complexity of the reality. Thus, strategy is important but team quality and implementation excellence can be as important or more so. Hiring good people is great but training the existing staff and creating systems and environments for success are just as important. Beware of turning something half true into a global philosophy.

Some of the most influential theories are based on skewed data. A *correlation* of two factors is presented as a *causation*. Contrary data are ignored or suppressed. What Pfeffer and Sutton argue for is a more critical, careful analysis. Ask for the evidence. Run experiments to test out an approach before committing the company on a grand scale. Be suspicious of ideas that are presented as “breakthrough” or “new” (most great ideas are old and classic). “Celebrate and develop collective brilliance, not lone geniuses or gurus.” Always try to see both sides to claims and proposals: virtues/drawbacks, upside/downside.

Evidence-based management is not just a set of techniques, the authors conclude, but a perspective, a way of thinking. In many respects *Hard Facts* is basically a call to common sense, basic logic, and attention to history. It is an important message, made convincing by the abundant *evidence* they provide.