

How to detect a management fad—and distinguish it from a classic

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From MBO to Theory Z, from TQM to reengineering, management thought over the past five decades has been altered profoundly by a few administrative fads that have shaped the vocabularies of managers but seem to have had no lasting influence on business practice. Eight properties distinguish between such fads and the more enduring classics: simplicity, over-promise, universality, step-down capability, zeitgeist resonance, exaggerated novelty, celebratory role models, and evocative prose. In helping firms spot a fad and determine the appropriateness of an approach, these properties also uncover a paradox: The very factors that make fads so attractive and cause their widespread adoption also cause their quick demise.

Many popular administrative ideas are epitomized by a search for the quick fix—a simple solution that all organizations can embrace to make employees more productive, customers happier, or profits greater. Although some companies are profoundly transformed by these ideas, many are merely grazed by them. The notions do not serve the core business, or are embraced ritualistically without having any profound effect on performance or any other desired outcomes. Before long, the fad is forgotten and the firm is left with the human costs of disappointment and the financial costs of fruitless implementation. Frequently, fads can have a lasting destructive influence as a practice is embraced that alienates employees or triggers an abortive reorganization. Downsizing and reengineering, for example, have often demoralized the workforce and robbed firms of vital talent.

To help managers identify such potentially dangerous trends, we undertook to compare fads to more durable practices and techniques—the “classics”—in an attempt to tell the two apart. Our research identified eight characteristics that reliably distinguish between fads and classics, which managers can use to avoid the former and capture the latter. Paradoxically, these characteristics accounted not only for the initial popularity and rapid spread of fads, *but for their quick demise* as well.

We define fads as ideas that (1) become very popular quickly, (2) stay popular for only a few years, and (3) experience a steep decline in interest and attention, leaving little trace. To avoid ambiguity, we have first *defined fads by their life cycles, not any common properties or outcomes they exhibit*. Although people can argue about things like utility or originality, the life cycle of an idea can be measured objectively, albeit approximately, through surrogates such as citations. Having said that, we expect that many administrative fads—ideas with short life-cycles—*will* have a lot in common. For example, they will typically have more impact on the superficial style and jargon of managers than on substantive behavior or fundamental practices. And even positive effects will often be quite

temporary. As we will also see, most fads exhibit common traits in their content, scope, and presentation. We define classics as approaches or practices with an enduring life that can sustain positive interest for many years.

The life cycles of some prominent fads—and classics

Our objectives in this study were twofold: (1) to identify some prominent fads and classics by evaluating their life cycles; and, more important, (2) to identify key characteristics—warning signs for managers—that distinguish fads from classics. The first task was simple. We selected a set of *potential* fads and verified their status according to a quick rise and fall in the amount of journal and press coverage they received, as well as an increasingly negative tone of the coverage. Then we selected a set of potential classics and assessed their ability to sustain positive coverage over many years—coverage that would suggest their long-run utility.

In compiling our list of potential fads, we chose ideas that had elicited great excitement among American managers and a good deal of discussion in the professional media. We avoided techniques that were narrow in scope, such as quality circles, zero-defects, or management by walking

Table 1
Some examples of administrative fads and their gurus

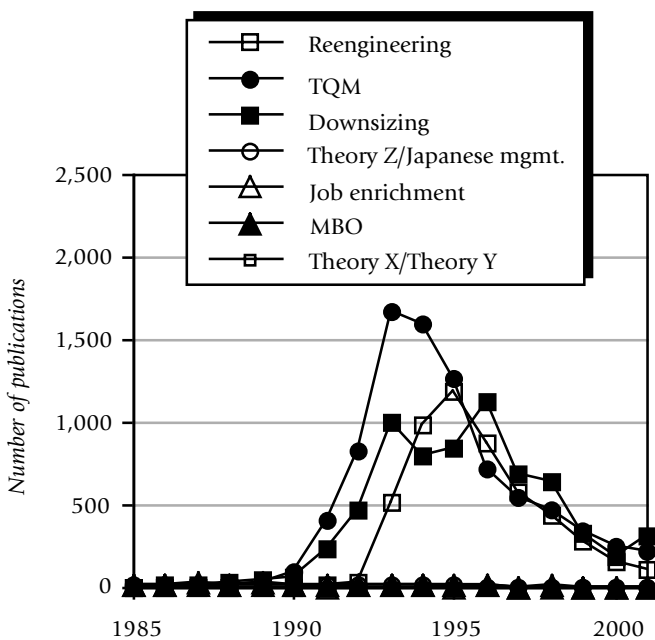
Management by objectives (MBO)	Drucker, Odiorne
Theories X and Y	McGregor; Likert
Orthodox job enrichment	Herzberg
Japanese management (Theory Z)	Ouchi; Pascale & Athos
Corporate culture*	Deal & Kennedy
Excellence*	Peters & Waterman
Total quality management (TQM)	Juran, Deming
Downsizing	(various sources)
Business process reengineering (BPR)	Hammer & Champy

**It was impossible to obtain data for the corporate culture and excellence fads because of the many different uses of the keywords.*

around, because they tended to be component elements of the more general ideas and programs we researched. Moreover, because our interest was organizations, we ignored ideas that focused on personal rather than organizational improvement, such as t-groups, skunk camps, and personal motivation seminars. Our list of fads—incomplete, of course—is shown in **Table 1**.

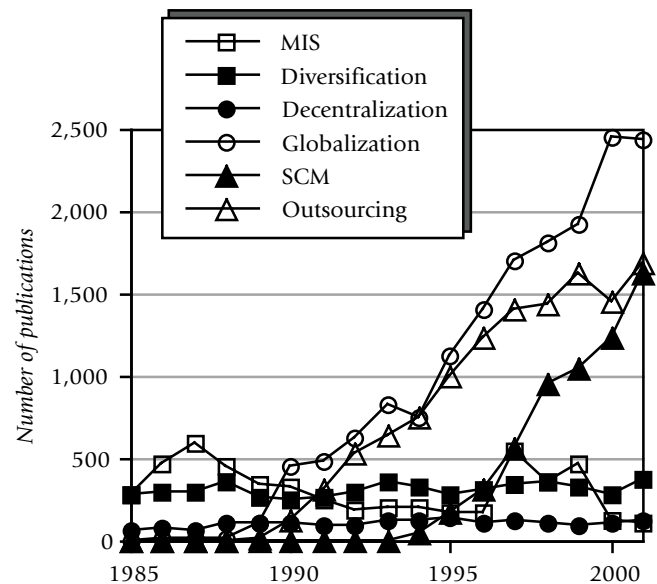
Again, these fads were not necessarily without merit. Fad auteurs frequently made insightful and sensible observations. The rapid decline in interest, however, suggests that their ideas were quickly abandoned, were only fleeting sources of advantage, or were rapidly transformed into something different by vulgarization or sexy packaging.

Figure 1
Publication counts of administrative fads—dead and alive (1985–2001)



Source: ABI/Inform—Global edition

Figure 2
Publication counts of administrative classics and risers (1985–2001)



Source: ABI/Inform—Global edition

Table 2
Article counts for fads and classics

	BPR	TQM	Down- sizing	Japanese mgmt.	Job en- richment	MBO	Theory X/Y	MIS	Diversi- fication	Decentral- ization	Global- ization	SCM	Out- sourcing
1985	0	5	6	15	15	17	3	275	289	61	3	2	0
1986	0	5	11	13	18	13	5	461	295	75	8	0	1
1987	0	8	18	5	25	20	5	594	294	64	14	2	3
1988	0	10	26	14	17	21	4	450	367	110	17	2	5
1989	0	34	40	15	31	21	6	350	267	104	115	0	19
1990	3	93	67	13	19	19	2	330	249	105	457	1	121
1991	13	403	227	14	3	15	3	256	263	100	486	2	309
1992	31	835	462	11	8	11	0	182	294	95	618	1	529
1993	517	1,670	1,002	11	14	23	3	208	352	128	835	7	642
1994	990	1,597	790	14	12	15	1	206	330	124	754	53	744
1995	1,190	1,266	844	14	3	15	1	168	289	137	1,127	174	1,006
1996	880	715	1,126	4	9	12	0	176	320	111	1,402	316	1,234
1997	581	540	692	7	7	4	0	546	350	119	1,703	567	1,414
1998	435	465	635	7	8	6	2	358	352	112	1,819	947	1,431
1999	287	337	335	5	5	4	1	470	331	97	1,925	1,052	1,632
2000	151	253	194	4	4	4	1	121	281	115	2,452	1,242	1,456
2001	114	218	311	1	6	4	0	110	368	129	2,438	1,622	1,690
	RECENT FADS			DEAD FADS				CLASSICS			RISERS		

Following others who have studied fads, we used the 2002 global edition of the ABI/Inform database to count the number of articles written about the potential fads. ABI is a comprehensive computerized bibliographical index containing abstracts of articles from more than 1,700 academic, professional, and trade magazines and journals. It allowed us to document the rise and fall of interest in administrative phenomena, but only since 1985. Accordingly, we identified three recent fads:

- *Business Process Reengineering* (keyword: "reengineering")
- *Total Quality Management* (keywords: "total quality," "TQM")
- *Downsizing*

Four older fads were included for comparison:

- *Japanese Management* (keywords: "Japanese management," "Theory Z")
- *Job Enrichment* (keyword: "job enrichment")
- *Management by Objectives* (keywords: "management by objectives," "MBO")
- *Theories X and Y* (keywords: "Theory X," "Theory Y")

We counted references to these fads for each year from 1985 to 2001. We would have liked to obtain data for the Excellence and Corporate Culture fads as well, but there were too many different uses of the keywords "excellence" and "culture."

In order to say anything meaningful about the life cycles and characteristics of fads, we had to compare them to

their less fleeting counterparts—those we call "classics." Otherwise, we risked identifying properties that hold not just for fads but all administrative phenomena. Examples of enduring classics include the intensive use of *management information systems (MIS)*, *diversification*, and *decentralization*. There are also the more recent potential classics, or "risers": *globalization*, *outsourcing*, and *supply chain management (SCM)*.

The results of our research are shown in **Figures 1** and **2** and **Table 2**. Clearly, TQM had relatively few references prior to 1989, then a dramatic growth in interest, peaking in 1993, followed by a sharp decline. As interest in TQM waned, references to reengineering soared, cresting in 1995; downsizing peaked a year later. References to reengineering began to decline in 1996 and continue to do so.

References to the earlier fads—Theories X and Y, job enrichment, MBO, and Theory Z/Japanese management—were minimal. It seems that once a fad passes from popular interest it is, for the most part, forgotten. And this does not take long to happen. Interest in Theory Z, for instance, would have peaked in the early to mid-1980s. However, as we see from Figure 1, references to it had declined to a level similar to that of other past fads as early as 1987.

Figure 2 plots the citations of the more established classics—flat curves—as well as the long-term risers. All curves are well above those of our dead fads, and are flatter and more gradual than the recent fads of Figure 1. We can conclude that the life cycles of our fads and classics are indeed quite different.

Table 3
Fads over time: A sampling of articles on TQM and reengineering

STAGE 1: ASCENDANCY

- **Something new and revolutionary is here.** "Total Quality: Wave of the Future," *Canadian Business Review*, Spring 1990; "Reengineering: It's Totally Radical," *Journal of Business Strategy*, November-December 1993; "Welcome to the Revolution," *Fortune*, 13 December 1993.
- **Out with the old, in with the new.** "From Total Chaos to Total Quality," *Industrial Engineering*, September 1990; "Reengineering: Out of the Rubble," *Personnel Journal*, December 1993.
- **Descriptions and how-to's.** "TQM: Understanding the Basics of Total Quality Management," *Manage*, May 1991; "A Six-Step Guide to Process Reengineering," *Planning Review*, March-April 1993; "How to Make Reengineering Really Work," *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1993.
- **Great praise and high promise.** "Total Quality Management: Giving Companies a Way to Enhance Position in Global Market," *Industrial Engineering*, April 1989. "The Promise of Reengineering," *Fortune*, May 3, 1993; "How to Work Wonders, Completely," *Management Today*, July 1993.

STAGE 2: MATURITY

- **Exhortations to jump on the bandwagon.** "Industry to B Schools: Smarten Up on TQM or Else," *Electronic Business*, October 1992; "Reengineering: The Hot New Managing Tool," *Fortune*, August 23, 1993; "The Reengineering Rage," *Industry Week*, February 7, 1994.
- **Initial questions of whether or not the technique is a fad.** "Warning: This Good Idea May Become a Fad," *Journal for Quality and Participation*, March 1991; "Quality: A Watchword for the 1990s or the Same Old Song?" *Health Care Supervisor*, June 1992; "Is Reengineering More Than a Fad?" *Personnel Journal*, December 1993.
- **Pleas to look beyond the superficial.** "Managing for Quality: High Priests and Hucksters," *Business Week*, 25 October 1991; "How to Stop Talking About, and Begin Progress Toward, Total Quality Management," *Business Horizons*, May-June 1993; "Reengineering: Beyond the Buzzword," *Business Week*, May 1993.

STAGE 3: DECLINE

- **Problems, pitfalls, and failures.** "Ten Reasons Why TQM Doesn't Work," *Management Review*, January 1993; "Management Fashion," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, December 1999; "TQM: The Mystique, the Mistakes," *Canadian Business Review*, June 1993; "Reengineering Isn't Enough," *Industry Week*, 17 January 1994; "The Hocus-Pocus of Reengineering," *Across the Board*, June 1994.
- **Questions of whether anything is worth saving.** "TQM: More Than a Dying Fad?" *Fortune*, 18 October 1993; "Why TQM Fails and What to Do About It," *Small Business Reports*, July 1994.

Some might argue that TQM is not a fad, since it made real contributions to business practice by helping to foster six-sigma, the ISO certification system, and the enhancement of statistical quality control. But as Tables 2 and 3 show, TQM as a movement spawned many disappointments. There was the typical rapid surge and then sharp decline in interest, and many later articles discuss why it has so often failed. Indeed, it appears that the technical aspects of quality assurance have advanced, but the fad-like aspects—quality committees, quality circles, quality seminars, and so on—led to ritualistic behaviors that resulted in very little improvement and were quickly abandoned. For a while, many firms adopted the ritual without truly boosting their quality.

We should add that the content of the articles seemed to change over the lifetime of the fad. **Table 3** presents a sampling of the changes, which progressed from enthusiasm and promise to instruction and doubt to disappointment and debunking. Indeed, after the thematic progression of Table 3 there is often a postmortem on the fad.

Warning signs for managers

Having identified some fads and classics on the basis of their life cycles, we explored which properties distinguished the two. The list we came up with (see **Table 4**) is incomplete and imperfect, but it does identify eight common characteristics or warning signs that virtually all our fads do have and most of our classics do not. Compare properties in **Table 5**, where fads scored positive on 76 percent of the warning signs and our classics on only 27 percent. These signs or properties should put managers on their guard. *It is not that any one of these qualities makes a practice suspect.* But when many appear together, we are most apt to be in the presence of a fad. Although some fads may have utility for certain companies, most on our list have led to lots of disappointments (the evolution shown in Table 3 was typical of our fads).

Before beginning to describe these properties, we must again point out one very central paradox that underlies all

Table 4
Eight common properties of administrative fads

<i>Simple, straightforward</i>	A fad's ideas are easy to communicate, comprehend, and reduce to a small number of factors, dimensions, or characteristics. Clear-cut distinctions, perfect contrasts, and ideal types are proposed. Simple solutions are suggested.
<i>Promising results</i>	Fad auteurs are confidently didactic. There is no false humility or hedging. Fads promise results such as greater control and efficiency, more motivated and productive workers, more satisfied customers, or some other valued result.
<i>Universal</i>	Fads propose solutions for everyone. Imparted truths are said to apply to almost all organizations, functions, tasks, individuals, or cultures. Fads claim enormous generality and universal relevance.
<i>Step-down capability</i>	Fads have the capacity to be implemented in ritualistic and superficial ways. Recommendations can be implemented quickly and easily, often without having much effect on organizational practices. Recommendations involving large expenditures of resources or substantial redistributions of power can be avoided.
<i>In tune with zeitgeist</i>	Fads resonate with the major trends or business problems of the day. They respond to challenges that are broadly felt and openly discussed. These might result from deficiencies in current administrative practices, technology changes, or shifts in economic or social conditions. Solutions are in tune with prevailing values.
<i>Novel, not radical</i>	Fads are novel, not radical. They question existing assumptions, criticize widespread practices, and point to fresh new ways of doing things. However, this novelty is not so much a new discovery as a rediscovery and repackaging of older ideas, values, and approaches.
<i>Legitimacy via gurus and star examples</i>	Fads are supported by tales of excellent companies and the status and prestige of gurus, not by solid empirical evidence. Stories of corporate heroes and organizational successes provide role models and suggest prestigious adherents, lending an aura of legitimacy to the ideas being espoused.
<i>Lively, entertaining</i>	Fads are almost always presented in a way that can be described as concrete, articulate, bold, memorable and upbeat. They are filled with labels and buzzwords, lists and acronyms. Interesting anecdotes and corporate war stories abound. Descriptions are vivid and extreme, making fads fun to read about and listen to.

Table 5
Paradoxical properties of fads and classics

FADS	<i>MBO</i>	<i>Theory X/Y</i>	<i>Enrichment</i>	<i>Theory Z</i>	<i>Culture</i>	<i>Excellence</i>	<i>Downsizing</i>	<i>TQM</i>	<i>BPR</i>
Simple	Y		Y					Y	
Promising			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Universal	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Step-down		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Zeitgeist		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Novel	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y
Examples/gurus	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y
Lively			Y	Y	Y	Y			

CLASSICS	<i>MIS</i>	<i>Diversification</i>	<i>Decentralization</i>	<i>Globalization</i>	<i>Outsourcing</i>	<i>SCM</i>
Simple						
Promising					Y	
Universal	C					C
Step-down	Y	Y		Y		Y
Zeitgeist		Y	Y	Y	Y	
Novel					Y	
Examples/gurus		Y	Y		Y	
Lively						

Y indicates that the fad or classic possesses the quality in question; *C* indicates that the technique or approach is said to apply universally, but its application is expected to vary according to the circumstances of a business.

our fad warning signs: The *very same* properties explain (1) the initial attraction and appeal of the fad, (2) its contagion and spread, *and* (3) its quick demise. Easy come, it seems, leads to easy go.

1. Fads consist of simple, straightforward ideas

The ideas behind fads are easy to communicate and comprehend. Typically, a small number of essential points or distinctions are used to convey some fundamental message. The esoteric is eschewed in favor of the basic, shades of gray in favor of bold colors. Indeed, some of these ideas are staggering in their simplicity. Some fads simplify by pointing to clear-cut distinctions, archetypes, or perfect contrasts. McGregor (1960) contrasts Theory X with Theory Y. Other fads reduce complex ideas, tasks, or situations to a very small number of factors, dimensions, or

Easy come, it seems, leads to easy go.

characteristics. Herzberg's (1968) two-factor theory proposes two essential types of motivators, one intrinsic and one extrinsic. TQM has been said to rest on five key pillars. The one-minute manager (Blanchard and Johnson 1981) succeeds mostly by paying attention to quick reward and punishment. Fads propose short lists of key factors that, if acknowledged and acted upon, hold the promise of economic or emotional salvation. In the forum of fads, very much can be based on very little.

Simple ideas appeal because they reduce cognitive demands, take relatively little time to absorb and master, and are easily communicated. Businessmen no doubt feel confident sharing straightforward ideas because there is little chance of error or confusion. The simple is far more memorable than the subtle or complex, so those who hear the ideas are able to impart them for quite some time. And simple ideas are especially convenient for consultants to pick up and spread because they appeal to such a broad audience.

Of course, the simplicity inherent in most fads may also cause them to be short-lived. Once everyone knows the secret, there is no more cachet, no more market for consultants or proselytizers, no room for any more "piggyback" books. Perhaps more important, the simplicity of fads makes them appropriate for a simple world. But

most administrators are not lucky enough to confront such a world. And because simple ideas ignore key realities, their usefulness is often limited.

LESSON 1: *Watch out for the really simple scheme: the one or two golden rules, the 2x2 matrix, the Theory A vs. Theory B. Think about the logic of the scheme and the complicating factors, perhaps critical to your firm, that are being left out. Consider the obstacles or exceptions to the scheme. Are there enough details to evaluate the approach being advocated?*

2. Fads over-promise

Fad auteurs write about the spectacular successes that result from adopting the practices they advocate. Confidently didactic, they have little false humility or hedging. Their fads promise outcomes such as greater control and efficiency (MBO, BPR), more motivated and productive workers (human relations, Theory Y, job enrichment), more satisfied customers (TQM), perpetual renewal (excellence), or some other valued bottom-line result.

Indeed, hope and promise are what many fads are best at delivering. Their animated sagas suggest a cornucopia of rewards—rewards often attained by managerial "heroes." They give managers an incentive to read, listen, and tell others the news. Although their promises attract attention and enthusiasm, they also set up managers for a fall. Actual achievements could pale quickly in comparison to those promised. And high expectations are those most likely to produce disappointment and abandonment of the fad.

LESSON 2: *Caveat emptor. Watch for promises that seem excessive, for reported fad results that are unrepresentative, that appear more due to chance, manipulation, or inimitable brilliance than any technique that is being recommended or that your firm can effectively embrace. Can you realistically assess the costs and benefits of the new approach?*

3. Fads propose solutions for everyone

Claiming enormous generality and universal relevance, fads appeal to a vast audience. They succeed in part because they propose practices that are believed to apply to almost *all* industries, organizations, or cultures. Theory Y, TQM, and reengineering are said to benefit all kinds of organizations—from General Motors to government bureaucracies, from giant utilities to mom-and-pop groceries. One size fits all.

This presumed general applicability makes fads that much easier to embrace. Managers do not have to worry about if, when, or where to use them. They are given the confidence to proceed without having to concern themselves with complications that may arise from their unique circumstances. The proposed universality of ideas broadens their perceived relevance. Indeed, many fad auteurs have a "This means you" subtext throughout their writings.

Moreover, the generality of their recommendations allows managers from different firms and departments to share in the new ideas, thereby enhancing the contagion. It also makes fads appealing to many consulting firms that can very efficiently use the same technique on a wide variety of clients.

Again, however, generality has a downside. Managers end up trying to implement notions that in many specific situations do more harm than good. Theory Y may be counterproductive in highly routinized bureaucracies; Japanese management practices may not be accepted in other cultures; TQM may be superfluous to cost leaders or producers of basic goods; and in some cases, BPR has been shown to devastate a firm's human resources and divest it of core competencies in the name of efficiency. In a complex world, it is likely that fad followers will be doing the wrong things at the wrong time.

LESSON 3: *Ask whether the practice applies to your own company. Why would it be relevant in your particular business model? For your own strategy and market? Is there evidence that it works in your industry? Does it augment capabilities that are central to your business? Does it take into account the particular resources available to your firm?*

4. Fads have a “step-down” capability, allowing superficial implementation

It follows from their simple and universalistic nature that fads cannot be overly explicit or exhaustive in their recommendations or implementation criteria. Many fad auteurs make vague, global suggestions about what to do, thereby encouraging ritualistic and superficial adoption. Indeed, cynics might claim that fads are *designed* to be implemented that way. Fads have what may be called a “step-down” capability—an ability to allow for primitive or partial implementation. Recommendations that involve considerable expenditures or redistributions of power are notoriously unpalatable, so most fads avoid them. Instead, they talk about new “attitudes,” quality circles, job rotation, goal-setting exercises, training programs, and so on. Such changes can be implemented quickly and easily without having much effect on the firm or its principal power-holders.

A vagueness in expected outcomes may provide cover for this superficiality. Fads generally do not specify clear-cut success or failure criteria that could reveal whether or not the implemented techniques have been successful. And where specified, criteria may focus on whether the techniques have been implemented, or whether they were *perceived* as being important or useful. With such criteria, one could “successfully” implement, say, quality circles simply by having a prescribed number of members attend regular meetings. There is nothing to indicate that people will take away the right attitudes, overcome pet political

concerns, or have enough power to alter the status quo. In the words of Oscar Wilde, “The play was a great success. The audience was a failure.”

Superficial changes also allow managers to believe they are being modern and progressive while avoiding the need for politically risky upheavals. Ritualistic changes are “grafted onto” a firm. They do not run very deep, are localized in only one or two departments, or fail to alter how the firm performs its basic tasks. There are meetings, new titles, a few committees, and some novel buzzwords. But it is “business as usual.” The superficiality of the changes makes them that much more palatable. Those in power can continue to do things in the old and comfortable ways while claiming to be using the latest management techniques. Workers know that things won't really change, not for long anyway. Given the limited scope and impact of the changes and their sporadic assimilation, substantive results are unlikely. Before long, managers realize that the fads have real costs but few benefits, and things revert back to the way they were.

In some companies, fads *have* triggered major changes. Reengineering has had a profound impact on the middle management tier of many companies; sometimes firms have benefited and become spry and efficient; sometimes too they have alienated their people and eroded core capabilities. TQM has also positively transformed some firms, but elsewhere has succeeded mainly in introducing unproductive rituals. The rapid decline of both these fads may be due partly to their unintended consequences and the fact that their broad application has rendered them less useful as sources of competitive advantage.

LESSON 4: *Ask if the firm will be doing enough to make a meaningful change, or just adding window dressing. Is real commitment being demanded for a new approach? Or is this another initiative without the staff, clout, or relevance to have any impact? Are specific, actionable recommendations being made that will change in a real and foreseeable way how the firm conducts its business?*

5. Fads are in tune with the zeitgeist

Fads resonate with acknowledged business problems of the day, responding to challenges being broadly felt and openly discussed. Such challenges may relate to deficiencies in current administrative practices, changes in technology, or shifts in economic or social conditions. MBO became popular with the advent of diversified businesses that demanded coordination and control from generalist managers. Ideas of corporate excellence, Japanese management, and TQM became popular when the US began losing market share to Japanese and European companies, often because quality was lacking. These fads provided solutions to problems that were on everyone's mind. The solutions also were in tune with evolving values. But they

focused on one core issue rather than the soundness of overall business practices. Thus, they could respond more to concerns of the moment than fundamental weaknesses, and tended to vanish with the next issue of the day.

LESSON 5: Sometimes there is a good reason for the broad popularity of an idea. But ask if that reason is germane to your own business. Although the problem being addressed may be on everyone's mind, that does not make the proposed solution appropriate. The very popularity of an issue creates a lucrative market for advisors and should trigger suspicions about any proffered resolution.

6. Most fads are novel, not radical

In some sense, fads have to create the “shock of the new,” grabbing attention with freshness and unconventionality. However, they are novel, not radical. They question existing assumptions, criticize widespread practices, and point to new ways of doing things. But frequently the novelty is rhetorical. Many fads turn out to be not so much a new discovery or invention as a rediscovery and repackaging of ideas, values, and approaches—“old wine in new bottles.”

For centuries, thinkers like Marx have worried about the quality of working life. The motivational distinctions made today by human relations psychologists were well understood in ancient Rome by the philosopher Marcus Aurelius and historian Titus Livius. Moreover, concern with efficiency *and* quality was very much in evidence in the writings of Adam Smith. Thus, the fad auteurs have taken old ideas and reformulated them to have greater appeal, perhaps by using simplification, memorable examples, and new vocabularies (satisfier vs. motivator; Theory X, Y, and Z). Another rhetorical device that dramatizes novelty is to contrast the old with the new. The old is supposed to refer to conventional practices, whose archaism may be exaggerated to highlight the benefits of the new approach. (How many managers *really* didn't know about quality or “one-minute manager” accountability, or embraced the prehistoric assumptions of Theory X?) But the novelty is rarely so radical as to challenge basic managerial values.

Fads are built mostly on credos that managers have long embraced: high motivation, fulfillment, success, efficiency, opportunity. And they rarely challenge the status quo in a way that would require significant redistribution of power or resources (see Point 4). In the domain of results, such constraints on radicalism may themselves be radically constraining. The superficiality of the novelty soon becomes apparent. Again, some fads, such as reengineering, did challenge basic approaches and power centers; most, however, did not. And even with reengineering, many firms opted for superficial implementation (see the reengineering titles in Table 3).

LESSON 6: Ask whether there is any real substance to the ideas being proffered. How exactly will they translate into con-

crete changes and new ways of doing things that will improve the business? Will the changes advocated go deep enough to have a lasting effect?

7. Fads attain legitimacy via gurus and stellar case examples

Fads attain legitimacy through the status and prestige of their proponents, *not by solid empirical evidence*. Often, a fad is espoused by an individual who has achieved “guru” status. Testimonials from other experts are used to lend additional support. And stories of corporate heroes and organizational successes provide role models and suggest prestigious adherents. The latter may show legendarily successful companies thriving by following the fad. Peter Drucker showed how MBO was used in the 1950s by a burgeoning General Motors. Peters and Waterman celebrated a host of enterprises that embraced their pillars of excellence. In fact, such role model companies are often deemed heroes by a fawning business press. Recently, Amazon.com, AOL, and Yahoo! have served as poster firms for the e-commerce revolution. Central to that revolution, according to Hagel and Singer (1999), is a potential “disaggregation” fad-in-the-making that advocates extreme specialization in a core competency while partnering with others for “bricks and mortar” and other services.

Just as fashion designers acquire prestige via their rich and famous customers, fad auteurs are helped along by stories of high-flying firms or star executives who have embraced the new approach, however unintentionally or incidentally. Of course, such tales of success often involve post hoc rationalizations that attribute good results to fads that had no impact. This again leads to disappointment. Miller (1990) reports that more than half of Peters and Waterman's companies lost their luster and ran into significant problems a few short years after the book was published. And so many of the great Internet disaggregators have yet to turn a real profit. The problem is with the method of drawing inferences: Given an endless supply of potential cases, all highly multifaceted, one can illustrate any thesis or proposition, regardless of its merits.

LESSON 7: Look for hard evidence of the efficacy of an approach. It is easy to be swayed by the words of gurus and stories of brilliant companies. But so often those gurus and companies fall from grace. And the stories may be of brilliant performance that has little to do with the approach being recommended. Ask too if the success stories apply to firms with resources and challenges similar to your own.

8. Fads are born of lively, entertaining prose

Framed with labels and buzzwords, lists and acronyms, fads are often presented in a way that is articulate, memorable, and upbeat. Interesting anecdotes, sagas of success and failure, and corporate war stories abound. Descrip-

tions are vivid, even extreme (recall Tom Peters's gripping accounts in *In Search of Excellence*). Problems are catastrophic, solutions near-perfect. Indeed, fads are very often made popular by interesting writing, usually in book form. The writer may be a consultant or an academic with a practical bent, almost never a practicing manager. And often the fad auteur writes in trenchant prose, adorning sometimes mundane notions with the sparkle of incisive phraseology. Although the expert status of a writer can confer some legitimacy, that is hardly enough to create a fad. Sober prose usually will not do the trick. To be influential, works must be at least bracing—more often lively and eloquent, with memorable tales, neat typologies, and an active and personal voice. Books or people that create fads are great fun to read and listen to; that is a major part of their appeal. Indeed, as in the realm of intended fiction, entertainment value is a major selling point.

In fact, fad auteurs write the way managers speak, or at least would like to speak. Tom Peters is perhaps the master of the medium. His adeptness at both oral and written communication no doubt accounts a good deal for the popularity of his ideas. He avoids jargon, except where he introduces it for purposes of panache.

Needless to say, ideas chosen for their ability to entertain usually do little to address organizational needs. And there may be a backlash from charismatic presentations that build up unrealistic expectations. Didactic tones also encourage quick acceptance, rather than reflective and selective usage; this also causes problems down the road.

LESSON 8: We all pay more attention to an entertaining presentation. But in the long run, content rather than style must carry the day. Again, make sure there is substance in a recommendation, that it is relevant to your firm, and that it is specific enough to be implemented in a practical way.

Paradox revisited

If there is a central thread running through these eight aspects that makes a fad attractive and popular, it is that they *also contribute to its short life*. Because simple concepts are easy to grasp, they often fail to do justice to the challenges they address. Similarly, universal recommendations are too coarse to apply or inappropriate in important situations. Over-promising results and dramatic examples seduce people into action, but they also make it clear early on that reality does not match the wonderful stories. Step-down capability also renders it easy to get on board—and to get away with doing very little. Superficial novelty can contribute to this “cop-out” because there is always the possibility of pointing to existing successes and attributing them to the fad. Finally, attunement to the zeitgeist attracts widespread interest, but may be of no rel-

evance to a particular firm, or may fasten onto a problem for which there is no solution. In short, our fad drivers giveth and soon taketh away.

These fad properties seem to be far rarer among classics, as Table 5 shows. Classics demand real changes in organizations and have lasting effects. They typically arise not from the writings of academics or experts but out of practitioner responses to economic and competitive challenges. They are complex, multifaceted, and applied in different ways in different businesses. There are no generally accepted primers of how to make such changes, nor are there any promised results or simple rules for all to follow. Globalization and outsourcing, for example, repre-

Today's Dilbert-reading employees are all too aware of the fad-surfing going on in the corporate world.

sent multifaceted responses to pressing business needs and opportunities. They elicit research into a multitude of strategic, corporate, and functional issues that, over time, change the way a large number of companies do business. Of course, such trends take longer to become widespread because of their significant costs and great impact on the firms that choose to adopt them. Moreover, though not always on the tip of everyone's tongue, they take much longer to go out of fashion.

As in all walks of life, if it looks too good to be true, it probably is. Executives would do well to bear in mind the relatively short life cycles of fads and the fact that many incur significant costs while producing few positive results. The constant shifting of bandwagons may cause distractions from important business, confuse and alienate people, and engender cynicism. Today's Dilbert-reading employees are all too aware of the fad-surfing going on in the corporate world.

Thus, when examining proposed changes relating to potential fads, managers should be constructively skeptical. They might do well to recognize the eight warning signs we have uncovered here and ask themselves some key questions. To recap, these are:

- What evidence is there that the new approach can produce positive results? Are arguments based on anecdote

or on solid evidence from lots of companies followed over time?

- Has the approach worked in firms similar to our own that face similar challenges?
- Is the approach relevant to the priorities and strategies of our company?
- Is the advice specific enough to be implemented? Do we have enough information about implementation challenges and how to meet them?
- Is the advice practical for our company given our capabilities and resources?
- Can we reasonably assess the costs and the prospective rewards?

If encouraging answers are forthcoming, executives may be on the trail of a “classic.” It will be especially useful to get inputs from different levels and functions of the firm in addressing these questions and to keep pushing for evidence of efficacy and relevance before embarking on any costly initiative. In dealing with management approaches, skepticism is a useful point of departure. We caution, however, that managers must not reject fads or potential fads out of hand, as these may have a positive impact on what the company is trying to do. Fads signal issues, problems, and techniques that managers really care about and may suggest approaches of value to specific contexts and enterprises. The trick for managers will be to evaluate them in light of the situations in their own firms. ○

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