Management Fads

How to Tell the Next Breakthrough Innovation From a Pet Rock

By James C. Galvin

Editor's note: Our reflection on CMA's 30 years led to a discussion about the many different management practices over the last three decades. Some worked. Others didn't. We asked ourselves: "How can you tell the difference between a management fad and something that's going to really work?" Organizational consultant Jim Galvin looks at some past management initiatives and helps us determine what is a fad and what is a true innovation.

Remember MBWA? "Management by walking around" was widely discussed in the 1980s as a way to improve organizational performance. What actually happened was that out-of-touch bosses got out of their offices and started micromanaging, violating chains of command, confusing supervisors, and generally irritating employees.

Yet this practice proved to be beneficial for executives in organizations with many layers. I know some ministry leaders who intentionally practice MBWA today as a way to stay visible and in touch with employees and volunteers. So is it a management fad or valid best practice?

Perhaps at some point in your career somebody gave you a copy of the *One Minute Manager*. In the 1980s, people were buying the thin $15 hardcover by the case. The book was a phenomenon. But have you ever been on the receiving end of a One Minute Reprimand? Did you find it inspiring and motivational? Yet goal-setting and immediate feedback endure as powerful management tools. So was the *One Minute Manager* a fad, or a collection of three best practices?

Let's not forget *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Millions of people have experienced the workshop or read the book. By the way, do you know anyone who can name all of the habits? Was it a fad or did it make an enduring contribution?

Flavor of the month

What exactly is the difference between a management fad and a management innovation that makes a lasting contribution? Surprisingly, not that much. "Management fad" is a derisive term used to describe a management philosophy

or practice that sweeps through organizations, then disappears when enthusiasm diminishes. Distrustful employees call these "flavor of the month" programs. Fads make a wave, while successful change efforts make a difference.

Judging by content alone, there isn't much difference between a management fad and a valid management practice. The former is simply an innovation or set of practices that have become popular. A popular practice only becomes a fad when managers and organizations adopt it, only to quickly drop it. If they successfully implemented it and achieved desired results, they'd call it a valuable best practice.

Management fads are marked by several phases. First is the formal *roll out* in an organization, usually involving workshops and posters. Next is *enthusiastic adoption* by

> **"Movies are a fad. Audiences really want to see live actors on a stage."**
> **Charlie Chaplin**

> **"The horse is here to stay but the automobile is only a novelty—a fad."**
> **President of the Michigan Savings Bank**

> **"I have traveled the length and breadth of this country and talked with the best people, and I can assure you that data processing is a fad that won't last out the year."**
> **The editor in charge of business books for Prentice Hall**

> **"They say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself."**
> **Andy Warhol**

some staff, and cynical adoption by veterans. Then there's a quiet period *of gradual disappearance* of the change. Soon, it's *back to business* as usual. The best practice didn't stick.

We'll never run out of raw material for participating in management fads. The Bible tells us: "Of making many books there is no end" (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Like the fashion industry, publishers need something new to sell. Through our lifetime, researchers and practitioners will continue to identify new management practices. As a result, we'll never run out of new management and leadership books.

To avoid the fads, we need to take time to understand the management practice in depth, assess whether it's a fit with our organization, and then adopt it effectively.

The problem is that managers attempt to use a popular innovation as a quick solution for a complex organizational problem. They're treating the symptom, or worse, just

What can you learn from a fad?

We've seen plenty of management fads the last 25 years. Beneath the hype, each is usually based on something that works and offers management wisdom.

Balanced Scorecard: Articulate your strategy and identify key indicators.
Chaos Theory: There's a reason why you're experiencing total confusion.
Corporate Culture: Organizations have a collection of values and norms that don't change easily.
Customer Focus: Find ways to delight your customers.
Delayering: Flatten the organizational structure.
Downsizing: Shrink the organization to survive.
Excellence: Be fanatical about getting good at what you do.
Lean: Eliminate all waste in the system for improved quality and reduced cost.
Learning Organization: Think about what you're doing and learn from your mistakes.
Management by Objectives: Negotiate goals with your employees.
Managerial Grid: Balance concern for people with accomplishing the task.
Matrix Management: Organize by function and cross-functional teams.
MBWA: Get out of the office and find out what's really happening.
Quality Circles: Talk together about how to improve work processes.
Quantitative Management: Study the cold, hard numbers.
Reengineering: Rethink all organizational processes.
Restructuring: Take apart the organization and put it back together a different way for greater efficiency.
Rightsizing: Increase some units while reducing others.
Six Sigma: Use appropriate measures to control quality.
Team-Based Management: Good teams outperform a group of individuals.
T-groups: Use small groups to teach interpersonal skills.
Theory X and Y: Use participative management techniques.
Theory Z: Use Japanese management techniques.
Total Quality Management: Lower costs while increasing customer satisfaction.
Zero-Based Budgeting: Justify every expense category every year.

Like the hula-hoop, fads that have died suddenly come back to life. Peter Drucker wrote more than 20 management books making major contributions, including *The Effective Executive* and *Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices.* Most managers would say the Drucker fad is long gone, but we now have evidence that China is at the beginning stages of a Peter Drucker fad. Will it be a fad or make an enduring contribution? It all depends on what the Chinese managers in training do with the concepts.

trying new things to see if they help. *Good managers use these innovations to provoke fresh thinking about how to improve organizational performance.* They appreciate the complexity of their organization and realize that if something seems too simple, they're probably right.

How to sponsor your own management fad

A fad only becomes a fad when managers grow tired of it and move on to the next thing. You don't have to participate in any management fads. But in case you do, follow these seven easy steps.

1. Look for what's hot. Skim business books and magazines for new approaches to management and organizational leadership. Don't bother reading in depth, it wastes time. The Internet can be useful here.

2. Talk it up. Spread the word in your organization. Find others who share your interest in this new practice. Remember there are two kinds of people in any change effort: sponsors and targets. Don't bother talking to the targets. Focus on ones with the power to actually lead the change.

3. Roll it out. Carefully choose the slogans you'll use. Far too many fads end abruptly at this step. Either buy a few copies of the book for people to share or put on a half-day workshop. Get everybody excited.

4. Look for shortcuts. Adopt only superficial aspects of the program. After all, you have to customize it to fit the uniqueness of your organizational culture. Don't allocate any budget for the change effort, because that always costs money.

5. Ignore complaints. Whiners…they need to get a life. Why are they always relying on you to provide meaningful support? Don't they know how to support each other?

6. Evaluate selectively. Look for anecdotal evidence or ask people how they feel about the program. But don't attempt to measure results. This only makes people feel bad and may expose the leadership if the program is not being implemented as intended.

7. Move on the next big thing. Don't be caught using yesterday's management technology. Besides, it takes too much work to get people excited about the old stuff.

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