

# Management Fads: Beware of the Next Big Thing

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Since the middle of the 20th century, the Department of Defense has undertaken a wide variety of initiatives to improve the management and control of the ever changing enterprise. Management by objectives (MBO), organizational effectiveness, total quality management (TQM), transformational (“good-to-great”) change management, and of course, the Lean Six Sigma business process engineering methods have risen and fallen over time.

In our combined 70 years of working with the U.S. military, we have seen and been involved in a number of these efforts, which are often heralded as “best practices.” In this article, we will summarize some interesting studies that have been conducted on what we consider management fads. We have not concluded that such ideas and practices do not have value, but it is important to be critical of what they claim to do and be careful of how we use them.

In his 1998 paper, “The Life Cycle of Academic Management Fads,” which was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Robert Birnbaum spoke about the negative and positive consequences of management fads on organizations.

The negatives are that “people become cynical and resistant to new ideas, the judgment of leaders is questioned, and funds and energy are seen as being diverted from important institutional activities.”

The positives are that fads “contain a ‘kernel of truth’ that can help institutions reconsider familiar processes. Fads may have important latent functions in cuing attention, promoting action, and increasing the variety nec-

essary for organizational evolution. And even after the fad itself has faded from view, its residual legacy . . . may remain and indirectly influence institutional structure and values. Even when fads fail, they are important.”

We certainly witness these positives and negatives in the Department of Defense, particularly the residual effects of fads. MBO is the basis for our personnel evaluation systems and arguably for campaign planning schemes in Army doctrine. While the Army’s organizational effectiveness program is defunct, the residuals include offsite leadership meetings and command climate surveys—often, but not always, used with a positive effect.

Another interesting piece is the 2001 *Academy of Management Executive* article, “Management Fads: Emergence, Evolution, and Implications for Managers,” by Jane Gibson and Dana Tesone. These scholars conclude that “organizations that were closely associated with popular management fads were more admired by the public and thought to be more innovative. These companies were also perceived as having better managers. The same research confirmed that CEOs [chief executive officers] of these firms also benefited from increased compensation, regardless of corporate performance.” Indeed, we have also seen that defense leaders with “new” ideas are popular because of their perceived innovation.

In “Management Fads: Here Yesterday, Gone Today?” a provocative 2003 report in the *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, Gibson, Tesone, and Charles Blackwell examine five fads that were popular in the second half of the 20th century: MBO, sen-

sitivity training, quality circles, TQM, and self-managed teams. They conclude that these innovations are not really fads but their essential logics morph into other names and technologies as time goes by.

In the researchers’ words, “the fad will either merge into standard management practice in its present or an evolving form (such as MBO) or it will become the roots of the next wave of management fads (such as quality circles).”

This seems to be true in the Defense community. We believe, for example, that the widely used Lean Six Sigma techniques of today can be historically linked to the scientific management ideas of Frederick Taylor (circa 1910), TQM (1980s), and process reengineering (1990s).

We feel that senior logistics leaders may jump from the pan and into the fire too quickly while chasing popular management movements. New management techniques may not last; they may instead be regenerated years later with a new name for the old ideas. Nothing is inherently wrong with the reinvention of old ideas, but it is important to remember where they came from—and why they may have faded.

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