Beyond Management Fashions : Perspectives From Symbolic - Interpretive and Postmodernism

การก้าวข้ามแฟชั่นทางการบริหาร : มุมมองจากแนวคิดสัญลักษณ์ การตีความ และ แนวคิดหลังสมัยใหม่นิยม

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss the underlining causes and effects of the likely phenomena in which managements and practitioners in many organizations overspend their organizational resources (money, time, human resources, etc.) on learning and implementing several management techniques which they believe as to achieve the state-of-the art-techniques in modern management. These phenomena, however, often reflect the lack of rationality in the process of consideration, adaptation, adopting and investment in those upcoming batches of management techniques reinvented worldwide. There is a very fundamental question to be addressed here , if we are to believe in a management period of "humanism and open system", how rational is the organization in the process of adopting modern management techniques?

Globalization causes races between organizations to keep up with the dynamics of management techniques invention, which may lead to mimicking behavior and over-consumption of management techniques among organizations in our society. These undesirable management behaviors may become pathological to the extent that organizations lose their focus on efficiency, effectiveness, and competitiveness and instead, adopting management techniques as a person is drawn to fashions. And this is when the symptom of "Management Fads and Fashions" adopting has occurred in an organization.

In order to discuss the root cause of these fashion phenomena in management, the article employs the perspective of symbolic-interpretivist and the perspective of postmodernist to analyse the inception, the process, the impact as well as to reflect on the subtleties of the phenomena in which modern organizations are competing in their consumption of management techniques. The article finally provides some suggestions from the symbolic-interpretivist and postmodernist perspectives on how to overcome these streams of management fashion on the basis of precaution and rationality.

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งอภิปราย ปรากฏการณ์ สาเหตุ ตลอดจนผลกระทบที่อาจเกิดขึ้นจากการที่ผู้บริหารและ บุคลากรในองค์การหลายๆแห่งได้มุ่งความสนใจ การเรียนรู้ และการประยุกต์ใช้เทคนิคการบริหารสมัยใหม่ จนนำ ไปสู่การลงทุนทั้งในด้านตัวเงิน ด้านเวลา และ ด้านบุคลากร จนมากเกินความพอดี หรือขาดการพิจารณาไตร่ตรอง ถึงความจำเป็นในการลงทุนรับเอาเทคนิคการบริหารจัดการใหม่ๆ ที่ถูกผลิตออกมาอย่างไม่ขาดสาย ท่ามกลาง ยุคสมัยของการบริหารแบบมนุษยนิยมภายใต้ระบบเปิด คำถามพื้นฐานจึงมีอยู่ว่า การนำเทคนิคการบริหารจัดการ สมัยใหม่เหล่านี้มาใช้ในองค์การแบบตามกระแส มีความสมเหตุสมผลหรือไม่? การที่องค์การต้องวิ่งตามกระแส การเปลี่ยนแปลงของเทคนิคการบริหารจัดการที่ผ่านการนำเสนอผ่านกลไกของโลกาภิวัตน์นี้ บางครั้งอาจนำไปสู่ พฤติกรรมเลียนแบบและแข่งขันกันบริโภคเทคนิคการจัดการ จึงอาจทำให้ไม่ใช่การใช้ประยุกต์เทคนิคการบริหาร เพื่อประสิทธิภาพและการเพิ่มศักยภาพในการแข่งขันขององค์การเสมอไป แต่อาจเป็นการยึดถือเทคนิคการบริหาร ในฐานะการตามกระแสแฟชั่น

ในการอภิปรายที่มาของปรากฏการณ์แฟชั่นทางการบริหารนี้ ผู้เขียนได้ใช้มุมมองจากแนวคิดสกุล สัญลักษณ์และการตีความ และ แนวคิดหลังสมัยใหม่นิยม มาใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ เพื่ออธิบายการก่อตัว กระบวนการ ตลอดจนใช้แนวคิดเหล่านี้ ในการสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงนัยยะ ต่างๆ ที่ทำให้เกิดปรากฏการณ์การแข่งขันกันบริโภค เทคนิคการบริหารร่วมสมัย และให้ข้อเสนอแนะเพื่อการรู้เท่าทันและการปรับใช้เทคนิคการบริหารใหม่ๆบนพื้นฐาน ของความมีเหตุมีผล

1) Introduction:

A count of publications over a period of time indicates that modern management concepts, techniques and practices often come and go like fashion as modern organizations fully or partially adopted them, then abandoned them, then jump into adopting another new management technique. And the process of adopting and readopting may continue indefinitely. Recently, the mimicking behavior of management techniques adopting has received growing attention by scholars and management practitioners alike. As the theories and techniques of management have been invented and reinvented so far, some organizations start adopting these techniques in a way of person adopting fad or fashion.

Nevertheless, as the awareness is increasing, most contemporary management literature fails to provide a clear theoretical foundation in explaining the issue of fashion adopting behavior in organization. Indeed, this catch-phrase of "management fashion" tends to build on common-sense notions of fashion on commodities, thus overlooking the theoretical explanations from the perspective of contemporary management theories. According to the above-mentioned rationale, this paper will investigate the concept of "management fashion" and its' implications for management practice in modern organizations. All arguments in this essay will be analysed under the theoretical perspectives of symbolic-interpretative and postmodernism influences in modern management.

2) What are Management Fads and Fashions?:

The theory of management fashion primarily draws from the work of Eric Abrahamson's theory which describes the process by which "fashion setters," which are generally consulting firms, management gurus, mass-media publications, and business schools, disseminate beliefs that certain management techniques are at the forefront of management progress. According to Abrahamson, the term "Management Fashion" is defined as "a transitory collective belief that certain management techniques are at the forefront of management process" and those management techniques are disseminated by management fashion setters including consulting firms, management gurus, business mass media publication and business schools, etc" (Abrahamson, 1996)

"The most important players in this arena are authors of management books, publishers, management seminar organizers and professors of business schools, who in different ways contribute to the attractiveness of the arena and, thereby, to the speed with which the fashion spreads. The best accelerator of a management fashion is a management bestseller which applies a specific rhetoric."

A management fashion and fad are used to characterize a change in philosophy or operations that sweeps through businesses and institutions. Some fads may become established aspects of business, sustaining themselves over several years. Others may disappear when initial enthusiasm wanes. The appraisal that a management theory or practice is a "management fad" is subjective and it may be used positively or negatively. Several authors have argued that new management ideas should be subject to greater critical analysis and for the need for greater conceptual awareness in managers

As illustrated in Figure 1, fads emerge quickly and are adopted with great zeal, then peak and decline just as fast. Fashions, on the other hand, are fads that briefly show signs of maturity before declining. According to Leonard J. Ponzi and Michael Koenig, management movements generally reveal themselves as fads or fashions within approximately five years after having gained some type of momentum. (Ponzi and Koenig, 2002)

Table 1: Fad and Fashion life
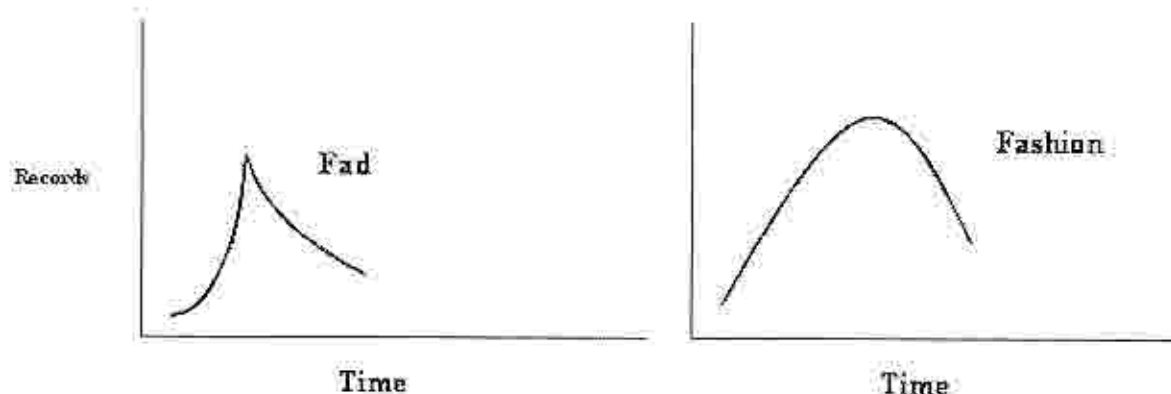
Source: Wasson, C. (1978). *Dynamic competitive strategy & product life cycles.* Austin, TX: Austin Press.

Edward Russell-Walling, the author of "50 Management Ideas You Really Need to Know" has clearly summarized the diffusion behavior of management thoughts invented and reinvented mostly in Western—industrialized countries, by arguing that,

"Management ideas are a product, like any other. They often begin as practice inside innovative companies, but they are usually hammered into theories—manufactured as ideas—inside the business schools. From there they go to idea retailers, the management and business consultants who distribute them among the corporate population at large. Companies put the idea to work and give feedback on any faults. Then academics tweak the design and, if it's a sound idea, the cycle continues." (Edward Russell-Walling, 2007: p. 3)

In general, management fashions are mostly associated with top-notch marketing that helps create interest in these ideas. Almost every major management fashion has associated with it one or several spokespeople who have the capability of communicating with great vigor and enthusiasm. Tom Peters made "excellence" a buzzword; Ken Blanchard popularized One-Minute Management; and TQM has Deming, Juran and Crosby to spread the word. While the Boston Matrix (BCG matrix) may be considered to be a brilliant management tool, but poorly deployed and then discredited, it is still illuminating in the right context. etc. (Edward Russell-Walling 2007, 20). It seems that the more popular the proponent, the more well-known the management technique becomes.

There is a compulsive question that needs to be clearly answered before proceeding to the next part of the argument: when and how can we tell that a particular management idea is being treated like a fashion? To be specific, the question is: on what basis and in what circumstance can we admit the claim that the techniques become fashion. The explanation can be elaborated as follows:

Management thoughts, tools, and techniques are not unlike any other products, they all have value and can be commercialized and generate profits. But management thoughts also have a shelf life. Management fashion phenomena exists when some eye-catching ideas becomes the hottest management must-have for a while and then gradually or rapidly fade from view, as the adopters learn that it does not, or is no longer helpful to enhance the competency of their business (or the adopter decided to abandon the idea after recognizing the hardship in practicing it). Nevertheless, some management ideas are better than others and become part of the mainstream, adapted in other countries spanning worldwide. While some management thoughts are overhyped and oversold, they rapidly fall, though some of their essence survives as part of accepted thought.

Abrahamson (1996) argues that management fashion should be treated more seriously than aesthetic fashion, giving two important reasons: first, whereas aesthetic fashions need only appear beautiful and modern, fashionable management techniques must serve an essential modernist management ideology by being both rational (efficiency leads to important ends) and progressive (newer and improved versions). Second, whereas socio-psychological force alone shapes the demand for aesthetic fashion, such force competes with technical and economic forces to shape the demand for management fashion. (Abrahamson, 1996).

3) How do management fads or fashions affect organizations?

"The swings between centralization and decentralization at the top of large American corporations have resembled the movement of women's hem lines" (Henry Mintzberg, 1981)

According to the 'diffusion of innovation theory", organization has considerable free-choice, in which a source of communication can interact with anyone in the system (Lorsuwannarat, 1995). The core concept of the theory is based on the notion of information as a means to reduce the uncertainty surrounding innovation. As the diffusion literature has examined the spread of numerous types of innovations, writers have used the labels "fad" or "fashion" to describe the diffusion of management techniques such as strategic planning units, job characteristics improvement, T-Group, matrix structure, quality circles, decentralization, benchmarking, joint venture, customer service revolution, reinventing government, autonomous organization, new public management (NPM), etc. Among these, there are two types of accounts that describe how management fashions should be viewed with caution: 1) The fads or fashions facilitate the diffusion of technologically inefficient administrative technologies. 2) The fads or fashions fulfill symbolic functions such as signaling innovativeness of the organization, but do little to boost its economic performance (Abrahamson, 1991).

From the theoretical perspective mentioned above, we might be able to explain the diffusion of many management practices from the West to Thai society, as Wanchai Meechart (2002), an academician in Public Administration, argues that it is a combining effect resulting from : 1) The impact of Globalization - along came international rules and law propagated by IMF, WTO, UN, NAFTA, AFTA, etc. 2) mimetic behaviors among organizations, mostly as a result of international study tours and training of Thai business and government elites in industrialized countries, 3) continuous and aggressive commercialization process of consultation system from major business consulting, MNCs, management gurus, etc. In addition, the academics that needs new product flow if they are to have a business at all, and partly by demand from managements, with their robust appetite for anything that promises to make their business better and 4) the way of thought underlining intellectual and wisdom colonization in Thai society. (Wanchai Meechart, 2002)

In general, modern organizations tend to embrace the newest management fashion and fad quickly. Nevertheless, there are some real costs of band wagonning, even when the ideas involved in the newly adopted fad are sound and productive. Pursuing management quick - fix solution is problematic. This circumstance will be explored in the perspective of institutional theory in the next part of the article.

Table 2 : Comparing Positive and Negative Effects of Management Fashions :

Positive Effects	Negative Effects
Management fashion provokes thought and discussion among managers and staff in the work place. It helps produce change in the workplace, by encouraging organizations to question their existing approaches and not to ride on management orthodoxy that is past its time.	Organization is attracted to the management approach because it is popular, or, on the surface, it makes sense. But when it comes to making the approach work, most do not have the depth of understanding to be able to apply it to a real workplace.
Management fashion creates excitement. Since their proponents are almost always powerful speakers and writers, many who come in contact with them come away energized and motivated by the prospects of better ways of doing things.	Management that embraces a popular management approach without adequate understanding will waste huge amounts of effort, decreasing employee morale and creating no new value for that effort.

Source: Work911/Bacal & Associates Business & Management Super site

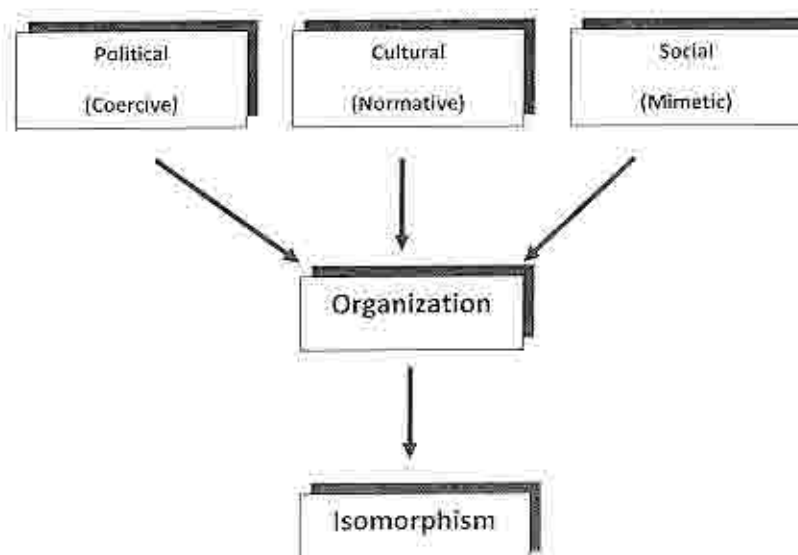## 4) Institutional Theories of Organization: Explaining a Bandwagon Effect

"The formal structures of many organizations in post-industrial society dramatically reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities"

(Meyer and Rowan, 1977:p. 151)

According to Institutional Theory, organizations are influenced by normative pressure. In general, organizations tend to conform to the norms and expectation of their institutional environment in order to survive. (Scott and Meyer, 1992) As organizations being constrained by social expectation, they often play along and sometime redirect their attention away from efficiency and task performance. To name a few, those normative pressures such as legal elements, standard operating procedures, professionalism, government regulation, social and cultural change, corporate business ethics, public image, etc., all coerce modern organizations to seek acceptance, and enhance their reputation and/or legitimacy from both the business and non-business communities surrounding them. According to Jepperson, the degree of institutionalization in a certain organization may be roughly conceived in terms of its relative vulnerability to "social intervention". (Jepperson, 1991)

In brief, institutional theory proposes a major assumption by arguing that: "apart from business/competitive environment, all organizations are embedded in institutional environment, and these institutional environments affect their structure, strategy, practice, and performance". This assumption of the theory implies at least two key propositions: first, organizations are more likely to survive if they obtain legitimacy and social support from their institutional environment. Second, organizational structures and strategies evolve through a process of adaptation and incorporate institutional elements.

Table 3: DiMaggio and Powell's Model of the Process of Isomorphism

The central argument offered by Institutional Theory can be briefly summarized as follows: "Organizations tend toward isomorphism with the institutionalized environment. Organizations incorporate the rules and myths of their larger social context to increase their legitimacy and survival prospects *independent of immediate efficiency considerations*" (Lorsuwannarat, 2004)

Institutional theory has generated valuable insight into the process that explains an imitative behavior among organizations (mostly within the same industries). Furthermore, it looks into the adaptation of organizational structure in response to the value and expectation of external forces which are complimentarily to the contingency perspective that focuses mostly on the internal and rational dimension (Oliver, 1991). In addition, Oliver also applied institution theory of organization in explaining the irrationality that drives organization to either diffuse inefficient management techniques or reject the old one and rush into adopting new and trendy ones.

By adopting of these normative elements, an organization often comes up with strategies to accommodate and fulfill social expectations, leading to "isomorphism" with the institutional environment. Organizations which exist in a highly institutionalized context and succeed in its process of "isomorphism" (be it coercive, mimetic or normative), will gain the legitimacy and resources needed to survive. Christine Oliver (1991), has applied the convergent insights of institutional theory and resource dependence theory together and has come up with a typology of organizations' strategic responses to the institutional environment, as illustrated in the following table 4. As the information in the table provides, it is very understandable that an organization may respond to the challenges from their competitive environment by choosing the most basic strategies of "acquiescence", following, invisible taken-for-granted norms, mimicking and obeying institutional norms, etc., all considered to be less committing and require less investment, yet encouraging the possibility of fashion adopting behavior.

Table 4 : Organizations' Strategic Responses to Institutional Processes and Challenges

Strategies	Tactics	Examples
Acquiescence	Habit	Following invisible, taken-for-granted norms..
	Imitate	Mimicking institutional models.
	Comply	Obeying rules and accepting norms.
Compromise	Balance	Balancing the expectations of multiple constituents.
	Pacify	Placating and accommodating institutional elements.
	Bargain	Negotiating with institutional stakeholders.
Avoid	Conceal	Disguising nonconformity.
	Buffer	Loosening institutional attachments.
	Escape	Changing goals, activities, or domains.
Defy	Dismiss	Ignoring explicit norms and values.
	Challenge	Contesting rules and requirements
	Attack	Assaulting the sources of institutional pressure.
Manipulate	Co-opt	Importing influential constituents.
	Influence	Shaping values and criteria
	Control	Dominating institutional constituents and processes.

Source : Christine Oliver, 1991

Institutional theory in management and organization explains the bandwagon effect that leads to fashion phenomena in the field of modern management and organization. For example, the study of Westphal, Gulati and Shortell, (1997) in the implementation of total quality management (TQM) programs in a sample of over 2,700 hospitals in the US, shows that early adopters customized TQM practices for efficiency gains, while late adopters gained legitimacy from adopting the normative form of TQM.

5) Understanding Management Fashion: A Symbolic-Interpretivist Explanation:

Symbolic-interpretivists played a crucial role in the history of organization theory by being the first to successfully challenge the objective science of modernism and offer an acceptable alternative explanation to management practices in organization. Symbolic-Interpretivists argue that it is the interaction among people themselves that constructs organizational and management entities as they make meaning and coordinate work activities. The overall logic of symbolic-interpretivism is based on the belief that organizational realities are socially produced as its members interact, negotiate and make sense of their experience (Hatch and Cunliffe, 43 : 2006).

In addition, the symbolic-interpretive school of management thought highly focuses on the significance of "multiple interpretations", the situation in which "meaning" is embedded in human interaction and in symbol and artifact that may be interpreted differently by different people. The symbolic-interpretivist's attention to how people in organization subjectively produce meanings from their own context provides some insight into how a particular management technique has achieved its popularity, in a sense of "tipping point" concepts, becoming management hype. The symbolic-interpretive organization theorists have been well-recognized for their ideas of applying an ethnographic method to organization and management study, which mostly contribute to the research methodology in organizational culture study.

According to the symbolic-interpretivist view, management fashions could be described as the outcome of multiple interpretations of individuals and subcultures blending to socially construct organizational reality. By being rushed into adopting and readopting several management techniques, organizations analyse and create the environmental features to which they (and their staffs) then respond. As organization races for the state-of-the-art management techniques, the rationality of adopting process tends to decrease. The sense-making and enactment concepts believe that the environment of an organization does not exist independently of the organization, rather it is socially constructed and reconstructed as people gather and analyze information, make decisions and take action based on their analysis. (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006: p.45) Indeed, it is actually their analysis that creates the environmental features to which they respond.

As Clifford Geertz's (1973) famous phrase describes: "man is an animal trapped in webs of significance he himself has spun." The pattern of adopting certain management techniques may have turned into fashion adopting behavior as organizations externalize something new by borrowing it from one another within their self-social construction process.

6) Postmodernism and Management Fashion

"The pursuit of enlightened human freedom has produced domination, oppression, and alienation as people have become subordinated to rational systems and technology—in other words modernism makes us slaves rather than master of our worlds..."(Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe , 2006)

For the Postmodernist, all social entities, including knowledge, order, institution and identity, are subjected to being questioned on their existence and reality and to have their underlining power and hegemonic behavior. With its purpose to challenge modernist worldview, post-modernism often appears to be critical in its orientation. According to the postmodernism, the myth of "human progress" leads to a rigid belief that scientific and technological advance is universally desirable and that progress is, by all means, a sufficient motive to justify all sources of human struggle and hardship, be it colonialism in the past or the management power of business in our present time. (Hatch and Cunliffe ,2006)

In the late 1800s, a Swiss linguist and poststructuralist inspirer, Ferdinand de Saussure, contradicted the prevalent modernist view of language as a mirror that accurately reflects the reality. Saussure, instead, argued that there is no essential linkage between "word" and "thing", their connection is arbitrary, and therefore language exists independently of reality. According to Saussure, language is a system of signs and all signs have two parts, the signifier (a sound pattern) and the signified (the concept of which the signifier refers). In Saussure's theory, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary because there is no natural or necessary or explainable relationship between a world and a concept.

In addition, for Saussure, the meaning of a word is not determined by the concept in which it represents, but by its position within language, that is, by its relationship to other words (i.e. rich/poor, white/non-white, the middleclass/the grass-root, organization/ disorganization, etc.). Overall, the poststructuralist view of language provides the insightful explanation of the management fashions phenomena in a way to comprehend the origin and diffusion of some management buzzwords in contemporary organizations. For instance, "good governance" and "new public management" (NPM) are management concepts and techniques that mostly embraced by Thai public organizations for a decade. However, these knowledge and principles when shifted in to Thai management contexts, fall into multiple interpretations, become redundant, lose identity and yet underachieve in term of the effectiveness and measurable outcomes.

Postmodern Theory on Management and Organization has been recognized for the last twenty years as the work of Cooper and Burrell (1980) are widely acknowledged as the first published article to discuss the influence of Postmodernism on Organization and Management. (Hancock and Tyler, 2001). According to the concept of Postmodern Organizational Theory, organization is traditionally governed by the discipline that marginalized the 'otherness' of non-mainstream organizational thoughts and activities in flavor of the quantifiable and technically-appreciable manifestation of organizational orders (Hancock and Tyler, 2001)., the explanation for fads and fashions phenomena in management may be explained by the postmodern assertion that, "Reality is what others make you believe".

Table 5: Comparison between the Three Perspectives on Management Knowledge

	Modern	Symbolic-Interpretive	Post Modernism
Reality is a	Pre-existing unity	Socially constructed diversity	Constantly shifting and plurality
Knowledge is believed to be	Universal	Particular	Provisional
Knowledge is developed through	Facts and information	Meaning and interpretation	Exposure and experience
Knowledge is recognized via	Convergence	Coherence	Incoherence, fragment, deconstruction
Model for human relationship	Hierarchy	Community	Self-determination
Overarching goal	Prediction and Control	Understanding	Freedom

Source : Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe, 2006

7) How to survive Management Fashions?

Management fashions characterize a change in philosophy or operations that sweeps through businesses and institutions. While some of these fads and fashions in management may become established aspects of business, sustaining themselves over several years, others may disappear when initial enthusiasm wanes. According to the symbolic and postmodernist

view, these management fashions, often propagated by those international management think tanks and fashion setters, are useful tools in political maneuvers during the implementation process and help in making the organization appear rational after the completion of the restructuring process. For all these circumstances, the discussion of the final part of the essay will focus on how organization would adopt and practice management techniques, not management fashions.

In order to be successfully cross those fads in management, there is one common attitude to start with: be sure to think as a "master of knowledge" not a "slave of knowledge". Management is certainly not an absolute but an application of science and arts to solve problems in organizations. To select a certain technique in management, one must know thoroughly the strengths and limitations of that technique and be able to adapt it to fit their context of the problems. It will be degenerative and unwise for an organization is to be evaluated on the basis of whom is the best imitator of the original or by seeking approval of those management fashion setters and dealers, instead of evaluating on the basis of substantive results in their performance and competitiveness.

These are some suggestions on the basic idea of how to adopt modern management techniques rationally

1. When coming across new exciting ideas, whether they are from world-class business consulting houses or bestselling books from business gurus, do not even consider applying them to your organization without reading and learning more about their empirical results.

2. Specify measurable results to be expected from adopting and implementing the new approach. Organizations need to be self-ascertained that they know why they are doing so. Keep in mind that any management fad or trend is a tool, pure and simple. And tools are good for achieving certain results, and not so good for creating other results.

3. Be aware that it is easy to use a new management approach to create the appearance of change, and to increase activity (as responsive to institutional challenges, etc.). But, it is a far different thing to use new approaches to create true value or results. So, look to the value added by these activities, and weigh the value against the costs.

4. Steer a steady course. Simply put, when implementing a new approach, do stick with it. If the data suggests that it isn't working, first examine your own knowledge, and look at how it was implemented, before rejecting the whole approach. Do not switch from one to another management techniques like a fashion consumerist.

5. Evaluate, evaluate, and reevaluate. Getting the evaluation process beyond employee satisfaction must include hard, data-based measurements of effectiveness or productivity. Keep in mind that new initiatives will sometimes lower effectiveness during early implementation as people adapt and then yield large gains.

6. Lesson learned from postmodernism, be aware that it is "the language game" that promotes different ideas on how an excellent organization can be described. So, learn several different language games in management at once and move comfortably between these management communities.

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