

“Deterministic, Highly Reductive, and Transient”

John Lubans Jr.

Allen Veaner’s cerebral take—in the title—on what he calls “business management derivatives” is a perfect lead in for this discussion of business fads; why we embrace them or eschew them, and what, if anything, can we get out of them.¹

Fads

First, what about the word *fad*—what does it cover?

Not all fads are created equal. The word *fad* is not the best term with which to span, in one breath, a wide range of workplace strategies, from the foolish to the savvy, from simplistic—“highly reductive”—adages to well-researched conceptualizations of how people are most productive. *Fad* suggests something short lived soon to be replaced by something equally ephemeral. Like the annual fashion shows that dictate the new fashion color for women and tie width for men. That’s a fad.

In the realm of the fad we can find fad phrases, adages, buzzwords, and exhortations. We’ve all used a few of these. Like most clichés, they are open to ridicule and may be used to serve the opposite purpose of the original intent. For example, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” was never far from the lips of one director who used it to dismiss staff attempting to improve mediocre systems. Some are:

If it ain’t broke, break it!
Do more with less.
Work smarter not harder.
There’s no “I” in “team.”
Open-door policy
Change management
Paradigms (greatly enhanced with the term “shifting”)
Customer-centric

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The learning organization
Who Moved My Cheese? (One organization’s grapevine has it as “Who Cut the Cheese?”)
The FISH Philosophy
One Minute Manager
Think Outside the Box (TOTB)

TOTB is now immortalized in airline-seat-pocket sales catalogs. One purveyor offers a forty dollar “sculpture” of three thinkers—stick-figure Rodin—hovering on thin brass poles above an open-sided brass box. The tag plate on the wood base profoundly claims: “Only those who see the invisible can do the impossible.”

That the TOTB thinkers are tethered to the rim of the box by three brass balls apparently does not impede seeing the invisible and doing the impossible.

And there’s a subset of the business fad industry: books. Not about a system of work, but titles written by celebrity leaders like Donald Trump, Jack Welch, and others bent on explaining how they got to be as good as they decidedly are and how you too, if you follow their advice, can make it to the top. Mr. Trump’s latest, *Think Big and Kick Ass*, probably defines the genre.²

Non-Fads

While often lumped together with fads, there are Systems of Management (SoM), like Management by Objective, Total Quality Management (TQM), Strategic Planning and Teamwork. As well, I’d include the Golden Rule concept.

These SoMs represent well-thought-out, proven, different ways of doing business, always moving away from top-down management. These are non-fads and they are not of the quick-fix variety that beckon to us siren-like, promising heightened library productivity with minimum investment.

The SoMs have some traits in common: they change the nature of fixed boss/worker roles and offer different, more informed ways to make decisions. SoMs do threaten the status quo by decentralizing an organization’s decision making. These “new” systems tend to disintermediate

managers, including those in the executive suite—making them less essential to daily decision making—and leaving the micromanager with too little to do, other than to . . . lead!

SoMs often share a liberated philosophy that respects the worker as an intelligent collaborator, partners them with managers, and expects each worker to understand what they are doing and to be able to make informed decisions—within the goals of the organization—about what they do.

Almost always these systems are up against the inherited pecking-order model—the organization chart—that consciously or unconsciously ties the hands of employees (presumably to assure consistency and quality), requiring approval of any deviation from established procedures. Eventually, the constant permission seeking exhausts staff and they go on autopilot, doing much less than what they could. While very good staff leave, other good staff remain and waste their energy in developing work-arounds to circumvent the inflexibilities of the “system.” Work processes harden and resist improvement. The system then becomes more about defending why something is done, more about why change is not possible, and less about getting better.

Obviously, if a top-down organization declares itself a team-based organization but sustains the hierarchy, nothing much beyond vocabulary will change. When nothing changes in the executive suite, nothing will change in the organization. In that circumstance, teamwork is relegated to fad status. The same can happen to TQM, Strategic Planning, and other SoMs. I have seen TQM become Totally Quagmired Management, and I have flipped through piles of strategic plans that were in reality *status-quo* plans.

Often critics will use the non-results of such half-hearted applications to dismiss the overall concept behind a new way of work. In reality, the concepts are robust; it's the application that's weak. In my personal experience, well-integrated applications of Continuous Improvement and Teams have delivered on their potential. Innovation and productivity skyrocketed, and, yes, I am talking about a library.

It's Pupillary, My Dear Watson, Pupillary

Why do librarians distrust so-called fads, including SoMs? What promotes this distrust? I have often wondered why some people simply don't get it. By “it,” I mean an intuitive way of working: a supportive environment, teamwork, people encouraging each other, with little need for the superficial authority. Yet some folks seem to be about appearances and titles, the corner office and the rug on the floor—as if, what else have they been working for? Like the well-known Theory X and Theory Y that splits managers into two camps—hard-nose, hands-on supervisors or hands-off, empowering managers—perhaps it is our personal philosophy that matters most. We embrace or reject the

new ways of work on the basis of who we are and what we believe is important, regardless of potential improvements in adopting new ways of working.

I have had the good fortune to return to my native Latvia and to teach several leadership workshops. I was intrigued that the Latvian librarians were more resourceful and willing to collaborate than many other librarians I have met in my career.

Until 1991, Latvians were repressed by a totalitarian—as in Stalin—rule. Some observers confirm that a generation of leaders was lost during fifty years of communism. Then, in 1991, Latvia became exuberantly independent. Who, then, would lead? Drove of expats helped out. Now a new native generation of leaders appears to be emerging.

This generation's parents include mothers and fathers sent to Siberia and otherwise punished and harassed for questioning authority. So, from what I saw in my workshops, this new generation of leaders had an unparalleled collaborative spirit, a can-do attitude, a willingness to help each other and to take chances. Was this new spirit in reaction to the highly central, stifling, and fear-inducing communist way?

Maybe post-1991 library leaders, with individual freedom regained, would desert the hierarchy, preferring instead a much more liberated and participatory process of work.

I got in touch with a Latvian economist in Riga who studies labor-management conflict including recent dust-ups at the national symphony and at the opera house. These two were of note because their leaders are heralded in the European art scene as highly innovative and liberated.

When I pitched her my idea that there was a newly invigorated, freed-up leadership, she would have none of it. What she sees among the new leaders is, to use her term, *pupillary* leadership, a pupil-like slavish attention to doing what Western leaders are thought to do. Rather than integrating and developing their own style, the Latvians are imitating Western ways.

Integration might come, but, in the meantime, whatever they are doing, the economist says they have yet to put their own stamp on it. The all-too-familiar hierarchy is the fallback, as it is for most libraries. I hope by giving the Latvians a chance to experience how positive teamwork and collaboration can be for an organization, they will keep in mind alternatives to the old.

When Southwest Airline's president Colleen Barrett asked me recently if I had a *PASSION* for CUSTOMER SERVICE, I heard the conviction (and capitalization) in her voice. If some consultant guru had asked me that, I would have been thinking, “You gotta be kidding!” She *knows* customer service. After all, Southwest is the perennial industry leader in customer satisfaction,

For most organizations, customer service is a market-

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- The more you practice good management skills, the better you'll be. Read good books and articles on management, find strategies that suit your style, and use them. Listen to your employees and let them know that you care about them.
- If it's time to have a difficult conversation with an employee, practice talking to yourself in the mirror or find a trusted colleague to work with.
- Know when to delegate. This demonstrates trust in another's ability and helps develop that person's decision-making skills.

Save Your Money and Buy a Postcard

This is a clever travel technique that I've come across several times. Do you really think that your photo of the Eiffel Tower is going to match any postcard that you could buy? So, if it's just a *picture* of the monument that you want, pay for it. On the other hand, if you feel that you've found a particularly unusual angle that speaks to you, or if you spot a unique photo opportunity, *go for it!*

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changes. Although this article focuses solely on the role, scope, and purpose of library HR officers in academic institutions, public library directors in larger systems face many similar situations and may likewise benefit from using specialized HR administrative models. In many cases and for many reasons, the prudent decision is often to have an in-house HR expert familiar with the library's issues.

References and Notes

1. For example, see Simmons Welburn, Janice McNeil, and Beth McNeil, eds., *Human Resource Management in Today's*

- Did a normally reliable staff member drop the ball on a project? Find out what the circumstances were behind it and then move on (buy the postcard). On the other hand, you may need to spend a lot of time coaching an employee who isn't always able to follow through on a project. In this case, be prepared to examine different ways to motivate and encourage the employee.

Have Fun!

If photography is your hobby, you should enjoy it. Focus on flowers, or set up that still life that you've been visualizing for a while. Capture some exciting cityscapes. Genuine interest will keep you going and encourage you to continue learning. Similarly, discover the joys of management. Watching people grow and develop, providing opportunities for others, or managing projects all contribute to your growth, both personal and professional.

Academic Library: Meeting Challenges and Creating Opportunities (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2004).

2. CUPA-HR Homepage, "We Are Higher Education," www.cupahr.org (accessed Mar. 13, 2008)
3. Library administrators need to be judicious in applying their "uniqueness" argument to the campus HR department. While there are indeed several unique elements in the administration of the academic library, there are many more administrative similarities to the campus as a whole. For an example of a library inappropriately applying this "uniqueness" argument, please see Dennis R. Defa, "Position Analysis of Library Assistants," *Library Administration & Management* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 88-93.

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ing ploy, a pretense that the customer is important. That lack of conviction comes through in the corporate voice, and it is most obvious when staff are not given freedom to resolve customer problems. When staff have to literally *stick to the script*, there is no passion for customer service.

There's a quote in a customer service book that Ms. Barrett gave me: "When the heart is in the right place, the ego gets out of the way."³ Simple and complex, it explains to me why some new ways of work catch on and why some do not.

References and Notes

1. Allen B. Veaner thusly sums up "business management derivatives." He elaborates on the topic in his "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained? A Persistent Personnel Issue in Academic Librarianship, II," *College & Research Libraries* 55 (Sept. 1994): 389-404. While admittedly critical of business fads, he does not "suggest that we cannot learn from business and industry or should not apply appropriate business techniques to managing academic libraries. The key is in the words *appropriate* and *proper*" (398).
2. Donald Trump and Bill Zanker, *Think Big and Kick Ass in Business and Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
3. Ken Blanchard and Barbara Glanz, *The Simple Truths of Service-Inspired by Johnny the Bagger* (Napier, Ill.: McMillan Media & Simple Truths, 2005), 72.