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BEYOND THE HYPE: A DECISION SUPPORT FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT THE RATIONALITY OF MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Abstract

Objectives: In an era of management hype, where management concepts quickly become buzzwords within the business community (e.g., chat GPT, Artificial Intelligence, pay transparency or Industry 5.0), the crucial skill of a manager is the ability to think critically about the rationality of all those fashionable management practices. To stimulate this, we present a heuristic decision support framework to assist managers in thinking more critically about management fashions – management practices that are intensively promoted and attract public attention but might merely imitate rationality and progress.

Material and methods: We employ a method of conceptual analysis, drawing from Abrahamson's management fashion theory, self-determination theory, literature on management fads and evidence-based management.

Results: The proposed decision-making support framework presents a heuristic decision tree based on three steps to evaluate management practices' rationality, involving critical thinking about their goals, importance, and efficiency.

Conclusions: The framework can be used not only to assist managerial decision-making but also to teach management students to think more critically and to empower the business community to question the rationality of currently fashionable management practices. Our decision support framework might act as a vaccine for the so-called shiny object syndrome, the tendency to chase novel, popular, or exciting management practices without evaluating if they deliver what they promise.

Keywords: *management fads; management fashions; artificial intellgence; evidence-based management*

Introduction

Instead of being interested in what is new, we ought to be interested in what is true.
Pfeffer & Sutton (2006, p.29)

People (and managers) love new things, whether it is AI, ChatGPT, or Industry 5.0. All these are new and exciting concepts, shiny objects that attract our attention. However, extremely popular concepts do not always deliver what they promise (Hills, 2022). Many companies that adopt trendy management techniques are not satisfied with the results (Brickley, Smith Jr, & Zimmerman, 1997; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Barends & Rousseau, 2018; Kulikowski, 2021), and many managerial ideas previously presented as *game changers* are simply abandoned over time (Taylor, 2012; Pollach, 2022), fading into obscurity (Zorn, 2017). Why does this happen? To describe this phenomenon, researchers coin the term *management fashions* (Zimmerman, 1997; Miller & Hartwick, 2002; Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020), which might be defined as *a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads to rational management progress* (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 257) and *managerial interventions which appear to be innovative, rational, and functional and are aimed at encouraging better organizational performance* (Phillips Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Birkenmeier, 1999, p. 321). Management fashions are not inherently negative, but they are usually referred to pejoratively and are presented in contrast to sound management practice (for a detailed review, see Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020). Recently, Pollach (2022) presented a historical review of management fashions and provided examples of eight popular management topics that were considered fashions in literature, such as Balanced Scorecard, (Business) Process Reengineering (BPR), Design Thinking, Knowledge Management, Learning Organization, Management by Objectives, Matrix Organization/Structure, Total Quality Management (TQM). According to Abrahamson (1996; see also Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020), these and similar management fashions emerge and exist due to stakeholders' expectations that managers behave according to norms of rationality and progress. The norm of rationality requires managers to use optimal solutions for managerial problems. However, in complex business environments, stakeholders lacking domain expertise may perceive popular management practices as optimal solely based on their widespread adoption. Consequently, there exists external pressure on managers to adhere to these trends. Managers may prioritize the adoption of these fashionable practices to align with stakeholder expectations, even if there might be better, more sensible options available. Whereas the norm of progress means that stakeholders expect managers to always improve and use the latest practices. If a manager sticks to *old ways of doing things,* stakeholders might think they are not good at their job, and that they do not keep up with the latest breakthroughs. So, managers feel pressured to use new fashionable managerial practices (e.g., big data, AI, etc.) to look modern, smart, and progressive, even if those practices do not actually solve managerial problems any better. Thus, management fashions arise from the high demands for novel progressive practices and managerial innovations (Brickley, Smith Jr, & Zimmerman, 1997), creating a market of fashions that focus on building the image of a rational and progressive manager.

But why should we care about management fashion? Often, management fashions are adopted with positive intentions to improve performance, and popular fashions may introduce some useful ideas (Taylor, 2012; Miller & Hartwick, 2002). As some fashions may be beneficial, caution is needed to avoid blindly following trends without considering their true effectiveness (Ogbonna & Harris, 2002). Particularly, management fashions can be possibly harmful in two ways (see. Abrahamson, 1991). Firstly, they might lead to the adoption of ineffective but fashionable practices that are current trends. Secondly, they force the rejection of effective but unfashionable practices that are considered boring and not progressive enough. Because management fashion might be potentially harmful, managers must have the awareness and tools to distinguish sound managerial practices from those with the potential to be a management fashion. Thus, the central research question of this study is: how can we differentiate management fashions from sound managerial practices?

Why this question is important for managerial theory and practice? Thanks to Abrahamson's theory of management fashion, we know that management fashion exists and what are their mechanisms but still, managers have no guidelines on how to recognize if a given emerging managerial practice has the potential to be a fashion. So, although we know about management fashion, we do not currently know how to protect ourselves against fashion's possible negative impacts on managers performance. Thus, in this study, based on a literature review and conceptual analysis, drawing from Abrahamson's management fashion theory, self-determination theory, and evidence-based management, we propose a conceptual framework that serves as a decision-making heuristic for managers to critically analyze management practices' potential to be a fashion.

In essence, this study aims to contribute to managerial theory and practice by presenting a heuristic decision-making framework to distinguish between ineffective management fashions and effective practices, helping managers make informed decisions about adopting popular management trends. Our contribution to management theory lies in highlighting a possible negative impact of management fashion on management practice and providing managers with a conceptual tool to think more critically about the various business trends offered to them. From a theoretical standpoint, we draw on Abrahamson's management fashion theory and discuss the role of societal expectations in the process of fashion adoption, even when they fail to deliver what they promise. In seeking explanations for the proliferation of management fashion in contemporary organizations, our theoretical contribution lies in expanding Abrahamson's theory by incorporating the concept of basic human needs from self-determination theory framework. This suggests that one of the fundamental human needs, the need for novelty, drives management fashions, leading to the adoption of management practices based on how good they are in satisfying the need for novelty rather than based on they rationality. These new insights broaden management fashion theories by suggesting that not only external social norms but also basic human needs might influence management fashion adoption. Therefore, we believe that our conceptual elaboration presented in this paper could significantly contribute to management theory and practice by helping to understand the origins of management fashion and providing tools to address them.

Conceptual framework development – how to distinguish management fashions from sound managerial practices?

Abrahamson's (1996) management fashion theory provides us with a conceptual framework to examine trendy management practices. From this viewpoint, one of the crucial aspects of management fashions is that they aim to create an appearance of rationality (Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020). Therefore, we propose that to differentiate ineffective management fashion from sound management practices, we should analyze whether the new fashionable management practice is genuinely rational or merely pretending to be. Regarding rational management practices, we perceive *rational practice* as one that embodies *efficient means to important ends* (Abrahamson 1996, p. 255). Drawing from Abrahamson's approach to rationality, an analysis of rationality can be further broken down into three sub-steps. First, we need to establish what the *ends* are, namely, the objectives of a given management practice. Second, we must assess whether these *ends* are important or not from a managerial perspective. Third, we need to evaluate whether there is evidence that the given management practice serves as an *efficient means* to accomplish these important ends.

1. What are the goals of new management practice?

You've got to be very careful if you
don't know where you are going,
because you might not get there.
Yogi Berra

The goals and content of managerial practices, which constitute management fashions, are often ambiguous and imprecise, as exemplified by statements like *implement AI algorithms for improving performance.* Vague statements about goals are frequently employed by management fashion setters to make promises that, due to their ambiguity, cannot be evaluated. If the content of managerial practices is ambiguous, we do not know how to implement them. If the goals of managerial practices are vague, we cannot assess whether they have been achieved. Thus, the first step in the analysis of the rationality of management practices is attempting to clarify the content and specific goals of the new managerial practice. We should ask whether new management practices can be clearly defined. What is the meaning of the labels and slogans that describe the practice such as *AI algorithms*? To clarify the goals of a new management practice, we suggest using a framework called PICOC—a conceptual tool popularized by evidence-based management (Barends & Rousseau, 2018). PICOC is an acronym that stands for P – population, I – intervention, C – Comparison, O – outcome, and C – context. We adapt it for use in the context of clarifying the goal of management practice. As an illustrative example, we might take an emerging practice of *implementing AI algorithms for improving organisation performance.* Here, population (P) describes the goal in relation to who might be affected by the managerial practice—for example, for what group of employees AI is set to bring benefits. Intervention (I) relates to a detailed explanation of how managerial practice is set to improve things, such as what specific actions are hidden under the practice label *implementing*

AI algorithms? Comparison (C) suggests that if we set a goal for managerial practice, we must establish, in comparison to what alternative, we will be evaluating this goal—for instance, comparing to not using AI or to using our standard data analysis techniques. Outcomes (O) highlight the need to express often abstract goals of managerial practice (e.g., performance improvement) in an objective and measurable form of specific key performance indicators (KPIs), such as how much implementing AI algorithms are expected to improve KPIs. Context (C) emphasizes that the success of management practices depends on external factors and organizational characteristics—for example, in what type of organizations or business sectors is this AI algorithm expected to improve performance? Thus, a goal of new management practice should be precise about when and where the practice is set to operate, in which industries, organizations, or under what external circumstances a practice is set to deliver what it promises. By applying the PICOC framework, we can gain clarity on the nature of the goals of management practice. If the goals of new management practices are vague and cannot be specified, this increases the likelihood of this practice being a management fashion. Not knowing what the specific *ends* of managerial practice are, we cannot assess whether this practice is an efficient means to reach them.

2. Are the goals of new managerial practice important?

All that glitters is not gold.

When we know the content and specific goals of a new managerial practice, we should analyze whether achieving these goals is actually important. Trendy managerial practices are often surrounded by buzzwords and puffery to create a demand for them. Managers are often affected by *shiny object syndrome* (Hills, 2022); we see novel management ideas and concepts as exciting and inspiring and we feel pressure to adopt them. This chase for novelty seems to be a part of human nature, as psychological research in the scope of Self-Determination Theory suggests that the need for novelty might be one of the basic human needs (González-Cutre, Sicilia, Sierra, Ferriz, & Hagger, 2016). However, the satisfaction that stems from meeting the need for novelty does not always correlate with an increase in organizational performance, and the mere fact that we can implement some exciting new management practices does not mean that we should (Levenson, 2017). Truly game-changing practices are not only new and exciting but also must be useful (Grote & Cortina, 2018). When we encounter trendy management practices, we often get hooked, pursuing them simply because they initially appear promising and satisfying. Management fashions are deceptive because they are simple, provide a step-by-step guide by telling managers what they should do, and refer to one defining central practice that is advertised as a solution for success (Miller & Hartwick, 2002; Zorn, 2017). Therefore, we suggest that in the assessment of the importance of management practice, we should use systems thinking. Although there are different approaches to systems thinking (for review, see Hossain, Dayarathna, Nagahi, & Jaradat, 2020), generally, the common aspects of various systems thinking definitions highlight that organizations' performance is not caused by a single factor but rather is influenced by a system of interrelated elements, and organizations should be seen as wholes rather than separated parts (Arnold & Wade, 2015). In our approach, we propose using systems thinking to assess the importance of management practices. Building on the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) Content Model (https://www.onetcenter.org/content.html), we focus on three key system skills: systems evaluation, systems analysis, and judgment and decision-making. Consequently, to assess a managerial practice's importance, we suggest three steps. 1) Systems evaluation: Understanding the organization's performance goals and how the new managerial practice aligns with them. The same management practice might be important for an organization that values business social responsibility but not for a company that is set to maximize profits. 2) System analysis: Examining how the practice impacts the organization as a whole and its various outcomes. A management practice might be important in improving one element of the system, but how does this translate to the final outcomes of the organization? 3) Judgment and decision-making: Weighing the costs and benefits of adopting the practice based on system analysis and evaluation. The introduction of new management practices might be surrounded by an aura of excitement, but is it worth adopting this practice? For example, introducing an AI chatbot to improve customer satisfaction might work perfectly fine, but what are the costs? Is it possible to obtain the same effect with less effort and investment, for example, by providing short training to customer service in difficult client management? As a management classic wrote: *There is surely nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency what should not be done at all* (Drucker, 1963; p.54), and using systems thinking analysis of trendy managerial practices can help us evaluate whether they should be done or not.

3. Is the new managerial practice an efficient means to achieve an important goal?

If it looks too simple to work, it probably is
(Miller, & Hartwick, 2002)

The management practice that has clear goals and is evaluated as important still must provide evidence that it works – to be considered rational. The managerial practice is often built around rhetoric that promises a lot, but we should draw evidence not from rhetoric but from reasoning built on logic and empirical evidence. Therefore, to analyze new managerial practice rationality, we suggest implementing two modes of evidence: conceptual evidence and empirical evidence. First, on a level of conceptual evidence, we should ask what the (theoretical) mechanisms are in which management practice is set to achieve its promises and goals. Are these mechanisms valid and congruent with logic? There is an important role of theoretical reasoning in management (Aguinis & Cronin, 2022) because theory allows us to understand underlying and often hidden mechanisms of management practices. As pointed out by Aguinis and Cronin (2022), theory is just a fancy word for *Do we understand what's going on?* For example, if we see a promise that AI transforms interactions with clients, we might ask by what mechanisms AI is set to improve client satisfaction (speed of communication, accuracy, availability, etc.) and how this mechanism relates to the broader theoretical knowledge, e.g., the distrust among customers that might be sparked by communication mediated via inhuman devices, technostress, etc. In some instances, mere conceptual analysis of management practice might suggest gaps and shortcomings constituting this practice's business model. Second, on an empirical level, we should ask what available empirical evidence says about the efficiency of new management practices. In an analysis of evidence, we should be aware of confirmation bias (Oswald & Grosjean, 2004). This is a tendency to cherry-pick and prefer evidence that confirms our existing beliefs, thus we should search for evidence that disconfirms and falsifies management practice, not only supports it. Here we should base on four sources of evidence inspired by evidence-based management practice: scientific literature, practitioners, organization, and stakeholders (Barends & Rousseau, 2018). Evidence from practitioners stems from the professional experience of managers and other specialists. Importantly, they relate to the evidence that arises not from intuitions but from accumulated knowledge acquired through experience. Evidence from scientific literature refers to the research findings published in peer-reviewed academic journals, particularly meta-analyses, and systematic reviews. Evidence from the organization encompasses organization data as well as *soft* aspects such as organizational culture and values. Evidence from stakeholders refers to stakeholder values and opinions about management practice when as stakeholders we see all parties affected by managerial practice they might be e.g., board members, employees, or managers. We might be unable to collect evidence from all four sources, but the more evidence we collect, the more robust might be our assessment of managerial practice efficiency. If there is no evidence to support managerial practice efficiency other than its popularity, rhetoric and case studies, we should be suspicious about this practice's true rationality.

Discussion – a conceptual framework for differentiating game changers from management fashions

In this conceptual paper, we outline a proposition for a heuristic decision support framework to assist in determining whether a managerial practice is a potentially ineffective management fashion or has the potential to be a rational management practice. Drawing from Abrahamson's (1991, 1996) management fashion theory, we suggest that the crucial aspect in evaluating a management fashion is recognizing whether a new management practice is rational or merely imitates rationality. Rational management practice is understood as *efficient means to important ends* (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 255). To aid in the evaluation of management practice rationality, we propose an approach that focuses on 1) Clarifying the content and goals (ends) of the management practice, 2) Systematically analyzing the importance of those goals, and 3) Providing evidence of the efficiency of the managerial practice in achieving its intended goals. This approach is illustratively depicted in Figure 1 and summarized in the form of a managerial checklist below:

1. Goals (ends) of managerial practice

1.1 Can the content of the management practice be clearly defined?

1.2 Can the goals of the new management practice be specified using the PICOC conceptual tool?

2. Importance of goals of managerial practice

2.1 Using systems thinking (systems evaluation, system analysis, judgment, and decision-making), can we evaluate the goals of the management practice as important (useful, urgent, serious) in the context of an organization as a complex system?

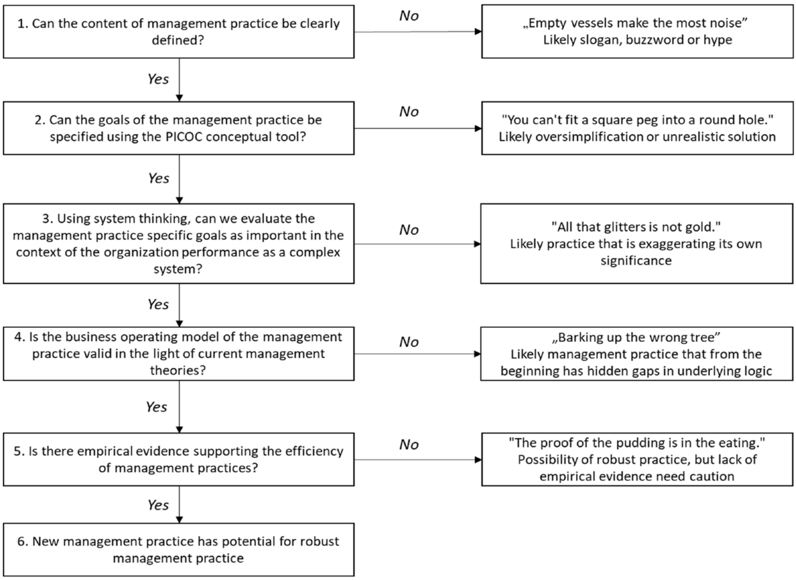
3. Evidence for efficiency of managerial practice in achieving its goals

3.1 Is the business operating model of the new management practice (the conceptual mechanism of its influence on the organization) valid in the light of current management theories and logic?

3.2 What is the empirical evidence (from scientific literature, practitioners, organizations, and stakeholders) that the management practice is achieving its promised goals?

The conceptual framework presented in this study aims to provide a structured approach to evaluate management practices more critically, with a concentration not on the novelty of management practices but on their rationality. Our proposition, as a conceptual tool, does not provide a certain solution for dealing with management fashions, but it might prepare managers to better recognize them and help them avoid falling into the trap of management fads, thus saving organizational resources wasted on following ineffective practices. Moreover, our framework increases the chances of identifying practices that have the potential to improve organizational performance, regardless of their current popularity, thereby protecting against the rejection of effective and rational management practices solely because they seem out of fashion or boring. The proposed conceptual framework might also serve as a reminder that organizations need to be cautious when adopting management practices that are marketed as innovative and game-changing, thus empowering managers to question the rationality of mainstream management practices.

Figure 1 *Is it a management fad or a rational management approach? A heuristic decision support framework to assist managers in thinking more critically about management fashions*



Source: own elaboration

Our endeavour in promoting critical thinking about fashionable management practices presented in this paper might be particularly important as organizations seem to be full of management nonsense (Tourish, 2020) and *bullshit* (Christensen, Kärreman, & Rasche, 2019). Possibly we might be living in an age of the economy of bullshit (Spicer, 2018), where there is a constant demand for new practices, novel exciting solutions, and business jargon that make an impression of progress and rationality, but with nobody interested in the hard work of testing all these *game-changing* propositions' real impact on business performance. This picture is even worse when we realize that we are persecuted by cognitive biases, the systematic errors made by humans during judgment and decision-making, causing our decisions to often deviate from rationality (see Kahneman, 2011). We often live in an illusion of explanatory depth where *Most people feel they understand the world with far greater detail, coherence, and depth than they really do* (Rozenblit & Keil, 2002, p. 522). Particularly, managers as decision-makers might be too heavily attached to their own prior beliefs, have a tendency to base decisions on a small amount of easily available information instead of seeing the big picture, ignore formal probability but overstate their own subjective beliefs about probable outcomes, and be too optimistic about success (see Das & Teng, 1999). These all suggest that managers, to avoid cognitive biases and not fall into a trap of management fashions, need formal help in making decisions about the rationality of management practices (Kulikowski, 2022). Therefore, our framework presented in this paper (see Figure 1) contributes to management theory by providing a heuristic, conceptual tool that might be used to promote a more critical approach among managers and increase their immunity to management fashion and marketing slogans. Our propositions might provide a *vaccine* for the shiny object syndrome—the tendency of managers to chase novel, popular, or exciting management practices without evaluating if they deliver what they promise. However, it is important to highlight that even clinically tested vaccines do not provide full protection; even more so, a conceptual framework. Our decision support tool presented in this paper should be seen as a heuristic aiming at promoting critical thinking and helping the manager in decision making, but not as an algorithm giving 100% protection against management fashions; as such, it could itself become another mindless management practice. As our framework has the potential to make the process of managerial decisions more informed, the decision of what practice to adopt and what to reject is always the responsibility of the manager. But despite these limitations, we believe that our proposition might contribute to managerial decision-making and building a more effective workplace, not only by providing a framework for more critical management practice evaluation but also by fostering an understanding of management fashion proliferation in contemporary organizations.

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