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COPING WITH FAILURE: THE MANAGER, HIS CONSULTANT, HIS CONSULTANT'S METHOD – AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Introduction

It has sometimes been argued that success is built on failure. The argument is that there is much to learn from failure and that the lessons of failure make an important contribution to change. The conclusion from this is that the society that accommodates failure - perhaps even encourages failure - is likely to be more innovative and hence competitive than the society that does not (Macdonald, 1986). Of course, when this stage is reached, the distinction between failure and success becomes somewhat blurred: failure becomes success and success failure; to succeed is to fail, and to fail is to succeed. The paper will look at management consultants, and then at the possible relationship between the methods they advocate and information technology (IT). The quotation occurring throughout comes from interviews with consultants and their clients undertaken during the course of the research.

At one level, the argument is simple. The management consultant is employed by the client organisation to effect change, or at least advise on the matter. Something is wrong and it is the consultant's job to help put it right. But, the better he performs, the more he cuts his own throat. Bringing about the right change quickly and efficiently and – worst of all – permanently may be good for the organisation's business, but is less satisfactory for the consultant's.

> *"It is really annoying when it is pretty clear that the client has someone in particular in mind. It's not corrupt, but it often comes down to 'We think the people who did a similar study two years ago will be way up the learning curve'."*
>
> Management consultant

Thus far the argument is straightforward and could as easily be applied to a builder and decorator, who has the same sort of incentive to work well - but not too well. However, the argument gets more complicated because of the nature of the transaction between management consultant and client. The putative client cannot know what he does not know. Even if he could, he could not know what consultant would know what he does not know. The problem is characteristic of all information transactions and yet is not a prominent consideration in the many studies of the relationship between client and consultant. There may be good reason for this neglect. It may be that management consultants and their clients have found a way to overcome the problems posed by this particular information transaction. It may be that buyer and seller are actually in collusion (Huczynski, 1993; Clark and Salaman, 1996).

> *"People know damn well what the problem is, but they haven't got the moral fibre to do anything about it themselves. Consultants are used to doing what management should do themselves. Management would rather act vicariously."*
> Management consultant

Manager and Consultant – Professionals Together

Accompanying the growth of the consultancy industry has been the transition of the manager from bumbling amateur, self-taught in the art of management, to professional manager, trained in business studies, perhaps even sporting an MBA (Pascale, 1990). The typical senior manager of the 1960s was qualified to manage nothing: the modern manager is qualified to manage anything. Thoroughly compatible with this omnicompetence is the use of management consultants to keep up with the latest thinking and to explore its relevance to the manager's organisation. Thus armed, the manager can transform management from art to science (*Economist*, 1993a, 1993b); he can exchange dependence on inspired creativity for reliance on mastery of method.

Where managers are less likely to have the benefits of an MBA from even a mediocre business school, they are often encouraged, certainly by the UK government, to hire consultants to compensate for their lack of professionalism (Burt, 1988; see also Hankinson, 1990; Freedman, 1990; Segal, Quince, Wicksteed, 1989). Indeed, the Department of Trade and Industry in the UK hires management consultants to promote the use of management consultants (Beale, 1994, p.21), a procedure which one observer roundly condemns as "folly construction" (de Burgundy, 1998). Such association of the consultant with the actual or aspiring professionalism of the manager has done much to make consultancy respectable, and respectability has been essential for the growth of consultancy in the UK and the rest of Europe (see Reynolds and Associates, 1993; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 1993). The alliance between manager and consultant is rendered the easier now that they are both professionals, now that they share a common training, now that they speak the same language (Poulfelt and Payne, 1994).

The combined professionalism of manager and consultant helps dispel suspicion that the task of management has become quite impossible. Yet, no amount of science and method can bring order to chaos, and the organisation in change is necessarily chaotic. Faced by unrealistic expectations that method makes everything manageable, the manager is only too willing to be gullible (Abrahamson, 1996). Consider, for example, the expectations set by Michael Hammer's re-engineering: "We must have the boldness to imagine taking 78 days out of an 80-day turnaround time, cutting 75% off overhead, and eliminating 80% of errors. These are not unrealistic goals. If managers have the vision, reengineering will provide a way" (Hammer, 1990, p.112). In desperation, the manager turns to the consultant.

> *"If you tell people you have a certain set of knowledge and skills, they will generally believe you."*
>
> Management consultant

Information Failure

While others might seek knowledge through the acquisition of information, this is an option for the manager that is neither comfortable nor convenient. The manager is a maker of decisions and more information only renders decisions yet more difficult to make. Information is sought either to confirm the manager's preconceptions (Ginsburg and Abrahamson, 1991), or to justify decisions that have already been made. Managers prefer less information to more, and information which fits to that which does not (Schwenk, 1986, p.302). Thus it is that the manager must walk the line between knowing at least as much as his peers of what the gurus of management have to say without actually becoming bogged down in information by reading their books (Huczynski, 1993). Quoting Kenneth Burke in his review of *A Passion for Excellence,* Charles Conrad discloses what managers expect from reading. It is not information: '"I'll wager that, in by far the great majority of cases, such readers make no serious attempt to apply the book's recipes. The lure of the book resides in the fact that the reader, while reading it, is then living in the aura of success'" (Conrad, 1985, p.428). Reading, then, is not necessarily a literal or literary activity for managers. Reading is a process by which the manager is associated with information.

"The last MD might have had an MBA, but it would not surprise me if his thinking came from reading."

Manager

"I keep myself up to date with exposure to consultants."

Manager

The manager may avail himself of other services which provide ideas with the minimum of information (e.g., Boyett and Boyett, 1998). One publication offers managers "the latest management thinking in just 16 pages a month" (Bulletpoint, 1996). Another "packs into just 8 easily absorbed pages, a mountain of business wisdom distilled down to just the purest essence" (*Independent*, 1994). One reviewer of a compendium of the works of 34 gurus intriguingly describes the result as 201 pages of "painless pith" (Hammonds, 1993), but reading, metaphorical or literal, is no substitute for the management consultant.

"Everyone knows the what now, but not the why……. Everyone has read the book, but they are still not sure how to do it."

Management consultant

"I occasionally recommend the books in airport bookshops. I don't read them myself."

Management consultant

If managers do not need yet more information, what is it they do need from the consultant? Basically, managers want comfort, security, re-assurance, someone to hold a hand. This is why the relationship between consultant and client is so often portrayed as a doctor-patient relationship (Tilles, 1961). Nanny-child might be more accurate, with the consultant's responsibility extending as far as discouraging clients from committing suicide (Weedon, 1990). The problem is that such a dependent relationship is really only practical behind closed doors and between consenting adults. Senior managers are actually rather lonely (TenEyck, 1989), frightened (Jackson, 1996), bored (Huczynski, 1996) and ignorant (Macdonald, 1998). Consequently, they do everything they can to demonstrate that they are none of these things. Proving awareness of the latest management methods shows that the manager is not alone, it shares the fear of responsibility, it makes work slightly more interesting, and suggests that the manager knows what he is doing and why.

"I think MDs must lead a lonely life. They have no one to talk to."

Management consultant

While the macho world of the corporation tolerates no other leader than the CEO, it does permit the senior manager an offsider, a Robin to his Batman, a Tonto to his Lone

Ranger, a loyal and trusted ally who will fight to the death alongside the manager (McGivern, 1983; Jackson, 1996). As Maid Marion to the manager's Robin Hood, the consultant can play both nanny and partner roles nicely.

The stereotypical organisation offers a world of heroes and villains, black hats and white hats, good and bad, a comfortable world for the manager as decision-maker in that it is easy to choose between right and wrong (Huczynski, 1993). In its unequivocal militarism, the language of the organisation reflects this simplicity: the competition is the enemy which has to be beaten to win market share or whatever. This is not a perception compatible with the real world, and especially the new world of collaboration, networking and co-operation in competition. Managerial confusion increases the need for management consultants to allay managerial fear. This is accomplished by providing managers not with more information, but with reassurance, with comforting thoughts and sounds, with a simplicity of language that obscures rather than reduces uncertainty (Alvesson, 1993), and that is not intended to be understood in any intellectual sense.

> *"BT were sitting ducks for every notion that was going. In the early stages, managers could be seen with Dale Carnegie books sticking out of their pockets. They all knew that they had to adopt the buzz words and the jargon because they were now in the private sector. They embraced every fashionable management nostrum."*
>
> Manager

The advice of management consultants is supposed to reduce the uncertainty of managers and thereby help them to manage better (Gattiker and Larwood, 1985; Washburn, 1991). But more information may increase rather than reduce uncertainty. The more information, the more informed, the more rational, the decision can be, but the harder it is to make. With more information comes growing awareness of how much more information still could be used to make the decision. With more information the manager is less able to take an unaided decision, and self-confidence withers. When this happens, the advice the consultant gives to solve a problem also maintains the problem and creates new ones for future solution. Future solution requires more and different information; hence the constant churn of ideas from management consultants (Huczynski, 1993). It is not even essential that these ideas be novel; the organisation has little memory and managers and consultants alike have done what they can eliminate what little it has. What is re-engineering but the deliberate deletion of corporate memory (Pollitt, 2000)?

> *"It's all about people learning the organisational approach to organisation.*
> Manager

> *"The key to successful management is the Three Cs, and the first of these is Change. What were the other two, Ian?"*
> Vice-chancellor

One cannot help but be struck by the elemental, self-contained simplicity of a system in which the supply of consultancy services has responded to demand, allowing this very supply to create yet more demand. The ideas provided by consultants increase rather than reduce the uncertainty of managers, thereby increasing the manager's demand for yet more consultancy. The more that is expected of the professional manager, and the more that the consultant is seen as a necessary accompaniment to managerial professionalism, the less likely it is that the manager without a consultant will be considered to be managing properly. The more dependent the manager becomes on the consultant's services, the less confident the manager becomes in his own, unaided abilities. And the more the manager uses consultants, the more accepted – indeed, the more necessary – it becomes for other managers to use consultants. Only the consultant with a philosophical bent can see this as failure.

> *"I recognise that look of complete joy on their faces when I say after a couple of days. 'Look girls, this is how you do it'. The look of huge relief on their faces tells me I have failed. Daddy has told them what to do."*
> Management consultant

In as much as each new idea compensates for the skills the manager is assumed to lack, each erodes self-confidence further, adding to the anxieties the idea is supposed to overcome (Sturdy, 1997). This stark reality makes the comfort of the illusion that uncertainty is being reduced all the more compelling.

> *"The more modern thinking about Empowerment as autonomy actually fits [this company] very, very well …. I mean you just can't manage that Matrix other than at the local level. The principle by which we try to manage our business was the notion of Global Localisation. Or was it Local Globalisation?"*
> Manager

> *"I am developing Gain Sharing as a concept in the organisation. [The consultant] put me onto that. Very little of this is done on the UK, though it is more common in the US."*
> Manager

Ideas and their sources

Managers are less concerned with the use of ideas to improve the competitiveness of the organisation than with their use to improve their own competitiveness (Sturdy, 1997). Consequently, they welcome the churn, the frenetic succession of fad and fashion in ideas for change (Crainer, 1996). New ideas are plausible less because they are rational than because they capture the spirit of the times (Grint, 1994). Their acceptance indicates a manager who is progressive, anxious to embrace change, enlightened and up to date (Gill and Whittle, 1992). After all, the professional manager is a mercenary, loyal to whichever organisation is paying and only as long as it is paying. And the management consultant is a prostitute, rendering personal services in return for payment. The organisation is no more than the stage on which they both perform. This may be why senior managers particularly welcome ideas which require loyalty to the organisation: in demanding the loyalty of others, they mask the absence of their own.

> *"I can join with consultants. If I am not selling my own cause, I can sell through consultants. When you prepare consultants, you can sell your own idea. It looks like someone came in and thought of it."*
>
> Manager

There is, then, competition in ideas among managers which is quite separate from any organisational requirement for these ideas. It is in catering for a managerial need rather than an organisational need that management consultants increase demand for yet more ideas with which managers can compete (McGivern, 1983). Clearly this demand is largely independent of the success with which ideas are applied in the organisation, which may go some way towards explaining why there is so little interest in measuring their success. Figure 1 gives some idea of how transitory are the teachings of the leading gurus. It maps annual citations of their publications since 1975, and suggests that interest in their ideas is highly volatile. An idea that makes an impact one year is forgotten and replaced by another the next.

> *"The original thought dies and becomes common currency."*
>
> Management consultant

> *"Success for consultants means giving something different. All the time successful consultants are searching for something different to say."*
>
> Management consultant

As IT investment grew, and as the turnover of managers and their consultants increased, many organisations endured new management methods in extraordinarily rapid succession. Figures 2 and 3, derived from abstract analysis of publications in the fields of business and economics, give some idea of how rapid and extreme has been the churn in management methods. The method that everyone was using at one moment is suddenly discarded and another seized upon with equal enthusiasm. Consider the plight of one of Robert Pascale's (1990, p.19) managers:

> "In the past eighteen months, we have heard that profit is more important than revenue, quality is more important than profit, that people are more important than profit, that customers are more important than our people, that big customers are more important than our small customers, and that growth is the key to our success. No wonder our performance is inconsistent."

The report of the Inquiry into the Parkhurst Prison escape in the UK reaches a similar conclusion:

> "Any organisation which boasts one Statement of Purpose, One Vision, five Values, six Goals, seven Strategic Priorities, and eight Key performance Indicators without any clear correlation between them is producing a recipe for confusion." (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996)

And as Jenny Stewart (1996, p.30) observes:

> "Any organisation seeking to follow these various forms of guidance would have had a confusing time of it. Over the past ten years, it would have been successively downsized, flattened, shamrocked, strategically planned, diversified, concentrated, re-engineered and, in all probability, bankrupted"

IT and management method

The information technology (IT) productivity paradox is the perceived discrepancy between IT investment and IT performance, between input and output (see Macdonald, Anderson and Kimbel, 2000). The particular perception which launched public discussion of the issue can be dated, with some precision, to a book review by Robert Solow published in the *New York Times* in July 1987 which included the line, "we see the computer age everywhere except in the productivity statistics" (Solow, 1987). The productivity paradox debate makes clear that productivity cannot be expected from IT alone; IT must be accompanied by appropriate management.

> "This is further supported by our finding that the rate of return for computer capital is highest for high performing firms - these are presumably the firms that have engaged in the most innovative improvements." (Brynjolfsson and Hitt, 1993)

But the discussion also hints that IT and new management methods are not just complementary; the methods may, in fact, be dictated by the IT. The fashion of the 'seventies was to perceive technology as deterministic, a fashion which did not survive growing appreciation that how technology was used was at least as important as the technology itself. In IT, this was reflected in a growing suspicion that managers rather than IT were responsible for the productivity paradox. Obviously this allocation of blame suited the IT manufacturers and suppliers, but it also suited the management consultants, a group that had been evident in the identification of the productivity paradox in 1987, and that had fuelled the treatment of the subject in the business press. Concern about the organisational change required to make IT investment productive was a godsend for management consultants (Sturdy, 1997). Indeed, much management consultancy, especially in the larger firms, had sprung from IT consultancy, a reality which is perhaps reflected in many of the methods of management consulting being possible only through the exploitation of IT. Indeed, though the measurement of IT productivity might be problematic, it was IT that permitted a great deal of the measurement on which so much management was focused.

Recall that the 1980s was a decade of management in the way the 1970s had not been, in the way the 1990s continued to be, and in the sense that the prosperity of organisations was seen to be not so much a function of how well their IT performed as of how well their managers performed. They did not go short of advice on how to manage: management education proliferated, the management consultancy industry was becoming gigantic, and a whole new language of management method was developed to communicate ideas from both. Management, much like IT itself, was in the ascendancy. In virtuous symbiosis, managers would unlock the value of IT, and IT the value of managers. Drucker (1988), for example, predicted that firms rich in IT would progress to organisational change as fundamental as that of 1895-1905, when managers became distinct from owners, and that of 1915-25 with the beginning of the modern command and control organisation.

Managers, of course, were not opposed to this elevation in their status, but it did leave them somewhat perplexed: if they were really so powerful, and IT was really so helpful, what was all this about an IT productivity paradox and why could they not manage their way out of it? Unless they could, IT, so promising as an ally, could turn into a terrible enemy. The business press, always influential in forming the ideas of managers, had sunk its teeth into the mismanagement explanation for the productivity paradox, and was relishing the flavour. Managers sought a way out of their predicament and found it in the management consultant.

Measuring performance

One school of thought formed during consideration of the IT productivity paradox was that any attempt to measure the impact of IT on productivity was probably unwise, that IT was best regarded as infrastructural, much like R&D. The available measures were said to be inadequate to the task, and the main product of IT to be unmeasurable anyway.

> "This finding leads to more general observations about the way executives make decisions about IT. Just as they do with R&D, they depend heavily on intuitive and nonfinancial measures as well as formal financial justification..... The analogy with other forms of R&D is striking. Most other technical breakthroughs also take years or decades to achieve paybacks, with company and industry indicators in the meantime showing low (or negative) paybacks. As with IT, few companies routinely try to evaluate the aggregate impact of all their R&D projects. Instead, they appraise effects on a project-by-project basis in terms of how well each project supports other strategic goals. For both R&D projects and IT programs, payoffs are likely to be uncertain in both scale and timing." (Quinn and Baily, 1994, p.41; see also National Research Council, 1994)

This, however, was out of joint with an age in which management and measurement were so intertwined. In fact, there were measures aplenty that might have been developed and applied to the qualitative output of IT (Johannessen, Olaisen and Olsen, 1999; Lucas, 1999). There had been consideration of what might be required to measure customer satisfaction (Ellis and Curtis, 1995; Hurley and Laitamaki, 1995), customer loyalty (Reichheld, 1993), employee satisfaction through teamwork (Henderson, 1994; Lumkin and Dess, 1996; Schrednick, Schutt and Weiss, 1992), product quality (Feigenbaum, 1985; Garvin, 1987; Teas, 1993), and service quality (see Freeman and Dart, 1993; Kordupleski, Rust and Zahorik, 1993; Quinn and Humble, 1993).

One consequence of assessing performance in the organisation by means of measures and indicators is that managers have a greater incentive to produce measures and indicators that will reveal appropriate performance than to produce the appropriate performance. We delude ourselves by assuming that we know from measures and indicators how a manager or an organisation is performing. We know much more about how well measures and indicators are being managed. Vast bonuses paid to senior managers of ruined companies are evidence enough of that. Take the performance of the Sussex police in the UK in 1998, exceeding by 1 per cent a target of 90 per cent of emergency calls answered within 10 minutes in urban areas, and within 20 minutes elsewhere. This improved performance was no doubt a credit to managers, but it was also associated with 873 accidents involving police cars, 39 injuries and 3 deaths (Bennetto, 1999). To paraphrase Rebecca Boden, writing in the context of scientific laboratories, accountability has become synonymous with accounting (Boden, 1998).

The mantra of 'what gets measured gets managed' is stronger than ever in these days of management method with the result that management attention is focused on what can be measured most easily and neglects what is less easy to measure. IT has allowed much performance to be quantified very easily - every finger tap at the supermarket checkout - but has trouble with the qualitative (Willcocks and Lester, 1996). Even so, it would not have been beyond the wit of management to devise measures to reveal at best that managers increased the productivity of IT, and at least that managers were not to blame for any deficiency in IT productivity. Managers could easily have weasled their way out of any responsibility for any IT productivity paradox with creative use of measures and indicators.

> "IBM, for example, instructed its sales employees to ask potential customers what productivity increases they sought, and trained its sales workers to prepare specific projections of the productivity gains to be anticipated. These figures were completely speculative, as old IBM-ers freely admit. No one really knew what productivity effects would occur, and no one, least of all the computer manufacturers, was funding researchers to carefully measure the outcomes of computerization on clerical productivity levels within individual firms." (Attewell, 1993, p.2)

But devising a measure of IT productivity may not have been the goal at all. If Paul David was right in his estimation of the productivity lag, measures related to output from IT investment would show nothing for 40 years (David, 1990), and that was of little use to the professional, mobile manager. It may be that IT performance was actually more useful unmeasured, as a source of ideas for management method.

IT and management method

It is possible that the customer orientation of so much modern management method arises from the failure of many organisations to benefit from their IT investment. IT seems determined to give extra value to the customer, despite the best endeavours of companies that have invested in IT to prevent this misfortune (Quinn and Baily, 1994).

It was hardly satisfactory for the organisation's IT investment to be justified in terms of customer satisfaction in the long run for the discount rate of the mobile manager is high and his own long run may not stretch beyond Christmas. Management method came to the rescue with the notion of serving the customer, of the organisation being close to the customer, being customer-driven, market-led. Organisational change would be guided by market-pull rather than old-fashioned technology-push. The irony is acute in that this customer-led strategy, inspired by IT, encouraged many firms to forsake their own technology development lest they be accused of being technology-driven (Macdonald and James, 2001). Such firms unwittingly remained technology-led, but led by IT technology. Anyway, what might have been construed as management failure to get to grips with IT could now be displayed as management success in leading the organisation in a bold, new strategic direction. The productivity paradox debate disclosed other supposed benefits of IT too qualitative to be easily measured. A degree of ingenuity was required to encapsulate them in management method that would capitalise on just how quality-related they were. Within Total Quality Management there was room for any stray impact IT might have on product or service.

Management method could also be constructed from the nagging problem of just how much to spend on IT, and once again the problem was transformed into the solution. Contracting Out dodged the problem by letting someone else decide. In a sense, most managers had long done this by abdicating responsibility for IT to IT departments. The disadvantage of this tactic was that the IT department had seized the opportunity to expand its power base. Contracting Out not only undermined the IT department, but also helped contain spiralling IT costs. Contracting Out may have been determined by IT, but it was justified in other terms altogether: it was a measure to increase organisational efficiency. And where Contracting Out could not be relied upon to establish IT investment levels, managers took other steps. Basically, they looked at what other organisations were spending and followed suit, a process that was really just keeping up with the Joneses, but one that the consultants called Benchmarking.

The organisation's IT bestowed considerable advantage on those whose tasks related to what IT did well. Sensible managers re-configured or re-defined their own tasks to align them with the capability of IT (Pinsonneault and Rivard, 1998). The specialist manager, the MBA who could exploit the explicit, codified information of IT, prospered: the generalist, reliant on only years of experience, did not. The latter, the middle manager, went to the wall as organisation after organisation made savings by Downsizing, thereby eliminating much of the corporate knowledge base, and justifying the use of IT in its replacement. After all, in Drucker's Flat Organisation, Knowledge Management exploited IT to store whatever information was required and to distribute it where and when it was needed. Knowledge Management also entitled the manager, as guardian of the organisation's intellectual property, to appropriate the employee's personal information. The managers of the new, Flat Organisation were reluctant to be seen, or even to see themselves, as passively dependent on whatever information IT provided. Much more appealing was management method that could portray IT as servant, as part of a Management Information System (MIS). Of the torrents of information that IT could generate, just about all could be justified as contributing to a Management Information System.

But most satisfying of all was the managerial response to the observation so often made in the productivity paradox debate that the whole organisation had to change if it was ever going to reap the full benefits of IT. The observation smarted because it suggested management incompetence. The solution was Business Process Re-engineering. BPR gave managers *carte blanche* to change whatever and as much as they wanted to change in the organisation (Kling, 1995).

> "... successful moves towards the factory of 'the future' are not a matter of small adjustments made independently at each of several margins, but rather have involved substantial and closely coordinated changes in a whole range of the firm's activities. Even though these changes are implemented over time, perhaps beginning with 'islands of automation', the full benefits are achieved only by an ultimately radical restructuring." (Milgrom and Roberts, 1990, p.513)

Problems with management methods

Driven by the requirements of IT and inspired by their consultants, managers converted the IT problem into opportunity. What IT determined was re-invented as method with which to manage not just IT, but much else besides. Unfortunately, opportunities too greedily seized can so easily turn back into problems. The new problem was that many of the new management methods did not actually work very well. Given their esoteric provenance in the requirements of IT, this is perhaps hardly surprising. Business Process

Re-engineering is a good example; Benchmarking, Materials Requirement Planning, and Total Quality Management are probably others (Thackray, 1993).

But failure, whether of manager or of management method, was not to be countenanced. Acknowledgement of failure would have risked the rapid replacement of the manager. So, while much is heard about the failure of IT systems (e.g., Collins, A., 1997), the concept is not seen as valid for managers and the methods they use. Consequently, managers and consultants are spared the embarrassment of explaining why BPR and TQM (Grint, 1994) and quality circles (Pascale, 1990, p.21), for example, were accepted with such unquestioning enthusiasm. It hardly matters that empowerment of workers has transpired to mean just the opposite (Collins, D., 1994, 1997), or that the original opus of Peters and Waterman, *In Search of Excellence*, has failed the test of time (Nikiforuk, 1995; Guest, 1992; Berry, 1983; Pascale, 1990). It does not matter even when management consultants confide that their methods are not always soundly-based.

> *“ We do have a model. I tend to steer away from it. Other consultants use their models as hatstands. A lot of them are just bollocks.”*
>
> Management consultant

> *“It’s all Emperor’s New Clothes. It’s a con trick.”*
>
> Management consultant

Part, perhaps a large part, of the explanation is that, despite its claims to be a science, there is little tradition of testing in Management Studies (Hubbard and Armstrong, 1994; see also Macdonald and Simpson, 1998). Indeed, despite its claims to be an academic discipline, there is not much tradition of criticism either. The culture of the organisation has prevailed over that of the forum or the common room (Macdonald and Hellgren, 1999). This culture places little value on dissent or reservation: it does value, and reward, commitment and unquestioning loyalty. The world of the organisation, just like that of the hive, requires joint effort and conformity. Even if managers did wish to measure the success of management methods, they lack the social, cultural and linguistic tools (Gill and Whittle, 1992). They also lack the incentive. When managers speak the same language as consultants, they do so less to communicate than to share the protection from scrutiny that this language offers (Jackall, 1988).

> *“It’s like people who use medical terms with doctors.”*
>
> Management consultant

Do managers actually want to be misled? Certainly they can be deeply resentful of those who reveal the flaws in the latest ideas. One prominent consultant and author argues that the very success of the consultancy industry has allied manager and consultant in common cause against worker: "….managers (often with the aid of consultants) have worked to quash dissent and debate in the workplace." He hides his real name and address from his audience and even his publisher for fear of retribution.

> *"When you teach senior management the tools and techniques - they are awful; they are arrogant and domineering - but when you are not there, they revert back to type again. With the shopfloor you do not need to be there. Yet, you are always asked to come back and do it again for the shopfloor."*
>
> Management consultant

Nick Oliver is an academic whose research has questioned the contribution to firm profitability of such Japanese methods as Lean Management and Just-in-Time (Oliver, 1999). Publication of the results in three *Financial Times* articles was followed by media interest and then by comment in engineering and business journals. Much of the last poured scorn on the findings: "I'm boiling mad about the way what has been disclosed by Cambridge University research has been presented by the press as if the whole production management profession were a load of gullible wallabies responsible for their firms' loss of profit." Indeed, the authors received a good deal of hate mail for their troubles, a lot of it from consultants.

> *"Quite honestly, I did not know what they were talking about…. I asked why we needed consultants and remember three or four people staring at me as if I had two heads."*
>
> Manager

Concluding Thoughts

Managers and their consultants cope with failure by denying its existence. They can do this because both are steeped in a tradition that eschews criticism, and because it has come to be accepted that measuring the success of management method is not appropriate. It is not appropriate because management method is destined to be replaced by other management method irrespective of how successful it has been. Bear in mind that the transaction that matters is the one between consultant and manager, not the one between consultant and organisation. The criteria by which success is measured are different. In the transaction that matters, the consultant brings the manager ideas and enables him to apply methods by which to manage. In so doing, the consultant brings benefits to the manager, and increases the manager's dependency.

> *"Dependency is increased by using consultants. You can get hooked on consultants. You can become consultant-happy."*
> Management consultant

> *"I would not have wanted to rely on my own judgement."*
> Manager

The remorseless churn of management method also undermines the manager's self-confidence and erodes his basic ability to manage. The essence of a good manager is the ability to use experience and instinct, not to apply method (Eliasson, 1999). Managing by experience and instinct requires the recognition of failure so that lessons can be learnt and the learning applied to the task of management.

> *"The defining feature of the best management is to allow their managers to fail. The right to be wrong more than once is disappearing."*
> Management consultant

It is because the consultant's methods remove the threat of failure that managers find them so seductive. It hardly matters what the methods are.

> "There are a lot of charlatans about. There's a lot of bullshit around. I have no reason to believe that I am or am not either one of the bullshitters or one of the charlatans, nor am I very interested. What's simply fascinating to me is that it's a time of ideas. The fact of the matter is that the average manager is buying lots of books. He or she is not an idiot and these people are desperately thirsty for ideas" (Tom Peters quoted in Dwyer, 1993).

Nor does it really matter whence come the ideas behind the methods. Under these circumstances, IT is as good a source as any.

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