

## **Management Gurus**

*Sideeq Mohammed* | University of Kent | s.mohammed@kent.ac.uk

Encyclopaedia of Critical Management Studies – Edward Elgar

*Who are management gurus?*

If you've ever perused the "Business and Management" section of any train station or airport bookstore, you're already acutely aware of who management gurus are and what their work looks like. Scanning the eye-catching fonts on the covers, you might see any number of promises to help you "unlock" the secrets of great leadership, claims that certain techniques can help you to manage yourself and be more influential, or simply an attempt to tell you the story of the practices of some "excellent" organization that you might want to emulate in your own encounters with organizing; that is, titles that fall into or on the margins of the categories of the "how-to", the "survival guide"/self-help, or the "what-can-we-learn-from" business books identified by Andrzej Huczynski (1993). Huczynski's influential 1993 book, *Management Gurus*, identifies three different types of guru who you might find to have authored these books: academics like Kenneth Blanchard, Henry Mintzberg, or Rosabeth Miss Kanter who have a theory or technique that they would like to see popularized, "hero-mangers" like Lee Iacocca, Jack Welsh, or Sheryl Sandberg who have become successful in their organizations and are prepared to tell the reader how to follow in their footsteps and, of course, consultants like Tom Peters and Peter Drucker who have a model or a consultancy practice to sell. As Huczynski suggests, "guru theory" emerged at a time in the 1980's when the management profession in the Anglo-American world might have been characterized by a significant degree of uncertainty. A time when many managers may have been amenable to advice on how to cope with the tumults and vicissitudes of managing, leading to the drastic expansion of the management 'advice industry'. Now, the popular business presses are

replete with a number of different “fashionable” or “faddish” ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Newell et al., 2001; Rüling, 2005) which the management guru often has a hand in producing.

In his 2001 book *Management Gurus and Management Fashions*, Brad Jackson traces out an etymology of the word “guru” through its varied history and uses to refer to different kinds of authorities, spiritual leaders, or wise men, all the way to its prominence in contemporary mediaspeak as a way to describe someone who has gained an expertise in a particular field or area of relevance. Yet in contemporary parlance, there is often a hint of snide cynicism in identifying someone as a “guru”, a kind of backhanded compliment or a way of acknowledging a certain kind of exaggerated importance, while also conjuring up images of mysticism, charlatanism, and indeed the air of a cult leader. In this regard, management gurus have come to be described in a number of derogatory ways, being seen as charlatans, con artists, and even “witch doctors” (Clark & Salaman, 1996; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996), who prey on the existential struggles of uncertainty and insecurity that many actors in present-day organizations feel when faced with the complexity of the contemporary socio-economic milieu, offering easy solutions and quick-fixes in order to sell books and attract large fees for public speaking engagements.

#### *How can you spot a management guru?*

Exactly what defines a management guru is a heavily disputed idea. Running the gamut from ideas that seek to optimize organizational systems like “lean management” (McCann et al., 2015) to Tom Peters’s stories and advice on how one can “thrive on chaos” in pursuit of “WOW!” (Collins, 2008), guru ideas and publications come in a variety of types and iterations that academics have tried to catalogue and subtype (Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001). For Huczynski (1992), however, while the *content* of what a management guru wants

to sell might vary, the *structure* of their ideas is fairly consistent. He exhaustively identifies that management guru ideas all tend to 1) be communicable or very simple to explain and understand, 2) treat human nature as changeable or amenable to management control, 3) focus on individual issues like motivation or communication rather than organizational structure, 4) involve management increasing their control in the workplace, 5) have clear steps, principles, checklists, or roadmaps in order to reduce managerial anxiety about their implementation, 6) have the ability to be applied universally in order to produce the best way of managing any organization, 7) be applicable in such a way as to produce a clear benefits or pay-offs in a very short space of time, 8) contain some elements of auto-authorization that reassure the user that these ideas work because they are “common sense”, based in science, or are used by the best organizations, 9) tend to confirm the managers own ideas and beliefs about reality, 10) assume unitarism or that workers and management share a common perspective free of industrial relations disputes, 11) offer scope for the manager to take ownership of the idea and put their own stamp on its implementation, and finally 12) there is a strong focus on the importance of Leadership in the success of the idea. Total Quality Management, Business Process Reengineering, Learning Organizations, Management by Objectives, Culture Management and the ideas around “excellence”, and Theory X and Theory Y all more or less fit this extensive list of features. These are all popular ideas backed by some kind of management guru which have risen to prominence, become fashionable, and then dissipated or faded into the background of contemporary management thinking. Someone who tries to convince you to adopt a management idea or programme that fits this paradigm might well be a management guru.

To crystalize this, we might draw on Clark and Salaman (1998, p. 138) to say that if you encounter a consultant, speaker, or leader who makes “ambitious claims” about their abilities to improve the individual or the organization’s performance “through the

recommendation of a fundamental almost magical cure or transformation”, you might be dealing with a management guru. Pay particular attention to whether that person uses compelling storytelling, or moving oration and charismatic public speaking skills to sell the idea that the individual or organization need to “reinvent themselves” and make a dramatic break with the past. The use of many “buzzwords” and a wide array of jargon to describe relatively mundane business processes is also good indicator.

*Why are we so drawn to gurus and their ideas?*

The question of why we might be so drawn to management gurus, and by proxy the management advice industry, is one of the most closely discussed areas. On the surface, we shouldn't tolerate their ideas at all. For example, each of the twelve characteristics that Huczynski (1992) identifies is something that has been critiqued by organizational scholars, with the critique often predating the guru's ideas. For some the answer is simple: we are drawn to guru ideas because they work and are adjudged to be effective by the managers to whom they are designed to appeal. Such a line of thinking would suggest, for example, that ideas around culture management, as described by Peters and Waterman in *In search of Excellence* could never have become as pervasive as they did if they were not useful to managers in some way. For others, the guru's ideas might take hold because they address particular issues that are being faced by the organization at a particular socio-economic moment in history, like those that accompanied the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980's. For others still, guru ideas gain traction because they are fashionable at a given time, leading managers to “hop on the bandwagon” because their competitors have adopted the idea and they are afraid that it will work. Finally, for many the allure of the guru's ideas lies in their charisma, their confident and dramatic oration during public speeches, or ability to be “tastemakers” (ten Bos & Heusinkveld, 2007) who can self-promote and inspire others to

follow their ideas. These four rationalizations correspond to those identified by Jackson (2001), respectively the rational, structural, institutional/distancing, and charismatic approaches to explaining the gurus success.

Yet for others the issue is considerably more complicated as the conversation around guru ideas often fails to acknowledge that managers are implicated in the demand for guru ideas. They seek them out, buy their books, pay to see their speeches and lectures, and implement their advice. Indeed, as David Collins has often (2001, 2003, 2005) argued, much of the academic literature on management gurus is unfairly dismissive and does not sufficiently seriously consider their ideas and address the question of why they are so appealing to managers. For him, this dismissiveness is a problem in that it tends to “produce blinkered and self-privileging accounts of organization, which, consequently, exercise little effect over practitioners” (Collins, 2001, p. 32). Collins’s work challenges us to reflect that commentary on management gurus is often too divorced from organizational realities where managers selectively adopt guru ideas or adapt them to their situation, suggesting that they are not unthinking victims of either the guru’s charisma or their own anxieties, but rather are co-implicated in a nuanced and difficult to disentangle mutualistic relationship.

The complexities of the relationships between the guru and their reader or the consultant and their client are worth considering further. For some, if we hope to understand this relationship, we need to understand how people can come to desire their own exploitation. This question has appeared in the writings of a number of poststructural philosophers on the topic of libidinal economy, sketching out how under certain conditions individuals come to desire their own repression, displaying a predilection towards rule-following behaviour, seeking out conformity to authority, and desiring that others also desire being controlled and subordinated, a “microfascist” desire (see Mohammed, 2020). Thinking in these terms places the guru at the centre of a complex of desire, with managers often

seeming to seek out their advice and lust after this figure of the charismatic demagogue who will “save them” and the organization from the uncertainty of their milieu *and* the guru needing to be perceived as useful, important, and satiate their own careerism and desires for recognition and acknowledgement; both thus seemingly locked in a mutual parasitism, both at once powerful and commanding, and impotent and beset by challenges. In this regard, the allure of the guru is the same allure that we feel whenever we are drawn to any fascist leader, who needs us as much as we need them.

### *The future of management gurus?*

What does the future have in store for management gurus and their ideas? The continued growth of the management consultancy industry might well bring with it new fashionable ideas onto which both consultants and their managers might selectively and strategically “bandwagon” (Whittle, 2008). In many ways the idea of “management guru” is itself dated because of the deluge of available ideas in contemporary popular business presses (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2016). It is hard to keep track of it all and given the many sources from which it comes. New “lifestyle gurus” like Tim Ferriss whose books top international best-seller lists go largely unnoticed by academics despite their success, only being considered by chroniclers of “business bullshit” (see Spicer, 2018) or those curious enough to experiment with their ideas (Cederström & Spicer, 2017). Hardly anyone can keep up with each new fashionable management idea, and relatively new trends like Agile teams (see Hodgson & Briand, 2013), take a long time to gain academic attention. Perhaps academic commentary on “guru theory” is destined to become too fragmented as we comment on too many new fads, or following Collins, realize that there is more to what is going on than just fads.

Perhaps the future of the management guru lies away from the singular and discursively coded “masculine” figure (the profession is heavily gendered with only a few women like Rosabeth Moss Kanter ever being mentioned on the lists of gurus that are common in academic discourse), who is able to charismatically inspire change in the contemporary organization? This may prove increasingly ineffective at wooing a disaffected managerial class who often seem beset by intensified work and at the mercy of economic fluctuations. It may well be that the fashionable management ideas of the future are the purview of an army of pseudo-anonymous content writers generating infinite neologisms on blogs and branded web-pages in order to get clicks and drive ad-revenue. Further still, maybe a “management jargon generator” or an AI powered by Amazon, or some other company with access to our book buying histories, engineers the next fad or fashion and producing a hologram of a guru to go with it, having perfectly computed what comforting stories of the possibility of changing and improving organizations that we want to have told to us...

## References

- Abrahamson, E. (1996). Management Fashion. *Academy of Management Review*, 21(1), 254–285. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258919>
- Abrahamson, E., & Fairchild, G. (1999). Management fashion: Lifecycles, triggers, and collective learning processes. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(4), 708–740. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667053>
- Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2015). *The Wellness Syndrome*. Polity.
- Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2017). *Desperately Seeking Self-Improvement: A Year Inside the Optimization Movement*. OR Books.
- Clark, T., & Salaman, G. (1996). The Management guru as organizational witchdoctor. *Organization*, 3(1), 85–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050849631005>

- Clark, T., & Salaman, G. (1998). Telling Tales: Management Gurus' Narratives and the Construction of Managerial Identity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 35(2), 137–161.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00088>
- Collins, D. (2001). The fad motif in management scholarship. *Employee Relations*, 23(1), 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425450110366255>
- Collins, D. (2003). The branding of management knowledge: rethinking management “fads.” *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 16(2), 186–204.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09534810310468152>
- Collins, D. (2005). Pyramid schemes and programmatic management: Critical reflections on the ‘guru industry.’ *Culture and Organization*, 11(1), 33–44.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14759550500062318>
- Collins, D. (2008). Has Tom Peters lost the plot? A timely review of a celebrated management guru. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 21(3), 315–334.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09534810810874804>
- Hodgson, D., & Briand, L. (2013). *Controlling the uncontrollable : ‘ Agile ’ teams and illusions of autonomy in creative work*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017012460315>
- Huczynski, A. (1992). Management Guru Ideas and the 12 Secrets of their Success. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 13(5), 15–20.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/01437739210016196>
- Huczynski, A. (1993). *Management Gurus: What makes them and how to become one*. Routledge.
- Jackson, B. (2001). *Management Gurus and Management Fashions*. Routledge.
- Kociatkiewicz, J., & Kostera, M. (2016). Grand plots of management bestsellers: Learning from narrative and thematic coherence. *Management Learning*, 47(3), 324–342.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507615592114>



- McCann, L., Hassard, J., Granter, E., & Hyde, P. (2015). Casting the lean spell: The promotion, dilution and erosion of lean management in the NHS. *Human Relations*, 68(10), 1557–1577. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726714561697>
- Micklethwait, J., & Wooldridge, A. (1996). *The Witch Doctors: Making Sense of the Management Gurus*. Times Books.
- Mohammed, S. (2020). Understanding microfascism: reading Deleuze and Guattari alongside management guru texts. *Culture and Organization*, 26(3), 196–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2018.1563604>
- Newell, S., Robertson, M., & Swan, J. (2001). Management Fads and Fashions. *Organization*, 8(1), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050840181001>
- Rüling, C. C. (2005). Popular concepts and the business management press. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 21(2 SPEC. ISS.), 177–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2005.02.010>
- Spicer, A. (2018). *Business Bullshit*. Routledge.
- ten Bos, R., & Heusinkveld, S. (2007). The guru's gusto: management fashion, performance and taste. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 20(3), 304–325. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09534810710740155>
- Whittle, A. (2008). From Flexibility to Work-Life Balance: Exploring the Changing Discourses of Management Consultants. *Organization*, 15(4), 513–534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508408091005>

