Management Fad of the Month … Can They All Work?

Wayne Turk

So you've heard about the latest and greatest management fad—a management concept, practice, tool, style, or whatever. It's something that's "guaranteed" to make your organization a success: to increase productivity, raise morale, lower turnover, increase profits, and solve your organization's problems. Your question is "Will it work for me?" The answer's easy: "Yes, no, maybe, or temporarily."

That answer doesn't help, you say? Well, let's look a little deeper.

What is a management fad? I do not use the term pejoratively. Webster defines *management* as "judicious use of means to accomplish an end" and *fad* as "a practice followed for a time with exaggerated zeal." If we put them together, we get "the use of a practice followed for a time with exaggerated zeal as a means to accomplish an end." Maybe we should take out "exaggerated" to make the definition more useful.

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Now that we know what they are, why are management fads so popular? That's an even easier question to answer. Managers at every level have problems and are looking for an easy way to solve them. And that is exactly what the experts promise with each new management fad.

Reach back into your storehouse of memories. If you have been around for a while, you will remember some or all of these: management by objectives; theory X/theory Y/theory Z; total quality management; quality circles; knowledge management; business process reengineering; balanced scorecard; 360-degree reviews; integrated product teams; cross functional working groups; or any of a dozen others. Many are still around and you are probably using one or more of them. I hope so. Why do I say that? Because they *can* work, and each and every one of them *will* work if implemented and used correctly.

The Life Cycle of the Management Fad

We need to step back for a moment and look at how a management fad is born, matures, and sometimes dies. It starts with a manager who intuitively tries something that works, or with an academic who has a theory. He or she then refines that concept and puts it into practice. Call this stage a pilot. The results are spectacular. Another

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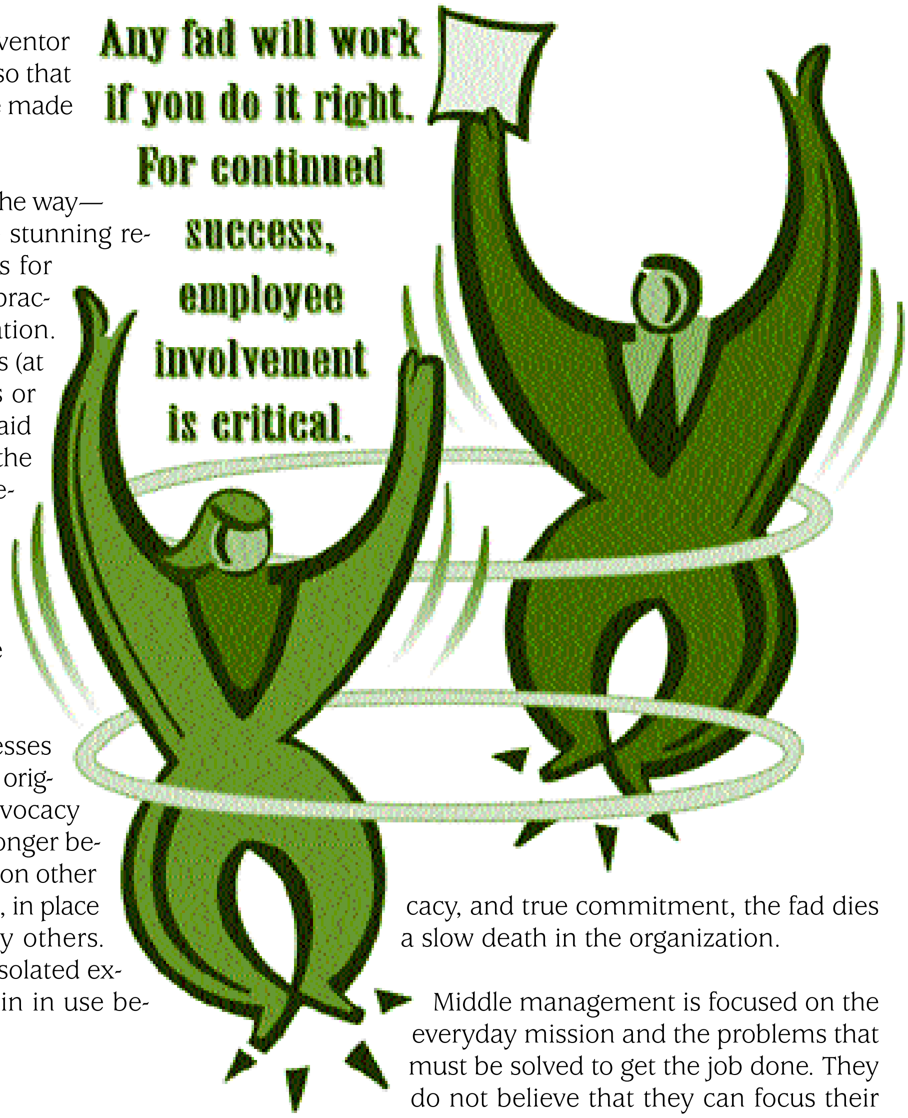
try, and more impressive results. Our inventor wants to share the concept with others so that all can benefit (and if there's a buck to be made from it, even better).

So he or she—and converts made along the way—pool their ideas and examples of those stunning results. They present classes or seminars for others to learn about this revolutionary practice and what it can do for an organization. The students of these classes or seminars (at least some of them) become advocates or champions of the practice. They have paid their money, heard the pitch, and seen the reported results. They become true believers who proselytize and spread the word. They implement the practice in their organizations, and some, if not most, have some immediate success. As word of these successes spreads, more join in.



But soon the pattern changes and successes are not as spectacular or as frequent. The original converts lose interest and their advocacy pales, not necessarily because they no longer believe, but because they become focused on other problems. Then the concept coasts along, in place in some organizations and dropped by others. Eventually many fade away except for isolated examples. Some, or parts of some, remain in use because they continue to work.

Some Come, Some Go ... and Some Stick Around

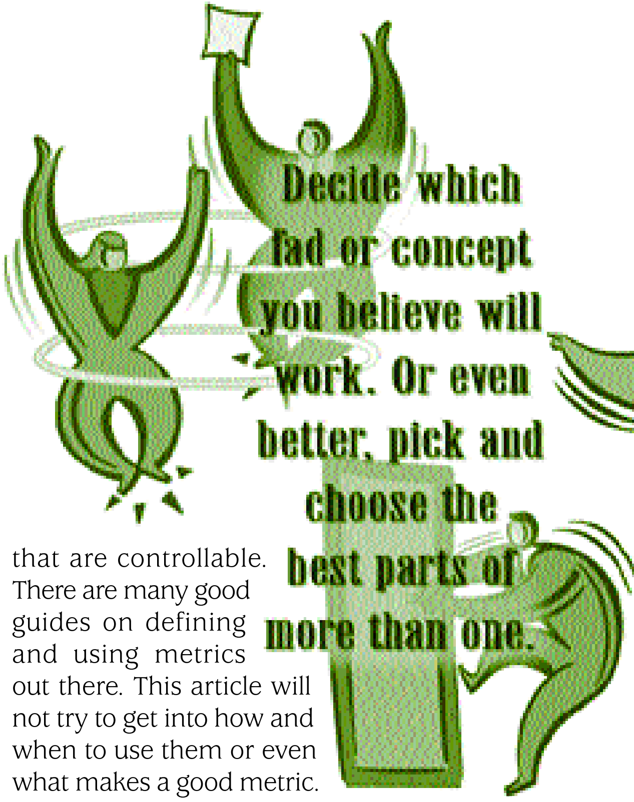
Why does the management fad work sometimes and not others? Why does it fade away if it works? Now we are getting into harder questions, but the answers to both are basically the same: It is a matter of advocacy, commitment, attention, metrics (or lack of metrics), communication, and involvement.

Looking at the various stakeholders, we naturally see different perspectives. At the upper management level, there are problems to be solved. There is no panacea for all of an organization's ills, but upper management is usually willing to listen to claims of one. Therefore, when a champion for a new and different practice, concept or tool comes along, all excited and gushing over a new and better way to solve the most pressing problem—maybe even all problems—there's a receptive audience. The organization may have tried one or more fads before, but the old champions of those other fads have usually lost their enthusiasm or may be focused on something else, so the cycle begins again. In some cases, there is not a new fad to replace the old one: there is just a loss of interest or focus. Without upper level management interest, advocacy, and true commitment, the fad dies a slow death in the organization.

Middle management is focused on the everyday mission and the problems that must be solved to get the job done. They do not believe that they can focus their attention on multiple fads and still have mission success. They worry that implementation and management of any fad will take too much time, energy, or resources, and may take too much away from their primary work. This is especially true if they have been down the road of new-and-better too many times before. Seasoned managers have seen fads come and go. Most still play the game and will support a new fad espoused by upper management (on the surface anyway). Without their full attention and involvement, though, the spectacular results will not be there. In fact, lukewarm support may be worse than no support because it sends conflicting messages to the worker level. In the cases where middle management only provides nominal support, the fad will usually show little success and fade away, sometimes fairly quickly.

Measurement, Involvement are Key

Speaking of results, that leads us to metrics and the measurement of results. Metrics are both difficult and critical. Defining and identifying good metrics are very hard, as well as potentially time consuming and expensive. To be useful, metrics must be quantifiable, measurable, and limited, in both scope and number. They must measure things



that are controllable. There are many good guides on defining and using metrics out there. This article will not try to get into how and when to use them or even what makes a good metric. What managers must remember, though, is that what is measured becomes what is important—both to management and the employees. They must remember, too, that when you measure something, you influence it, so you have to measure the *right* things or your metrics can lead you astray. Feedback on the results to all involved is also necessary. “All involved” means both up the chain to upper management and down the chain to the employees. If people can’t see measurable results, they don’t know whether their efforts were worthwhile, and interest wanes. The lack of good metrics and the non-use of the information from the metrics are two more reasons that many management fads fail over the long run.

This brings us to involvement and the Hawthorne Effect. Most managers know about the Hawthorne Effect and have studied it in college or a management class. The name comes from some early work on organizational measurement, conducted between 1927 and1932, at the Western Electric plant in Hawthorne, Ill., where management tried to determine optimum levels of factory-floor lighting and the results of other changes. Because the employees knew about the study and felt some ownership, they responded to each adjustment by increasing productivity. It has been proved again and again that employees respond to attention, even negative attention. If they feel involved, a part of the team, then their productivity is higher and their morale is better. The bottom line is that they work harder because they feel that someone cares about them.

What’s in it for You?

What does all of this mean for today’s managers? Well, for one thing, it means that any management fad will work if you do it right. Even negative management styles can work … for a while. They are not good for long-term success, however. Any of the positive practices can provide outstanding results and these results can be sustained. For that, we need to go back to the original definition, “the use of a practice followed for a time with zeal as a means to accomplish an end.” If a manager truly believes in a management fad (whatever it is), can communicate that zeal to the employees, and can make sure that they are involved and feel a part of what is happening—it will work. For continued success, employee involvement is critical. That was a large part of the early successes of concepts like management by objectives, quality circles, and business process reengineering. Employees at the working level were a large part of each of those. One of the reasons that each faded out or lost its popularity was that managers lost their zeal, and employees no longer felt a part of what was happening. Each concept frequently became a facade or sham. It was back to business as usual after a time, with only the vestiges of the concepts remaining. That does not have to happen. By keeping employees involved, aware of the importance of what is happening, and giving them feedback on the results, sustained improvement is possible, if not inevitable. That is the job of the manager. Maintaining zeal can be tough; so can finding the time to share information with the employees. But both are vital to the manager’s success. Without enthusiasm and communication, success (if there is any) is usually doomed for anything other than the short term.

Pick and Choose, Mix and Match

You say that all of this sounds good, but what does it *really* mean for the manager? It means that you, the manager, can be a shining star—but it requires work. Decide which fad or concept you believe will work. Or even better, pick and choose the best parts of more than one. That means doing some research. Read the professional journals and the popular press. See what’s out there. Analyze what you find. Take it apart and put it together again. There is no rule that says that you can’t mix and match parts of multiple concepts or even modify them to match your organization’s needs or your personal style. Develop your own, but keep those under you involved. Give the employees some ownership. Share what you are trying to do and why. Then stick with it. A short trial may not be enough. Give it time to work, time to become institutionalized. Develop good metrics and use the information that the metrics provide to make changes. Share that information up and down the chain. Maintain your enthusiasm. Communicate it to the troops. Make them believe. The employees are the real basis of success. Do these things and your choice of fads will pay off in the end—for you and for your organization.

Editor’s note: The author welcomes comments and questions. Contact him at Wayne_Turk@sra.com.