
Fad Spotting



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I recently came across a great article. It was written back in 2001 and was based on data from the 80s and 90s, but still may have something to teach us.

Three researchers in Montreal, Danny Miller, John Hardwick and Isabel Le Breton-Miller had done an interesting analysis of management fads since 1985. Their first task was to figure out what constituted a fad. They hit on the idea of searching academic databases for key words in articles and found that while some concepts appeared to have permanently entered the lexicon (e.g. globalisation), others had a brief surge in popularity and then faded away (e.g. TQM). They then chose to regard those that come and go as “Fads” and those that stayed as “Classics”. While, by their own admission, this might not have been the most sophisticated approach. It did identify a number of potential fads that were worth looking at.

By comparing the “Fads” and the “Classics” they were able to identify the common characteristics of those ideas that make a big, quick splash and then fade away.

- Simplicity – what is striking about the faddish ideas is that they are very simple to grasp. We tend to have to worry about very few factors in order to make them work. The story is easy to share and the message is clear.
- They promise the world – without fail, spectacular claims will be made about the upside of adopting the desired approach.
- Universality – amazingly the solution offered seems to work in every department of every company in every industry. You don’t need to worry if this is the right solution for your precise context – apparently it is right for every context.
- Easy to implement – they tend to offer solutions that can be quickly rolled out and may involve simple attitude change rather than something costly or complex to bring in.
- In tune with zeitgeist – fads are always of the moment and address the fears and concerns of the day (e.g. Japanese approaches became popular as the US started to lose its lead in the world).
- Novel not radical – despite their claims, Fads tend not to be genuinely revolutionary (despite the fact that they claim to be), they tend to be the repackaging of something that already existed.
- Star quality – they nearly always have a star individual or business as their standard bearer. A high performing company or CEO is often cited as the reason to adopt a certain approach.
- Entertainment value – “Framed with labels and buzzwords, lists and acronyms, fads are often presented in a way that is articulate, memorable and upbeat.”

Well, these insights were gained back in 2001. What about the current crop of leadership fashions? Two of the biggest trends of recent years are “Authentic Leadership” and “Mindfulness” – perhaps it is worth reflecting for a moment how many of the 8 Fad characteristics apply to them.

Paul Ballman is the author of [Red Pill: The Truth About Leadership](#) and has made his career in the world of business psychology. Following a degree at The London School of Economics and PhD in the University of London, he entered the world of telecommunications, but soon

discovered that his real passion was the development of leaders. Having pursued this vocation with a range of firms he eventually rose to become Co-CEO of YSC and established a network of offices around the world. Following Private Equity investment into the firm, Paul moved on and now divides his time between writing and a role in Vodafone.

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