

**What's your
affliction?**



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Not again or words to that effect

Recently I was speaking to a manager – not a gnarled old seen-it-all-before manager, but a comparative spring chicken. In just a few years this manager had experienced a heady cocktail of TQM, Downsizing, Performance Related Pay and Outsourcing. Now he'd been called into his manager's office to be told that the UK arm of the company had just been told to try JR by its American parent.

His first reaction was the time-honoured, *Not Again*. He was suffering from fad shock syndrome – a mortifying cynicism and weariness about the value and application of management fads. He isn't alone. All of us have trod the fad trail so often, so far and so frequently that it is wearing thin. We've heard the stuttering excuses for fads gone wrong, for direction changes, for new bunches of management consultants being brought in to solve the problems the last lot left. We've seen some of the carnage fads can cause – a customer care initiative in the wrong hands is more potent than a exocet with a bad sense of humour.

His next reaction was to pause and ask... what is JR?

A fad is born

His boss looked at him for a moment and then she told him.

JR stands for Job Revitalisation. It's a technique for raising motivation and output that is currently sweeping across Europe, having been immensely successful in South East Asia. This in itself makes it interesting – the very fact that it did not start in the USA but in one of the emerging and vibrant economies of the Pacific rim. If it's good in Taiwan it must be good here.

The principles are deceptively simple and the process was documented in 1995 by A.T. Chen-Wah of PulPuhjon University School of Management. In fact it was his extremely successful book (summarised in an article in the Harvard Business News in December 1996) which led to the explosion in JR.

Professor Chen-Wah was commissioned by the KLB Consumer Electronics Group in 1990, to do two things. He was to identify reasons for the significant decline in productivity over the past two years and was also to propose ways of reversing the trend.

He researched human potential and satisfaction amongst 14,980 workers doing the more mundane jobs that exist in many manufacturing environments in South East Asia. His discovery was that, as recently as ten years ago simply having a job with KLB was seen as a mark of social success and carried status and worth in the community. But this had changed and by the time he started his work over 38% of manual (skilled and semi-skilled) workers in the electronics manufacturing and assembly industries were expressing either significant or serious dissatisfaction with their employment.

The problem was not linked to traditional views of job satisfaction that relate to the intrinsic rewards of the work itself. It was more related to the issue of the status of a particular job role, in the eyes of the community and one's peers.

Chen-Wah turned to the approaches devised decades ago by Frederick Herzberg and other motivation experts. These have stood the test of time and have become received wisdom in employee motivation, so he explored ways of using job redesign to add some interest and satisfaction to the roles. He changed some parts of

different jobs round, added some new tasks and gave people new things to do. While expecting success to follow fairly quickly, he was amazed to find that his trial of traditional job redesign failed miserably.

The breakthrough came with the realisation that two key issues were central here. One was that what mattered was not the reality but the perception. Debriefing interviews with the employees showed that the issue was less about the direct satisfaction achieved from the work, and more about status and perceived value and image. The other was that the employee themselves did not have control of the job redesign process, so empowerment was not taking place.

Perceptions of status

Giving an employee more responsibility without formalising the process did not allow them to claim status and recognition. Some formal recognition – almost some form of ceremony was needed so that the employee could have some sort of badge, or rite of passage to show tangibly that the employer valued them by giving them difficult tasks to do, by stretching them and expecting more of them. Without such a ritual, performance would not rise as markedly as was needed.

In some ways there are parallels with the motivational ‘trick’ of giving someone a more important title, with no more money or responsibility. This was the flash of inspiration. What if that status issue was really what motivated people, in today’s material and status-conscious world? What if Herzberg, MacGregor, Maslow and all the other motivational gurus had been right about the time they were describing, but had been looking at a totally different work

environment and social structure from that which was emerging in the late twentieth century?

In other words, had Chen-Wah's failure given a clue to a way of bringing motivation up to date for the new millennium? He believed so, and devised JR to test out his new theories. The results were astounding, from a process that differs only slightly from what has gone before.

The Job Revitalisation process extends traditional job redesign. Each employee is eligible for JR only after two years' successful employment. The key to the status element is that at the end of two years they must turn in a performance evaluation that shows them to meet the required standard for entry to JR. Thereafter, each year's review must meet the required standard or they cannot carry out a JR review in that year. So someone in the JR programme is instantly recognisable as someone with success and status. They even get overalls with JR monogrammed on the top pocket.

Status plus empowerment

Status is crucial but the other factor – allowing employees to take control – was also vital. The JR programme consists of an annual review where each employee identifies tasks outside their current role which they wish to undertake and which would be most challenging to them. They also specify which of their current tasks have become mundane.

Each employee then (with their nominated JR mentor acting as facilitator) trades a task with a colleague. So each individual exchanges at least one main task with another worker – based on the notion that what has become easy (and possibly boring) for

one person after two years is a new challenge for someone who has not yet done it.

In the first year this exchange is contained within the section in which the employees work. The employees themselves have the right to make the trade – management cannot stop them and it is the employees who carry the can for any failures.

In the second year the exchange takes place across section boundaries, so an employee in, say, TV assembly, can exchange a task from a colleague in calculator calibration. Each is responsible for training their counterpart and remains available as a consultant should they be needed.

In the third and subsequent years it is possible to trade tasks across departments, so someone in production can exchange tasks with someone in marketing – if an exchange can be arranged.

Results have been astounding. The motivation that comes from new tasks is supplemented by the fact that each employee is in charge of his or her own destiny at work. The improvement in output starts from day one, as employees strive to achieve the performance levels required for entry to the prestigious JR programme. It then continues as they regularly have new challenges and learning experiences to handle, as part of a process which carries prestige and status.

Three things then emerge from this look at Job Revitalisation. First, it is merely an extension of the traditional job redesign techniques known by all HR managers. Second, it contains a simple but powerful motor that drives the concept. Third, it's a load of twaddle that we made up in about twelve minutes!

There is no such thing as JR – although the really scary thing is that there easily could be if we decided to launch it as a scam on an unsuspecting business world. Somebody would buy it – and would buy our consultancy services to implement it – if we packaged it right.

Not long ago there was a school of management thought that said 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'. At the same time someone described the concept of Business Process Re-engineering, which one cynic summarised as 'If it ain't broke... break it'.

So who's right? What can we believe? What do we do about fads?

Let's get one thing straight. Effective and efficient management is one of the most important issues ever. We like management. It is fascinating, wonderfully refreshing and a source of immense interest. We believe in good management and we believe that management is fun. There can be nothing more creative than coming up with new ideas about organisations and how to manage the people in them and there is also a need to continually refresh the language of management. So we have no problem with management thinking.

Our aim is not to rubbish any of the great management thinkers. Indeed, these are the very people we admire and for whom we feel sorry. They came up with what now seem like simple and obvious ideas and concepts – the ones we all take for granted in organisations. But at the time their thinking was novel and revolutionary and it is only because their ideas have become accepted as fact (or at least highly probable theories) that we have lost sight of the fact that someone actually had to invent the notion of motivation, management style or quality management. Our sadness for them

is because it is their often brilliant ideas that have been hi-jacked and turned into fads.

However in this book we have decided not to toe the party line. We're not out to defend anyone and while we aren't going to throw out good ideas we have decided to call a fad a fad. We shall call downsizing indiscriminate sacking and retribution, and name TQM as a source of enough hot air to fill a Richard Branson balloon. And fads have their victims amongst the people in the organisation, as well as in the ranks of management thinkers.

So if you've trod the fad road and had enough ...read on.

Why enter the dragon's lair?

You may wonder why we wrote this book. We could say that there is a current fad for knocking fads... but that's a bit too cynical, even for us.

The answer is that it came from our enquiring minds and a genuine interest in the 'where are they now' stakes. We have been asked over the years to write books and articles on all sorts of management techniques... most of which seemed to sink without trace.

So one reason for writing it was to apologise to the world on behalf of clever management experts... you know, the people who take a perfectly sound notion and turn it into a fad. We happen to care about you and the people around you, as you struggle to implement the impossible. It's not fair for someone to ask what you think of the Emperor's New Clothes, so we decided to come out with it and admit that he's naked, most of the time.

Another reason is to work out where they all are now. While quality is obviously vital, what exactly did happen to Quality Circles? While knowing what we're here to achieve is critical, where is management by objectives today? And the team briefing model...? Is anyone still implementing sound principles under the disguise of these threadbare old war-horses?

It looks like a duck

A past president of the USA is credited with saying that if it walks like a duck, looks like a duck, quacks, swims and lays eggs... maybe it's a duck. In other words, sometimes the obvious is what it is.

So some of those old fads are still around. But not necessarily as fads – more as simple common-sense approaches that would have been tried anyway. And only by people who really understand what they are looking at. The basic problem with fads is that they suffer from Chinese Whispers. There is a sound message there at the start, but it gets changed, added to and refined out of all recognition as it passes down the line.

It's like JR. Plain and simple common sense tells us that it's in everyone's interest for people to enjoy their work. Yet we rely on someone else to come up with a label for it and to stick it on a potted and simplified formula.

So we end up not with the main message but an altered set of instructions, a quick fix approach to a problem that can't be solved or that didn't exist in the first place.

One of the most important and telling moments in our lives as consultants was when we stood in front of a group of very senior

executives who had come to hear us tell them how to manage change. Well, that's not quite true; they hadn't originally come to hear us but the person they were expecting had been left on the platform in Manchester when the train timetable changed without notice. (There's a moral in there, somewhere!)

Anyway, we started by saying that we were sorry, but the topic they had paid to talk about was not valid. Managing change was a contradiction in terms. It was, we said, a bit like trying to knit fog – a great idea but totally impossible.

Our opening tenet was that change is simply unmanageable. It's not like a burger bar or a budget. Change is a concept that involves people and their emotions. All the books on it say that if you tell people in time, involve them, get their commitment and all this stuff, you can manage change. It needs careful planning but great managers handle change as easily as scoffing an ice cream... according to the books by writers who have often never managed anything. This notion of change as a process we can control was absolutely wrong, we contended. Absolute nonsense. Change is a force with a mind of its own – sent from outside the universe to try the patience of all managers and every human being. You can't manage electricity, wind, or the tides. It's not on to try and control the weather. You can understand them, forecast what might happen, work with them and minimise the damage they can cause, but you cannot manage them.

Then we asked a simple question. How many people in this room (out of about 60) believe they must be doing something wrong and are failures compared to the rest of the audience – because they can't manage change when all the books say all good managers can do it? At first, all eyes were cast down at the conference programmes...

then a few hooded glances shot round the room between those present. Then one tentative hand went up... then a couple more, and then a whole forest. Eventually a huge round of applause swelled and exploded and in the calm that followed someone stood up and said that they had just heard the most valuable statement about managing change that they had ever encountered. It was all right not to be able to do everything the text books said. It was all right not to feel guilty because they could not do what the books said.

These people had felt as if they – individually – were failing; as if they were the only ones in the room who could not do it, when everyone else obviously could. And all because the text books say that we can manage change when all we can really do is limit the damage, control the failure and cope with the process that threatens 99% of the population? All because a book said it was right and someone who claims to be an expert said this is the way to do it.

It's sad to think that we could then have started a fad – a Living With Change Because You Can't Manage It fad. But what is really creepy is that it could well have become the flavour of that year! It would have sunk into oblivion by now, but it could have had its brief and glorious moment.

A third reason for writing this book is that management fads are rather like embarrassing teenage photographs. These days you may look cool and respectable but just think in the 70s you were probably all knitted tank tops, flares and inappropriate haircuts. Perhaps just a few years ago you may have been evangelising about Just in Time, or SPC or the like. And perhaps when you think back you feel a bit silly about getting carried away by all that hot air and the dubious promises. Perhaps you remained unashamed for now.

So, this book is about all our yesterdays. It paints the picture in all its crummy detail. Some of it is nostalgic, some plain angry – but from it we hope emerges a picture of the exciting, fresh, frustrating, messed up world of management thinking.

Why do we need management fads?

Some cynics would say, to provide a home for venerable old senior managers turned freelance management consultants, stateless academics from bad universities trying to make an extra buck and others too downright disreputable to mention.

But we wouldn't say that.

Some people would argue that it's the Jones syndrome – keeping up with the competition. One point of view is that the firm down the road is a good firm and they employ all graduates... therefore we ought to employ all graduates because we want to be a good firm, too.

This is as flawed as the logic that says that dogs, cats and marmosets have four legs and are mammals; I am a mammal therefore I have four legs. The fact that the firm down the road is a biotechnical laboratory and we are a pizzeria ought to have some relevance to the equation.

We would say there is some of this, but there is more to it.

Fads actually plug into a basic human need. We need to believe that there is an answer to everything. We need to feel that everything would be fine at work if only we knew a bit more, or did a bit more, or made some changes. And there are some very credible people and theories out there to help persuade us.

It's our own insecurity that leads us to accept other people's ideas. Like managing change, we cannot bring ourselves to believe that maybe we do know, we do understand and we are right. Surely someone else must know more than we do, so we must take their word for it.

There's another more basic point, too. It's us that buys the fads – it's our insecurity that drives us to need the designer labels. Behind the best-selling book that launches a new fad there's a simple idea. We often would benefit from the little gem that sits at their heart, but what starts out as a sound and sensible nugget of an idea or concept somehow gets hijacked along the way.

Take something like customer care. It's been around for hundreds of years. My grandfather – who had a small grocer's shop – used to say to me that the customer was always right. Now, half a century later (and probably more than that because I'm sure his father told him – and he didn't invent the concept) writers, consultants and gurus are telling us that customers are important. Tom Peters made a fortune out of it – and he's right! The fascinating thing is that we nod sagely – as if the scales are falling from our eyes as we speak.

But we know that customers matter. We may have forgotten it in the maelstrom of consumerism... but we know that without customers we don't have a business. After all, aren't we customers and don't we matter? It's so obvious it's as if we must have missed the point and are out of a secret that everyone else knows. So we nod, go along with it and pretend to see the Emperor's New Clothes.

It's just that the fad industry is always on the lookout for an old idea to update and make fashionable.

Take the following example.

The author of this book went to buy a ticket for a railway journey just the other Sunday. One window was open in the ticket booth. A queue of 19 people had formed. Your ever smiling author had a train to catch in 20 minutes. The minutes ticked away and your author noticed an employee was sitting at another window in the booth doing some paperwork. He walked up to the man and enquired whether it would be possible to open the window and take some money for a ticket because trains were about to be missed.

The employee looked up, surprised.

'No mate. I'm (hacked) off with having to tell you people that it ain't me. He said. I'm not tickets today. Now you've lost your place in the queue, too!'

One response to this experience is to write and complain to the senior management. Another is to cause a scene, and to stand and shout about how simply bloody awful some people are at looking after customers. A third one is to mutter under our breath and accept that this is how things are – and that's the normal approach.

But the faddist would come up with a technique to suit this situation. Every company in the country would be exhorted to train its staff, in teams, so that Management through Understanding became de rigeur. The trick is to talk sympathetically to the staff member who was rude and then run loads of training sessions that allow all staff to perceive the experience as if they were customers. They are then encouraged to project the implications of that onto the back-cloth of business success and see just how much impact that one tiny situation has on the profits of a train company. It's like chaos

theory, where a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon basin causes a flood in Switzerland.

On the other hand, of course, we could just sack the obnoxious jerk that is always rude to customers, or discipline him – once we have tried training and awareness raising as a fair first line of attack.

Generally, when companies are this messed up some bushy tailed person in the marketing or strategy department decides to look for an elixir to make things better.

Perhaps it is a very British and American thing. It is said (we're not sure by whom) that it is only the British and the Americans who pin their hope on celebrity economists. These economists have come to be more important than planned rational approaches. We are looking for the one guy who can give us the one answer. Not surprisingly, the economists haven't delivered.

But any decent person is interested in the New – and fads are all about the new and what the future can offer.

Also, fads are exciting. There is a real buzz when you get caught up in implementing your first fad. Rather like in the spirit of the Blitz, everyone pulls together, everyone has a role towards the greater good and the enemies are those who resist the change, who don't want to play ball.

But we sometimes wonder how much the fads really add. Let's give you an example.

Half a century ago, the chief executive of 3M wrote down what he believed the company was, and should be, based on.

'Those men and women to whom we delegate authority and responsibility, if they are good people, are going to want to do their jobs in their own way.'

Just note this. It encapsulates a simple view of motivation, delegation, empowerment, creativity, innovation and the like – whole areas where sackloads of twaddle have been written about since.

And by the way the same chief executive said:

'If people are any good they will make mistakes, but we should welcome this because mistakes are essential for growth.'

This visionary was heralding all sorts of modern stuff about learning organisations and the like. Or, he was simply saying what he thought.

And when you see the simplicity, yet all-encompassing nature of the vision you wondered why we ever needed management fads. Surely 3M got it right all those years ago and any company that did as 3M did wouldn't need any help from a guru or dream-maker.

Might as well pack up and go home? Not quite.

Fear and loathing

In his demented book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter S Thompson comments that the defining moment of the 1960s came when the Beatles consulted the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: this sounded the death-knell of 60s idealism. The decade's icons had sought the guidance of a 'guru', a spiritual teacher whose expertise in wisdom, in the theory and practice of life, was supposedly superior to theirs. The pursuit of beauty and happiness was, for Thompson, incompatible with gurus of whatever persuasion.

Why indeed bother with gurus? Can they really do anything for anyone but themselves? Does an 'expert' necessarily have anything to say? And if they have authority – who anointed them in the caste? Should you defer to *that* person's judgement too? Or is the belief in another's prescription the mark of slavishness, moral corruption and decadence?

Thompson thought so, and he was not alone: the view has been articulated by psychiatrist R D Laing and, before him, by Nietzsche's anti-Christ figure, Zarathustra. One can imagine Zarathustra standing on the mountain and, instead of laying down the tablets of the law, turning to his disciples and screaming:

'Do not follow me – this is my way! You must find your own!'

How do *you* feel about experts and professionals, leaders and gurus? Do you have faith in them, or do you mistrust panaceas? Do you trust your own judgement, or do you think it's safer and more sensible to be led? Do you *find your own way* – or do you, like the faddists in this book, warm to the words of the guru, recite his mantra, and follow meekly in his footsteps?