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The fascination with management gurus: An exploratory argument

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This conceptual paper investigates our fascination with management gurus; those who dictate opinion on how organizations should be managed. By revisiting Plato, it is obvious that these views are subjective representations of reality. Furthermore, it is argued that the flaw lies with those who follow, rather than with the gurus. It is not the intention to discredit any of the big names in management opinion, but rather to point out that there is a broader reality than that presented by the expert. Lastly, this paper implores us to consider that all that is currently presented as new directions in management thinking is nothing more than the theory we are already accustomed to, but in a new guise.

Key words: Management guru, management thinking, Plato, management success.

INTRODUCTION

Management is arguably the only academic discipline where formal study is not a prerequisite to success. There are hundreds of documented cases where university drop-outs have achieved massive commercial success, the most noticeable being Bill Gates. Thus university professor and university drop-out have the same standing in the area of business and management, s long as they can predict business success. The discipline of management or business thrives on success stories and it places those that have achieved success on a pedestal. This paper is based on non-empirical inductive logic whereby the phenomenon of the management guru is investigated and juxtaposed to Plato’s view on the nature of reality. Thereafter the idea of the management guru is contextualized within the greater realm of the evolution of management thought. This paper therefore, attempts to answer the following question: Why do business practitioners and scholars alike ascribe such value to the views of management guru’s?

THE ESSENCE OF “GURU”

They publish books, they write articles that get published in the most prestigious journals in the world, they are quoted in the popular press, they address audiences all over the world and their ideas are echoed in boardrooms and lecture halls all over the globe. We all know their names…Tom Peters; Henry Mintzberg; Peter Drucker, Michael Porter; Igor Ansoff; Ricardo Semler; Richard Branson…to name but a few.

These are the so called “management gurus”; people that have, either through scholarly prowess (in the case of, for example, Drucker, Mintzberg, or Porter) or practical ability (like Branson and Semler), risen to the pinnacle of success of this fuzzy thing called the management of strategy and organizations. CEO’s, directors, academics, students and employees alike are all seemingly in awe of these larger than life figures. “The new Porter book formed the basis of our new strategic direction”; “After being inspired by Branson’s lecture, our HR director has changed a few things around here”…how often has this scenario not unfolded in organizations? How many times has the guru sparked something within a person (such as the CEO), or changed the collective mindset of the management team? Nothing wrong with that. The gurus are, after all, the opinion leaders. That is why they are gurus. That is why we listen to what we say. But remember, they are mortal too. The fact that they are extremely knowledgeable in terms of management and
strategy is beyond questioning. The fact that they have risen to the status of "guru" because they create opinion as opposed to following it is beyond doubt. However, our (referring to opinion followers) obsession with them is eerie, we place them on pedestals. We talk about them as if they walk on water. We accept their word as gospel truth (Goldman and van der Linde, 2008). After all, who are we to challenge them? What they have forgotten about management and strategy, we still have to learn…right? Not necessarily…

**THE GURU VERSUS PLATO IN RELATION TO THE CREATION OF MEANING**

The problem is not the guru. After all, they have toiled hard enough to get where they are; so they deserve the elect status of "guru". The problem lies with us as opinion followers. The guru is not obsessed with being a guru. We are obsessed with accepting their opinions and doctrines as irrefutable truth. For us, they can say or do no wrong.

But, as eluded to already, they are mortal too. And because they are mere mortals, they behave, act and think as the rest of us. The point is a philosophical one; humans tend to want to make sense of the world around them in an effort to understand their place on this earth and in this universe. This is the basis of western philosophy (Wall, 2005). This is the very issue that ushered in the era of the great Athenian philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; and it is with Plato, in particular, that I will be investigating our obsession with management gurus.

So, the point is that we are constantly striving to make sense of the world around us (reality), in an effort to understand it so that we can ultimately comprehend the role we have to play in it. Problem is that to make sense of reality, we tend to structure it; give it order in a way that is understandable to us. In so doing, what we are actually doing is relying on perception. Thus, reality makes sense to us according to the way in which we perceive it. The inherent flaw, resultantly, is the fact that we are all going to perceive reality differently and therefore never agree on what it actually is.

In an effort to overcome this, we search for the "truth" (or truthful knowledge); because truthful knowledge has certain traits that we agree upon. For one, "truth" implies there is evidence to prove the existence and correctness of any given claim (Babbie and Mouton, 2004), secondly, "truth" implies verification of the claim to put it beyond question in terms of validity (Babbie and Mouton, 2004). The constant search for truthful knowledge according to structured principles is the cornerstone of science per se.

Yet, a conundrum exists in terms of the existence of evidence to base any claim on. Evidence implies that we can observe something; that we can use our senses to experience it (Babbie and Mouton, 2004). We can see Virgin as this Global Empire…and Branson started it all, so what he says about business, about strategy, about management must be true. After all, it worked for him, right? Of course! Michael Porter did not develop his Value Chain Model out of nothing. After studying numerous organizations, investigation, assessing and analyzing the exact issues that contribute to the creation of value in organizations; he synthesized his findings into the model we are all familiar with. So is it wrong or flawed? Of course not, It works. And here lies the problem…as well as the dichotomy. If we cannot use our senses to experience something, how to we know it exists?

Plato urges us not to trust our senses when we strive to gain proper understanding of a phenomenon. This plea resounds through “The Republic” and is the basis of many of his arguments (Blackburn, 2006). Plato uses an allegory of a cave (Figure 1) to clarify the point (Wall, 2005). In this cave we are all prisoners chained to chairs; we cannot move and we are all facing the same direction. We know no other place; we have been there all our lives. On the wall of the cave in front of us, we can see shadows. These shadows emanate from behind us. Behind us there is a light source and in front of this light source people are walking past with cardboard cut-outs of objects. The shadows we see are the reflections of these cut-outs on the wall in front of us. But we do not know that these are merely reflections. To us this is reality, it is all we know. But one day, one of us escapes from his imprisoned position and notices that all he knows to be true are mere images of cut-outs being reflected on the cave wall. When this escaped prisoner escapes from the cave, he is firstly startled by the brightness of the sun outside and then overwhelmed by the true nature of the real forms that the shadows cast by the cut-outs in the cave were based on. The escapee now understands that what he saw in the cave, on the wall, was but a facsimile of reality.

But the escapee also feels compelled to emancipate the rest of us from our world of illusion. But when he comes back into the cave and tells us about the real world outside the cave, we become so enraged by his claim of us living in a false reality that we rise up and put him to death. After silencing him and his claim that we are living in a dream world, we are all content to return to our places in the cave, chained up, motionless, staring straight ahead at the shadows being projected.

**THE EFFECT OF THE CAVE ON OPINION FOLLOWERS**

Let us now put Plato’s cave in context with the guru and the followers. The followers are the prisoners and the guru is the escapee. But there is more to than just that. Implicit to Plato’s allegory, firstly, is the fact that the escapee was once a prisoner. So too, the guru was once
a follower. All our guru’s reached a watershed moment in their lives and careers that lead them to new realizations about how a business works. This is where they went into the sun and left the cave behind; when they stopped being a follower. Secondly, it can be argued that the escapee can remember what happened to the last person who escaped upon their return to emancipate the others. Resultantly, after the escapee realizes that what is happening in the cave is illusion, he is on the one hand compelled to emancipate everyone else; but on the other hand he knows that the others might kill him. Therefore, he will either never return to the cave or ignore his fellows, or he will return to the cave, but not so as to free them all. Instead, he might decide to create better cut-outs that resemble the world outside more accurately (Goldman and van der Linde, 2008).

This is the realm our gurus move in. They show as excerpts of reality; the cut-outs that better resemble “the world out there.” The Bransons and the Semlers and the lacoccas of this world found a recipe that worked for them. No disputing that. They broke from convention, challenged status quo and had the courage of their convictions to do things their way. But the fact of the matter is that what works for Virgin; what works for Semco; what works for General Motors works for them ONLY. It is not to say that these doctrines and methodologies will work anywhere else (Goldman and van der Linde, 2007). Organisations differ, we all know that. So why do we expect that what Branson says is going to help us in our situation?

The problem is ours as the followers. We want to hear what the guru says, how they revolutionized their companies, in the hope that we can find some inspiration from them and take our companies forward too. So we pay exorbitant amounts of money to attend a public appearance of the guru. Its’ worth the money to hear somebody as inspirational as Michael Porter, right…?

And the more people that ascribe to that vein of thinking, the more popular the person becomes, and the more money the guru charges for an appearance in an effort not to spend every waking moment telling people about their success stories… (Semler, 1994). It’s a vicious circle, actually, as the more expensive the appearance money, the more the speaker is perceived as an expert. Furthermore, once the escaped prisoner has achieved this guru status, the level of innovation to the original ideas and doctrine that made him or her guru in the first place, is highly questionable.

Have our gurus really come up with anything new in the last 20 years? The key note address has a different title

Figure 1. Plato’s allegory of the cave (Adapted from: Wall, 2005).
to the last one you heard by that person, or the cover of the book is different to the last edition and the title is catchy, but the content is in essence still the same; maybe a new foreword or opening statement; or an extra chapter here and there, but our gurus have essentially been bombarding with the same message since they burst on the scene. They have fabricated a cut-out that is a better representation of reality and they are projecting onto the wall over and over.

And why would they not do it? Why would they now drastically deviate from this premise? Like the returned prisoner that gets killed, they could run the risk of being ostracized for being “too radical” (Goldman and van der Linde, 2008). They are doing what we all would do, sticking to winning formula. As the saying goes. “If it ain’t broken, don’t fix it...” It becomes comfortable, it is safe. So, is the guru really, on a constant basis, giving the opinion followers truly new material and insights to ponder, or are they just rehashing their original revelations in an attempt not to appear to confrontational?

IT’S A STRANGE LITTLE GAME, THIS...

What has been argued up to this point seems to be symptomatic of something bigger within management and related disciplines. If one considers the “pioneer” management scholars, and in particular Frederick Taylor, Henri Fayol and Max Weber, the fathers of Scientific Management; Administrative Management and Bureaucratic Management, respectively, they have laid the foundation for the study of management ever since (Goldman and Van Der Linde, 2008; Stewart, 2006). In the 112 years since Taylor coined the term Scientific Management through his time and motion studies of laborers packing pig-iron, most of what has followed has not caused a total revolution or paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense of the word (Stewart, 2006).

Again, there seems to be a dynamic at work here that exacerbates this problem. Organisations demand solutions to current and very real situations. Hence, the focus is on pragmatic means of solving real world problems (Boatright, 2000). Practitioners thus demand real time answers to problems, and the person or institution that can provide the solution as quickly, cheaply and cleanly as possible will be viewed as the “best”.

Thus, the sense of tradition within the discipline, the sense of heritage is lost (Stewart, 2006). The fixation with the person (or guru) that can provide the proverbial quick-fix here and now leads to practitioners – or followers of the guru’s – not considering the rich and vast body of knowledge that came before. And very often we have to go beyond the realm of conventional management wisdom, and always we have to move very swiftly past the plethora of self-helps and quick-fixes on offer on the shelf at the “Business” section at your local book store (Stewart, 2006). For example, most of the hot issues in management can be traced directly back to Taylor, Fayol or Weber. For diversity management, change management and business ethics, consult Weber, strategy can be traced back to Fayol and organizational effectiveness and value creation can be traced back to Taylor. Then again, if you want to understand the issues of social investment and sustainability look no further than Meditations by Marcus Aurelius, the strategy ‘bible’ is The Art of War by Sun Tzu (both of which are over 1600 years old...).

During a focus group session with some post-graduate students in my Philosophy of Management course at the University of Johannesburg some months ago, I posed the question as to what the nature of management as a discipline of inquiry was. There was a sentiment that management was not rocket science. It is common sense, some students agreed, but we always try to make it more complicated than it really is. We forget the basics, they contended. We do not understand how this discipline evolved and what the thinking was that brought us to where we currently are. They concluded that we were so fixated with solving problems that we have lost the ability to philosophize, to conceptualize beyond the norm that has been imposed on us ever since Harvard and Yale University deemed Frederick Taylors’ work important enough to establish Schools aimed at academic enquiry into the phenomenon of ‘Business’.

These views were quite striking and showed quite some insight by the students involved. Although, at times oversimplified, the study realized that the students’ views do ring true. We try to over-complicate something that is, in its essence, purely rational (common sense). We try to find answers to everything in management but sometimes we just do not have the guts to acknowledge that maybe we cannot find an answer. Think for example of the whole debate around trying to measure the effect of marketing expenditure on a firm’s profits, and the debate is still inconclusive. Maybe it is time to say we just do not know what the effect of marketing is on the profit of the business. But we do know that marketing works and maybe that is all that counts!

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the world progresses toward a truly global economy, business practices will increasingly start to transcend traditional boundaries. However, there is an inherent pitfall in trying to emulate what has been done in other areas of the world. In the 1980’s, US business practitioners were perplexed by the rapid success of the Japanese economy (Lewis et al., 2000), especially seen in the light of the fact that Japan had been totally destroyed after World War II. US business practitioners and academics wondered whether the Japanese keys to success could also be implemented in US organizations to make them more productive and profitable. A wave of
US management scholars visited Japan to assess what the key contributors were to this rapid rise of the Japanese economy. However, upon publication of their findings the subsequent application of so called “Japanese management principles” in US firms was not as successful as anticipated.

After much debate, the simple answer to the scenario sketched above was found. There are vast cultural differences between the USA and Japan. At the end of the day US practitioners realized that they had to find solutions to suite them. One could extend this argument to developing economies too. As a South African citizen, this situation is encountered in South Africa too. Ideas that originate in the USA, Japan and Europe are taken and implemented in South African organizations. But somehow, no original South African views on business and management have evolved.

The argument is thus, a simple one. Instead of clinging to the American, the British, German or Japanese guru to find answers to, South African, Polish or Brazilian problems maybe we should search no further than our own shores. However, we often suffer from inferiority complexes in emerging markets. We underestimate our own potential to find solutions unique to our own situations.

Also, the phenomenon of the management guru is a product of our collective fascination with those who have achieved the seemingly impossible: to find a winning formula when it comes to this supposedly gargantuan task of successfully managing an organization. But for their grandeur, they present an ideal picture only. They do not present scenarios where things might not be perfect, where success in business has not been achieved.

Maybe the problem lies with the outlook of western society as a whole. For in business, the only measure of success is the bottom line (and we all know which one of the three...); which is a universalized societal construct. However, the means to achieve this end always seems justified. Our gurus present us with a means to achieve this end. Is our fascination with our gurus an attempt to find the “meaning of business” rather than “the meaning in business”? A question that surely needs further engagement.

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