



We all know that people and fashions come and go, with business fads as much as with anything else. They have their day, then disappear. We also know that most people resist all forms of change, until the change has been fully embedded in the organisation, at which point they will proudly take ownership of it. By which time, any good manager will have started on the next business process improvement.

**Fraser
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Take any recent management fad you wish – six sigma, MbO, quality circles. Someone invented it, convinced a number of people that it is in their interest to use it, and great things happened. They really did. Properly applied with intent, things really did change.

But, over time, the first love withered, perhaps something new came along for the enthusiast to take up, perhaps the need diminished, or, more importantly, perhaps the idea became embedded in the organisation, so there was no need to promote it. It was happening, part of the culture.

Quality assurance is a good example of this. Yes, you do need to work at it. You need to keep control of improvement processes. You need good reporting mechanisms, but many of the quality techniques and skills have become embedded as good management practice and don't need

any further special treatment. In other words, it has taken you to new plateaus, from which you need to do something different to advance further.

This may not be a bad thing

All of life is cyclic; the seed germinates, plants grow, seed and die and the whole thing starts again. Whether we are discussing Dr Deming's 10 principles, or the demise of kaizen, this natural law applies. Sometimes, the outcome will be a bigger, brighter, better variation arising from the decaying form of the old process. Sometimes, we will need to change everything, and a whole new 'thing' will arise. This may be really new, but what is more likely is that it is a hybrid of what has gone before, such as kaizen integrated into a whole supply chain.

This natural life cycle does apply in full to management practices and

improvement techniques, which are continually reborn, with an occasional mutation. The question, I suggest, is how we recognise, and indeed accept, that they have reached a certain stage in their development and how we determine what to do next.

Six sigma, if my American reading is anything to go by, seems to be moving on to the integration plateau for those who have adopted it. Where will it go from here? I know that statement will give rise to howls of protest from some, a few will suggest that it never made the plateau, but rolled down the hill again, and others will nod sadly and agree. There are still, however, plenty of six sigma missionaries around.

If I had made a comment like that on MbO a few years ago, I could expect a whipping at least, but who today uses MbO in the pure form it was originally introduced? There are companies doing their own versions of MbO, but it has moved out of the realm of a new project, complete with its own managers and clerks and forms and processes and suchlike, and become embedded in the company culture. All that is needed to run it is a clerk, right? Wrong!

Maybe it no longer needs a senior manager and a team of technicians to implement it, but it does need to be managed. I once set up a central records system for a company which had previously had its records 'managed' at departmental level, and very poorly at that. We did all the right things in terms of analysing the need, consulting the workers and so on, but when it was in place the company put the implementation team on to other things, and left the system to some basic grade clerks and a manager who was more interested in other things, euphemistically referred to as 'prime responsibilities'.

The clerks, predictably, got bullied by various people with their own agendas, and had neither the ability nor the political clout to maintain the system, and certainly they weren't improving it. It regressed to the point that the clerks resigned as they found more satisfying jobs, and were not replaced because the project appeared to have gone away, or to be running itself. The outcome was entirely predictable, with echoes of the Biblical story of the man who had a thorough clean out of his 'house', evicting the devils who inhabited it, leaving it nice and clean and tidy and empty. In due course, a passing devil noticed this very desirable place, and invited all his friends to squat there. Jesus's comment was as applicable to my records section as it

was to the state of the man's soul: "The last state was worse than the first."

So, what for management services?

I am wondering whether the management services profession has fallen into that trap? Or has it carefully and cunningly avoided it? You be the judge.

Has it, like the quality assurance organisations, focussed on certain techniques and skills and activities which have now rendered it redundant because the champions are no longer needed? There is no doubt in my mind that quality assurance has to address this issue and reinvent itself if it is going to avoid the trap of being so successful at what it does that it has become – ho, hum – just part of the fabric. Like my records manager, however, there is a critical need to lift quality assurance off that plateau with new approaches and a refreshing new vision.

Or has management services, because it has deliberately been so general, avoided this trap and fallen into another one? Has it become lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, neither one thing nor the other? What is it actually promoting? It doesn't appear to have the passion of the person who used to enthuse about flowcharting as a way of life. After all, any student

older than about 10 can draw a flowchart these days. But does management services now sit and do nothing? And what is there to be busy and passionate about?

The difficulty for the person and the

'A person totally dedicated to the design and development of work processes'

organisation seems to be to get out there and promote 'something' as a way of life without appearing to be totally self seeking, preserving one's job at all costs.

What actually is the management services profession and the management services practitioner? Does it push itself and the specifics it can offer with a passion that enthuses everyone, or is it sitting and waiting passively for old age and dementia to carry it away?

In an earlier life I was a management services practitioner for a government department which determined, during a restructure, that the management services organisation wasn't needed. With hindsight they were right: they didn't need

it in the form in which they had it.

I ended up in a line management position in that organisation, and six months later my boss, a new, outside appointment, commented that what was needed in this busily changing organisation, was a person totally dedicated to the design and development of work processes.

I rest my case. Maybe a bit of reinvention is in order.



Fraser joined the Royal New Zealand Air Force in 1957 as a photographer. He changed career to management services, in which job he acted as internal consultant to the NZ Defence Force, carrying out efficiency/effectiveness projects. He resigned from the RNZAF in 1981 and since then has been employed by the NZ Defence Force in a number of consultancy and development roles.



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