Just Say NO to Training Fads

Management fads come and go—leaving disillusioned employees in their wake. Here's how to avoid fad worship and become the business partner your executives want.

Fad, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, is a "fashion that is taken up with great enthusiasm for a brief period of time." The key word here: brief. Why? Because an initiative turns into a fad when companies don't put in the time necessary for it to become truly beneficial. And often, the time isn't invested because the initiative didn't have staying power to begin with.

Ask learning professionals to describe their worst experiences with management fads, and chances are you'll hear a wide range of responses. Robert Pennington, an organizational psychologist with Resource International, a management-training firm in Houston, Texas, recalls a session he attended years ago in which participants were given drums and instructed to make music together. "The idea was that if people could create a unified rhythm on the drums, then they would probably also work well together," he explains, chuckling.

Richard Hadden, co-author of *Contented Cows Give Better Milk*, cites the Six Sigma quality improvement process taken to the extreme as the faddish low point at a company he once worked with. "Six Sigma became such a fad in that company that employees began to apply it to everything they did," he says. "They even tried to plan a luncheon conference by putting it through Six Sigma."

Just about every management tool to come down the pike in recent years—reengineering, total quality management, emotional intelligence, virtual teams, the balanced scorecard, and so on—has been deemed a fad, wrongly or rightly, by someone in the corporate world. Many name-brand initiatives have also gotten lumped under the fad umbrella, including those in Stephen Covey's book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, William Byham's *Zapp!: The Lightning of Empowerment*, and Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.*

All of those initiatives have the potential to improve organizations—and, indeed, many companies have benefited from them. But the very fact that some companies profit from the initiatives turns them into fads.

On the golf course, an executive talks to his crony about a great little book called, *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson, and, soon, everyone in the company finds a copy on his or her desk. A vice president hears a speaker talk about her company's experience with a morale building seminar called Fish!, and, suddenly, stuffed fish are hanging around the training department. Employees learn about those programs and roll their eyes like disgusted teenagers.

It's not that the books, tools, and training programs are inherently flawed. "Many, if not most, of the concepts that I'd term management fads started out with valuable underlying principles," says Lynn Daniel, president of the Daniel Group, a strategy firm based in Charlotte, North Carolina. It's just that people either took the ideas to extremes or lost sight of the objectives, or that the tools were sold into companies by charlatans who didn't understand the concepts but knew the right buzzwords.

"Every sound principle I've seen has been hijacked by consultants looking to profit from current trends," says Terry Horsmon, principal partner with True North Leadership, based in Santa Barbara, California.

Due to all of those factors, new concepts can become an end in and of themselves, rather than becoming a means to more profitable businesses.

Regardless of the reasons such initiatives fail, corporate trainers stand to lose the most by hitching their wagons to the latest hot fad. For example, career damage can occur when a trainer becomes too closely associated with a particular tool or program. When it fails to produce results, the trainer's credibility suffers. But that, says George Ludwig of George Ludwig Unlimited in Chicago, isn't the only problem.

"When I began my training company, I was focusing almost exclusively on teaching Covey's seven habits," Ludwig explains. "Like scads of other trainers at the time, I taught mission statement, roles, goals, teamwork, synergy, and so forth. But several big negatives occurred. One, I discovered that teaching what I thought was hot—as opposed to what I had a natural talent to teach—led to little or no repeat assignments. Two, business was harder to get when there was little differentiation among corporate trainers. Three, and most important, I was miserable teaching something my heart wasn't totally in."

If you follow a training fad as Ludwig did, you're bound to run into another problem: Many fads require trainers to achieve certification, which can involve a significant amount of time and professional attention. That commitment can divert a trainer's energy away from the immediate training needs of the organization, further eroding his or her credibility. If you're focused on becoming a certified mediator, for example, you may miss the fact that employees need immediate help with rapid technological change.

By following fads blindly, trainers risk being pigeonholed as cogs in the corporate wheel, explains Ray Jackson, associate dean of the Unisys University Leadership School in Bluebell, Pennsylvania. "Those trainers begin to be viewed as mere mouthpieces for come-and-go fads," he says. After a while, employees know which trainers are honest and have their best interests at heart and which are just sifting through the latest PowerPoint presentation.

Fad perpetuation

Despite the fact that fad worship can slowly kill their careers, trainers often contribute to a reputable program becoming a fad. That happens when they become too invested in the means rather than the end.

Says Pennington: "Ropes courses are a great example. When used effectively, they're great tools." But over time, trainers tend to focus more on making the courses challenging than on using them to improve team effectiveness. "The assumption was that if people risked their lives together, they would naturally speak up more in a team," he says. "But that's not how it works. The application has to be there." When enough programs are conducted inappropriately, they become ineffective, regarded as fads, and then fade away—taking the trainers along with them.

It's the skill level of the trainer that prevents a management tool from becoming a fad, says Pennington. "A lot of times, trainers attend programs, see some activity (such as teambuilding), think it's easy, and decide to lead those programs," he explains. But, Pennington points out, those activities appear easy because of the skill and artistry of the trainer who has years of experience. When trainers conduct courses without the proper education and experience, the programs aren't as effective, and a useful tool in one company becomes an inefficient fad in another.

Trainers also contribute to the clutch-and-release cycle of management fads by treating new initiatives as if they are already fads. "Trainers need to ask themselves," says Hadden, "whether they believe in a new tool and are convinced it will help the company." If they're not convinced, it will be impossible for them to convince others.

Fad prevention

What should corporate trainers do when executives are chasing the fad and shifting responsibility for its rollout to them? How can trainers, who often have little input into adoption decisions, respect their own integrity and say no to fad-chasing managers without risking their careers?

"The decision to pass on a fad must be made carefully, and corporate trainers must be prepared to account for that decision to management," says Christine Quinn Trank, visiting assistant professor in the department of management and organization at the University of Iowa. Fortunately, it's a task that trainers are well trained to do. "By their education and experience in a variety of organizational development efforts, corporate trainers are in a unique position to offer advice," Trank says.

Thus, when a manager comes into the training department and evangelically insists on implementing a program that was featured in the latest business magazine, a program that has allegedly improved productivity at "countless other companies," a trainer has a lot of options before agreeing. The trick, says Pennington, is not to focus on the program the manager insists will help the company; it's to realize that the manager understands there's a

How Management Programs Become Management Fads

- Upper-management support or sponsorship doesn't exist.
- The program doesn't link to company goals.
- The program isn't given enough time to take root.
- Employees don't understand how it's relevant to them or their jobs.
- Progress can't be measured.
- Employees aren't held accountable for using the new concepts.
- Trainers don't have a thorough enough understanding of the ideas to train others in using them.
- Trainers treat the program as just another fad.
- It becomes an end in itself instead of the means to an end.

problem, and that he or she is willing to invest time and money to fix that problem.

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"What you want to do," Pennington says, "is ask questions and understand the problem from the executive's perspective and why he or she thinks a particular program will help." Then, it's your responsibility to research that program and determine why it worked at another company, what kinds of groups were successful using it, what problems it was designed to solve, and whether the corporate environment it was successful in is similar to yours. In doing that research, it's crucial to talk with participants, not just other trainers. Why? Pennington explains: "The leaders of an effort are usually the least likely people to know how successful that effort was."

If, after diagnosing your company's problem and researching potential solutions, it appears that a particular management tool would be useful, trainers need to make sure it's sustainable before jumping in with both feet. No matter how good the training may be, it still requires thorough organizational support to be successful in the long run. According to Horsmon, trainers should ask the following questions:

Is the program driven and sponsored by key senior leaders? "Don't simply bless a program with holy water and then allow it to dribble down into the organization," says Horsmon. "To be successful, your program must be heavily supported and championed by top leaders."

Is the program attached to a strong set of corporate objectives, including a clear mission, vision, and values? If it's not clear how a program fits into an organization's overall strategy, it probably won't.

Are the key lessons transferable into the organization? "You want to make sure," Horsmon cautions, "that a training effort doesn't become an event that's nothing more than a nice way for employees to spend an afternoon." Ensure that employees can use what they're being taught. Typically, training efforts become faddish events when they aren't aligned with corporate objectives and don't have leader sponsorship.

Can the concepts be communicated effectively? Unless you're going to hire a training or consulting company to move into your organization for an extended period of time, make sure the concepts have been clarified enough to pass on to various groups of trainers and employees.

Can you measure what you're doing, and is it value-added? "If you can't measure outcomes and a program doesn't add value, it will become a fad quickly," Horsmon explains.

Is the effort sustainable? It isn't enough to pass information on to employees; they also have to understand how to use their new knowledge. People can have a lot of information and not do anything with it. When that's the case, nothing changes.

For instance, a lot of good work is being done around the concepts of emotional intelligence and what makes a star performer. Unfortunately, according to Horsmon, to date nobody has been able to come up with an application or scenario that helps employees acquire the competencies that make a star performer. If you only tell people what those competencies are and hope their emotional intelligence rises, that's not likely to happen.

Are employees held accountable? If you're going to introduce training as part of an organization-wide effort, you have to hold employees accountable for its success as well as failure. Without accountability, employees aren't likely to change.

Horsmon says that organizations need only these types of training: financial, organizational, strategic, and operational. If you can't find a good reason to place a particular program in one of those categories, chances are you're dealing with a fad.

Deconstructing resistance

Even with the best research and most methodical implementation, it's likely that some employees will view the latest training effort as just another passing fad. How can trainers overcome employee cynicism and convince them that this time the initiative isn't just the flavor of the month?

According to Pennington, cynicism is really nothing more than resistance to change. Research shows that 10 to 15 percent of employees will always resist change, no matter how much they're cajoled. The challenge isn't to contest their resistance or try to convince them that an initiative isn't a fad; the challenge is to let them express their resistance and for you to acknowledge the legitimacy behind it. He says, "You want to take time to determine why employees are resistant and frustrated and then work to build linkages between their concerns and your efforts."

Horsmon agrees: "The reason people don't change is a psychological dynamic called 'competing commitments.'" In other words, employees may label something a fad and refuse to participate because they already have a project or think they're protecting the integrity of the organization by not signing up for a possibly worthless activity. "It's not that they never want to change," he explains. "There's a reason behind their reluctance, and it's a trainer's job to find out what that is. If you can somehow align yourself with those competing commitments, often the resistors can become your biggest allies."

Another contributing factor to employee resistance is not understanding a program's relevance. Over the past several years, employees have been dragged through empowerment, change management, globalization, diversity, the birth of e-commerce, and more. In some companies, those efforts were successful; in others, they were failures because employees couldn't see how they related to their jobs. When programs lack personal relevance, it's easy for employees to cross their arms, label the programs fads, and refuse to participate. It's a trainer's job to make programs relevant to every worker.

The first step in overcoming employee cynicism is battling your own reluctance. If you diagnose your company's problems thoroughly, do your homework on potential solutions, and commit yourself completely to a new management tool, there should be no reason for resistance.

In the final analysis, fads that promise a quick fix to complex problems will always be part of the corporate landscape. By studiously refusing to fall prey to them, trainers can secure their reputations as internal productivity consultants. Drumming may have worked in the past as a team-building tool at some company, somewhere, but only you can tell whether it will work for your company.

Is the business environment more faddish or less? That depends on who you ask. Pennington, who has been in the training business for 30 years, believes executives tend to hunt for quick fixes in bad economic times. "When times are tough, it's easier and cheaper for companies to buy pre-packaged programs," he says. "If a program doesn't work, they can always try another, and it gives them the sense they're doing something."

Jackson agrees: "There's more potential for fads now because people are desperate. In this environment, fads are like the Holy Grail, offering the divine answer to a company's problems."

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But others believe that fads are more prevalent in good times, when companies have more money to throw around. "Companies are more willing to take a chance on something when budgets aren't so tight," says Daniel. "But in the past 18 months or so, training budgets have been slashed and there's more pressure to focus on the basics."

When looking at the big picture, it might be irrelevant whether fads are more predominant in good times or bad. The bottom line is that all companies are vulnerable to fads, and it's the trainer's job to search and destroy. TD

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