



Had enough of consultant's inventions?

We've all heard the definition of a consultant as being 'someone who borrows your watch to tell you the time'. Well, I prefer the alternative definition 'a consultant is someone who sees something working in practice and wonders whether it will work in theory'.

The reason why I like this second definition is that, whilst it can be construed as being a negative view of consultants, there is some merit in the approach suggested. Not many people want to be the guinea pig, taking all the risks. And many people are resistant to copying other people's practices, certainly not in their entirety, with 'it might work there but it won't work here' being a usual mantra.

And yet many companies want to be seen as being innovative in their management thinking. But the first question asked of a consultant after presenting a new idea is 'where has this been used successfully?' Even worse, some organisations, particularly those in the public sector, want a list of at least 10 similar organisations where the new ideas have been used. So, whilst being seen to be innovative most organisations want to eliminate any element of risk of failure.

Consultants have a part to play in changing management and business culture. The use of theory based upon established practice give the illusion of innovative thinking with the comfort that the risks are known and can be managed.



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The 'inventions' themselves are normally no more than a combination of techniques which have been used many times before, both as a stand-alone technique or as part of another invention.

An example of a current invention is Lean Business, this having roots in the Toyota Production System, although no one in Toyota ever heard the expression 'Lean Business', this name being invented at a latter date. The aim of the Lean Business approach is relatively simple, to eliminate everything in the organisation which does not add value. The techniques used range from Value Stream Mapping, a relatively recent technique, to basic problem solving techniques. Lean Business can therefore be seen as a philosophy underpinned by tried and tested techniques aimed at streamlining business activities. Although its application was originally focussed on a high volume car manufacturing facility, the Lean Business approach is now accepted as being applicable in many business activities.

This gathering together of a range of tried and tested techniques may be seen as nothing more than a clever piece of marketing to sell the same products many times over. But businesses and people move on, customer expectations and the markets change and therefore there is a need for fresh ideas. The use of 'themed' approach as a catalyst for change is usually justified, even if some of the underlying techniques have been used before. From a change agent's perspective it is much easier to sell a 'themed' approach than selling a list of component techniques.

Lean Business
Six Sigma
Value stream mapping
Toyota Production System

So in a world which is constantly changing we should be grateful for the consultants presenting 'new' ways of managing and improving organisational performance even if we know that the component parts of their 'inventions' are hardly new. It is just a pity that some consultants think that the answer to all business issues is Lean or Six Sigma etc. In fact, some consultants advocate the use of some of these approaches in the most inappropriate environments, giving rise to a certain degree of cynicism which should be directed towards the consultant and not the approach.

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