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Excess, forgetfulness and the persistence of organizational allergies

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In this essay it is argued that excess in management ideas, ironically, is fed by and maintains organizational forgetfulness. Herewith I seek to challenge a dominant and simplistic conception that considers temporarily popular organization concepts that constitute the excess solely in terms of continuous transience and develop an alternative view on the excess of ideas in the management knowledge market. As a result, this essay adopts a ghosstrider’s perspective (ten Bos, 2003) in relation to many management fashion accounts.

An abundant supply of new management ideas is presented as important knowledge to address persistent organizational problems, hereby seeking to become viewed as crucial paths to organizational success (ten Bos, 2004). Their inherent utopianism constitutes a key element for their widespread acceptance (ten Bos, 2000), but also lays the foundation for a collective rejection. As Lammers (1988) already noted, there is more continuity than the excessive turnover of new management ideas would suggest, however this ‘idea excess’ is believed to suffer from a lack of accumulation indicating that the wheel is continuously reinvented anew. While this notion may be, at least for some of us, noting new, I feel that, in the light of the continuous transience in management thinking, it cannot be repeated enough.

In spite of these initial observations of management ideas excess, there has been little research on the way this excess takes shape within organizations (Clark, 2004). A lack of attempts to develop a better understanding on the way the abundant stream of new concepts evolve within organization has led to the belief that knowledge consumption is still regarded as a ‘poorly understood component of the organizational field’ (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001: 939) As Clark noted, the current literature provides merely analyses of print media data but ‘is generally concerned not with the organizational implications of management fashions’ (2004: 300). As a result, the notion of transience dominates current conceptualizations of the idea excess. In contrast to this view, theorists describing and conceptualizing the process of institutionalization indicate that under certain conditions adopted management ideas and practices may become sedimented (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Røvik, 1996; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996) in organizations.

Thus in spite of the excessive supply of allegedly transient management ideas, some elements of it may resist the pressure for change so that ‘prescriptions that have become obsolete may have become very entrenched in organizations’ (Røvik, 1996: 163). This would imply that there is more persistence during an alleged concept’s downturn than current theorists would suggest (see also Lammers, 1988; Clark, 2004). However the way the ‘new’ collides with the ‘old’ cannot be easily known ex ante, or as Watson suggests: ‘… the pattern that is left is rarely a neat one and it is never predictable’ (1986: 47). The previous starts from the assumption that the evolution of popular management idea does not follow a single all-embracing pattern and can have unanticipated consequences.
In addition, to further explore the relation between the excessive supply of management ideas and the persistent lack of accumulation in organizations, I start from Brunsson and Olsen’s (1997) understanding of forgetfulness and draw on various accounts addressing transience and persistence in organizational practices. However, as this paper will reveal, the continuous replacement in the abundant supply of new concepts does not automatically lead to discarding old practices but the relation between ‘old’ and ‘new’ ideas is not predetermined pre se (Ortmann, 1995). Rather, allegedly transient ideas that are part of the excess may leave serious allergies that hold important and enduring implications for the future functioning of organizations.

Excess in management ideas

Various commentators indicated that, ironically, excess in management thinking is nothing new. Rather, this notion keeps being rediscovered in different periods by various commentators from different fields. For instance Joan Woodward is well known in organization studies by her typology of technical systems in relation to the characteristics of the products they produce. In addition her widely renowned work reveals that technical systems show important structural differences on aspects such as the average number of managerial levels the traits of the employees and the organizational form. At the same time, what is less known, is that she also noted that the many changes in the managerial ideas defined the shape of changes in organizations: ‘Management fashion also had an important part in organizational changes. The urge to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ seems to be as powerful a force in industrial circles as in social life.’ (Woodward, 1965: 22)

Similarly, Lawrence and Lorsch have become widely recognized for their research on contingency theory. Their studies indicates that different organizational units are responsible for different tasks and operate in distinct circumstances. As a result these units have to be organized in their own specific way to obtain an optimal result (Lammers, 1983: 152). At the same they stress in their work the importance of integration between the units by means of hierarchical coordination, procedures and liason mechanisms. Something that is edited out of the collective knowledge on this research is their observation about the excessive supply of new managerial ideas: ‘The last fifty years of executive life have been filled with a multitude of important new methods and techniques for running a business. Around the turn of the century business was being urged to systematize in terms of cost accounting, production control and budgeting. Then the Scientific Management movement came in, with time and motion studies and job and workflow rationalization. About the same time a plethora of monetary incentive systems, such as the infamous Bedeaux plan came into vogue.’ (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967: 160) They go on by describing some key characteristics of the ideas that are part of this abundant flow. Specifically Lawrence and Lorsch emphasize that these idea are imbued with hygienesque expectations that may contribute to creating an utopian view (ten Bos, 2000): ‘Each of these techniques seem to carry with it a trust in one of two directions: either toward greater order, systematization, routinization and predictability or toward greater openness, sharing, creativity and individual initiative.’ (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967: 161)

More recently, two well-known management gurus have touched this subject. Even though they contribute to idea excess themselves they show a severe discontent with the abundant supply of new ideas: ‘But none of the management fads of the last twenty years - not management by objectives, diversification, theory Z, zero-based budgeting, value chain analysis, decentralization, quality circles, ‘excellence’, restructuring, portfolio management, management by walking around, matrix management, intrapreneuring, or one-minute managing - has reserved the deterioration of America’s corporate competitive performance. They have only distracted managers from the real task at hand.’ (Hammer and Champy 1993: 25)
The above indicates that organizations have always been repeatedly viewed victim of an abundant supply of allegedly innovative management ideas. Brunsson (1997) even (under)stated that knowledge on organizational forms cannot be particularly considered as a scarce resource (1997: 310). Then, as now, people perceive a constant and collective rejection of ideas that have been embraced only a short time before. Drawing on data about the performance of innovation projects generated in two case studies Benders & Vermeulen (2002) discuss whether the abundant supply of innovation tools is useful in organizational praxis. They state that abundance of management knowledge does not mean that problems are solved, rather it is argue that ‘…yet other tools is not the sole solution and perhaps even part of the larger problem.’ (2002: 164). This point to the observation that the persistent innovation problems offer important grounds for the emergence of new solutions and incessantly launching new tools. When this alleged novelty does not bring the changes consistent with their prescriptions, it creates space for the introduction of a surge of newer ideas and makes people readily reject their ideas-in-use. In other words idea excess entails that management ideas are easily abandoned after a short while and replaced by the next innovative vision on organizing. Unsurprisingly, these ideas are easily denoted ‘fads’ or ‘fashions’ soon after they emerge (Kieser, 1997; ten Bos, 2000), leaving an impression in which organizational knowledge continuously becomes prey to transience.

Although the management ideas excess has been noted in different periods by different commentators, it has not been until the early 1990s that this phenomenon received systematic attention from management theorists. In this, the attention for new knowledge commodities that constitute the idea excess is conceptualized as a bell-shaped pattern in which a rapid growth in popularity is quickly followed by a sharp decline. Using a marketing perspective, Huczynski (1993) stressed that, like any product, knowledge commodities go through a life-cycle mainly shaped by customer demand. He identified different stages including introduction, growth, maturity, saturation and decline. Analyzing the evolution of three management ideas Gill & Whittle (1993) came to a similar conclusion. They typified four distinct phases through which knowledge commodities tend to proceed, thereby indicating a continuous transience in the production and consumption of management knowledge. Typically in a first phase a knowledge entrepreneur transforms a general management idea into a form that will enhance its ability to appeal to a mass audience. This is often supported by successful implementations of these ideas within some prominent pioneering organizations. The birth phase is followed by a period of rapid growth in which it is received with great enthusiasm among an increasing population of managers. At the same time other knowledge suppliers also promote and seek to develop the idea into a saleable form to enhance their business. Subsequently, the commodity moves into a phase of maturity that is characterized by widespread implementations within organizations and increased standardization of consultancy methods. A phase of decline sets in when organizations experience that it cannot meet its initial expectations, is no longer regarded innovative and are confronted with new and promising solutions that are brought on the market by knowledge entrepreneurs.

Drawing on the previous accounts, Abrahamson (1996) and Abrahamson & Fairchild (1999) hypothesized three basic stages in the evolution of specific management techniques that shape the perceived excess. This starts with a dormancy phase involving a relatively long period of little attention which is followed by a quickly accelerating upsurge and, after a short peak, giving way to an irreversible downswing in popularity. Key to this pattern is that under norms of progress and rationality management ideas cannot remain in use for long (1996: 257). As a result Abrahamson defined these management fashions as transitory phenomena. Unlike Abrahamson’s account that distinct from aesthetic forms, Kieser (1997) offers an overview of different sociological theories of fashion in clothing, i.e. trickle-down, collective selection and marionette theories, and shows that these can provide complementing explana-
tions for the recurrent bell-shaped curves in the popularity of management ideas thereby sug-
gesting that knowledge suppliers and consumers seek to constantly abandon the old for the
new. Providing a field-level analysis of the system of production and consumption of man-
agement knowledge, Suddaby & Greenwood (2001) present the commodification of manage-
ment knowledge as a cyclical and institutionalized process between different knowledge mar-
et actors. These actor’s interaction continuously induces recurrent patterns of knowledge
creation, legitimation and consumption. Congruent to the view of earlier accounts they argue
that converting management knowledge into a commoditized form induces the need for new
commodities resulting in transient cycles in the attention for management knowledge.

The common held thesis that the attention for management knowledge commodities
abundantly produced by knowledge suppliers resembles a bell-shaped curve has been empiri-
cally corroborated by various studies (Pascale, 1990; Carson et al., 1999; Jones & Thwaites,
2000). Most of these studies, however, base themselves only on analyses of print media data
and provide little clues about the consumption side of the knowledge market (Clark, 2001;
2004). The research, often using bibliographic databases, revealed the expected short lived,
bell-shaped patterns but also found notable differences in impact between distinct communi-
ties of knowledge entrepreneurs. For instance Benders & van Bijsterveld (1999) were able to
show that the shape of discourse intensity about Lean Production (LP) was characterized by a
sinusoid wave during the 1990s. However, as indicated by media traces, LP became particu-
larly popular in Germany while in many other countries the concept was hardly discussed.
Also various professional groups may differ significantly in the extent and way a commodity
is received (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001). Finally, studies of print media found important
variations in the evolution of different commodities (Braam, Heusinkveld & Benders, 2002).
It is therefore that some theorists argue that the life-span of commodities tend to shorten and
their intensity is getting higher (Pascale, 1990; Kieser, 1997; Carson et al., 1999).

Fashion theorists maintain the idea that organizations continuously abandon concepts
after a short in favor of new ideas thereby providing a fertile contest to ideas excess (Gill &
Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993; Abrahamson, 1996). In this view that dominates current
management fashion literature, it is generally assumed that a concept’s up- and downswing in
discourse strongly relates to its usage in praxis. This image is reinforced when media often
tend to uphold the suggestion that soon after their introduction, concepts not only become
extensively debated but also widely associated with changes in organizations. In their effort to
substantiate this co-evolution proposition, Abrahamson (1996) and Abrahamson & Fairchild
(1999) use survey data on QC usage in the US and compared it with the intensity of QC dis-
course in the print media. They reported that the increase in articles on QC in the US during
the early 1980s coincided with evidence adoption of the concept among a large number of US
firms. In the same way they found indications that the downswing in discourse during the
mid-1980s was paralleled by the firms’ collective abandonment of QC. They even hypothe-
sized that the unfavorable tenor and downswing of discourse in the business media reinforced
large-scale rejection across populations of companies (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999: 732).

Forgetfulness

The excessive supply of new ideas both benefits from and maintains organizational forgetful-
ness (Brunsson & Olsen, 1997). Organizations are flooded with allegedly new knowledge
items though at the same time tend to reiterate old debates (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001)
and continue making the same elementary mistakes (Benders & Vermeulen, 2002). It is em-
phasized that the constant discrepancy between the utopianism in the way ideas are presented
(ten Bos, 2000) and how they actually work in praxis offers inexhaustible space for the emer-
gence of new rediscoveries. The excessive eagerness for new ideas (Ortmann, 1995) rein-
forces and finds its source in the inability to systematically understand failures and shortcomings made in the past thereby limiting the opportunities for accumulation.

Congruent to the relatively easily observable short-lived patterns in the media, theorists generally explain the recurring transient cycles in the attention for management knowledge in organizational praxis from the major differences in views before and after a commodity’s implementation. The analysis of Gill & Whittle (1993) reported a continuous and collective cynicism and subsequent abandonment of concepts that have been received with enthusiasm and were widely implemented only a short time before, thereby indicating a radical shift in opinion ex post and ex ante. In support to this explanation, Abrahamson & Fairchild (1999) found that the increasing media attention for QC in the early 1980s went together by positive evaluations and high expectations about the possibility of performance improvement in the market. In contrast, the study revealed that increasing negative evaluations and a more critical attitude to the concept paralleled the downswing in media discourse on QC. It is suggested that after a period of excitement and high enthusiasm, a concept inevitably becomes increasingly criticized and loses its initial image of rationality and progress.

In line with this, ten Bos (2000) contends that disillusionment is inherent to management fashion because it is imbued with overly rationalistic principles which remains unreachable far from the real world of management practice. It is therefore that fashions are unable to fulfill the oversold expectations initially attributed to them. This points to the fact that while some of their characteristics are crucial elements for concepts’ widespread acceptance within organizations, they also lay the foundation for their collective rejection in organizational praxis. Particularly the inherent characteristics associated with new ideas that play a role in generating a popular status such as simplicity (Fincham, 1995; Kieser, 1997; Røvik, 2002) and utopian promises (Furusten, 1999; ten Bos, 2000) cannot be completely realized in organizational praxis and generate new unanticipated problems (Lawler & Mohrman, 1985). Ten Bos even stresses that fashion always has an ‘appointment with disappointment’ (2000: 6). Such a view decreases the likelihood that the adoption of concepts will eventually lead to incorporating them as part of the firm’s routines.

As a result, theorists often emphasize the transient (Abrahamson, 1996) and non-cumulative (Gill & Whittle, 1993) nature of the excessive supply of management knowledge thereby suggesting a resulting continuous erosion in organizational knowledge. Brunsson & Olsen (1997) even argue that the consequences of these transient patterns for organizational praxis can be regarded as one of its causes. Specifically, they state that the constant introduction of new ideas is fed by and increases organizational forgetfulness. Organizational forgetfulness ensures that earlier experiences do not obstruct the introductions of new concepts carrying similar problems. Not being able to recognize earlier attempts allows to continuously reiterating old knowledge and presenting it as new.

Ten Bos (2000) argues that the abundant supply of new managerial ideas may inspire managers with ‘new’ insights but at the same time noted that a key element that persist in management fashion is that by their inherent focus on novelty and progress it tends to obliterate the past and therefore is condemned to repeat it. He even marks that ‘forgetfulness is a defining characteristic of the utopian mind’ (2000: 175) indicating that the longevity of oversold management ideas in organizations is rather problematic. Take for example the field of information systems development. This field is flooded with allegedly new tools and method for organizational analysis and design. However, in spite of this supply of design knowledge, organizations continue making the same elementary mistakes. Remarkably the continuous struggle with failing information systems is unremittingly attributed to inadequate system development methods (van Bijsterveld, 1997). Despite descriptions of long-standing problems allegedly new design knowledge is repeatedly introduced, each containing substantial promises of performance improvement. Ideas excess stimulates jumping from one tool to another.
thereby creating a constant discontinuity and limited opportunities for knowledge entrenchment (Zeitz et al., 1999).

Also Lammers (1988) shows a strong ambivalence with regard to these excessive stream of new management ideas. In response to one of these ideas, the 1980s bestseller In Search of Excellence, Lammers found that the authors used inadequate research methods and reproduced old knowledge without referring to earlier sources (Lammers, 1986). At the same time noted that the book caused that management thinking about the subject received a new impetuous. He states that: ‘in sum they should not have done it in this way but I am very glad they did it’ (1986: 27) hereby pointing at the fact that the book contributed to the idea excess and mad no contribution to management knowledge per se, but caused that management thinking about the subject received a new impetuous. While he acknowledged that fashionable concepts play an important role in repeatedly drawing attention to management knowledge, he also pointed to major problems of under-utilization of existing insights.

For instance the contemporary popular ideas behind the concept of Excellent Organizations, as presented in the early eighties by Peters and Waterman have been incessantly renamed by different theorists and rediscovered as new but do not building upon previous experiences. German sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s already wrote about organizations with low degree of formalization. Also in following decades, variations on the same theme were put forward as part of ideas excess thereby indicating that similar insights have been rediscovered as new and renamed by different theorists without building on existing knowledge (see also the analysis of Kieser, 1996). He therefore argued that there is more continuity than the excessive turnover of new ideas would suggest but at the same time these suffer from a lack of accumulation (Lammers, 1988: 219). This is not only regarded a crucial issue for management scholars but also has important implications for management praxis. A permanent inability to systematically build on existing insights and experiences means that people have to reinvent what others already knew and therefore are condemned to endlessly repeating the same mistakes.

Organizational allergies

Although the excess of ideas is fed by and maintains forgetfulness, this does not mean that that these allegedly transient ideas may not leave any unanticipated problems that hold important and enduring implications for the future functioning of organizations. Current accounts make it at least doubtful that some of the ideas that are part of the excess become absorbed and routinized by organizations as main consumers of management knowledge. However, I believe this conceptualization suffers from a lack of systematic attention for a concept’s sedimentation process in organizations (Røvik, 1996; Oliver, 1991). Practices are regarded sedimented when they have become perceived as a taken for granted and enduring part of organizational practice or common stock of cognitive representations of organizational members (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Yin, 1979; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Zeitz et al., 1999). This means that they have moved through a process of institutionalization to become an established pattern of behavior in a community and thereby remain constantly recognized and re-enacted in the daily activities. As this paper will explain below, the realization of an idea may cause that organizations develop a persistent over-sensitivity, or allergy to specific language and become permanently immune for specific solutions. This shows that management ideas excess cannot be regarded a trivial or transitory phenomenon, but may have some unanticipated but important and enduring consequences for the future functioning of organizations.

In order to obtain a perceived relative advantage over the large amount of existing ideas, it is important for a new idea to be accompanied by major promises of performance improvements thereby creating a utopian view (ten Bos, 2000). When an idea cannot meet its
oversold promises it can limit the possibilities for future ideas. Rogers has dubbed this phenomenon as ‘innovation negativism’ (1995: 227). This entails that when an idea falls short of its expectations, this may become part of a cognitive consciousness with which all future ideas are assessed, thereby particularly leaving a strong anxiety among a group of people for specific terminology in which ideas are expressed. It is argued that the trajectories of a concept’s words cannot be easily controlled or known ex ante (Kelemen, 2000). For instance Zbaracki shows that during a concept’s employment, its language obtains a specific loadedness now including what organization has done. This means that elements of the initial linguistic package can be assimilated into the organization’s language system, in spite of the fact that the initial concept may no longer be in vogue. The case study of Benders (1999) shows that institutionalized elements of previous concepts played a crucial role in the organizational specific interpretation of Lean Production once this concept was introduced. So even though earlier concepts are no longer central to the managerial discourse, their traces can be maintained.

However, theorists also point to the possibility that organizational members can no longer employ the language within a specific organization because it has obtained a negative connotation. This may be a result of the crystallization of an ‘organizational allergy’. After their realization, concepts are regarded differently than before. Whereas the initial optimistic discourse is important for a concept to become widely accepted, its realization is often accompanied by new or unexpected problems (Brunsson & Olsen, 1997; DeCock & Hipkin, 1997). Being associated with heavy difficulties, conflicts or practical concerns undermines the concept’s initial attractiveness and inevitably affects the way a concept is talked about in organizations (Zbaracki, 1998; Kelemen, 2000). For instance Benders & Verlaar (2003) show that because of specific interpretations obtained in the past, the use of specific words may constitute a barrier to the acceptance of proper knowledge. In this organization the term ‘structure’ had obtained a pejorative meaning due to negative experiences with earlier ideas. When this has become a part of the company’s institutionalized pattern of thought an action, it worked out as an insurmountable barrier. It is therefore that Benders & Verlaar (2003) noted that future initiatives had to avoid using this term as it may inevitably lead to an overstrained situation.

Also the study of Heusinkveld (2004) observed that a concept’s realization may contaminate the organization’s linguistic package thereby creating an over-sensitivity to specific terms. One of the respondents nicely illustrated this situation: ‘That dissention was expressed in real rows with the works council and resulted in a overstrained situation on the shopfloor […] Because of this, the term Nova has become taboo in this organization. Members got a large hang-over from the implementation of this project.’ The introduction and realization of previous concepts had caused what I call *organizational immunization* to old solutions. When specific traces have become controversial or are regarded unproven it affects their future reputation in an organization and hampers the transfer of these traces to new solutions. So a concept’s unsuccessful realization may block further application and herewith becomes an important barrier in the viability of traces associated with it. In such a case, people easily seize the opportunity to reverse organizational manifestations that occurred under that banner. So the language of allegedly transient concepts that are part of the excessive supply of ideas may remain and play a conditional role in future change initiatives within organizations.
References


