

MANAGEMENT FASHION

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 25, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *MANAGEMENT FASHION*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=61906>

MANAGEMENT FASHION

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Organizational Theory, Strategic Management, Sociology of Organizations

1. Core Definition and Scope

The concept of **Management Fashion** refers to the cyclical, often intense, yet usually temporary interest in specific management techniques, technologies, or ideologies within the business community. Unlike stable, long-term best practices, management fashions are characterized by a high degree of social construction, driven by the desire for organizational legitimacy, status, and competitive differentiation rather than purely objective utility. These fashions represent socially acceptable ways of talking about and attempting to solve complex organizational problems, often packaged and sold by management gurus and consulting firms.

The phenomenon acknowledges that managerial decision-making is not solely rational; it is deeply influenced by cultural trends and normative pressures. The core tenet, as noted in early definitions, is that "Different managers will encapsulate a different **management fashion** depending on what they feel comfortable with and what works." This highlights the subjective nature of adoption, where comfort, cultural fit, and perceived effectiveness--which can be localized and temporary--dictate the embrace of a specific method, such as Total Quality Management (TQM), Reengineering, or Agile methodologies.

Management fashions differ from fundamental management principles in their temporal velocity and their origin. Fundamental principles evolve slowly through rigorous testing and empirical validation, whereas fashions sweep through organizations rapidly, promising radical improvement or competitive advantage, often before their true efficacy has been established. Consequently, management fashions follow a predictable lifecycle of inception, rapid diffusion, peak adoption, eventual disillusionment, and replacement by the next trend.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The formal academic study of **management fashion** was pioneered primarily by U.S. Management Theorist Eric Abrahamson in the early 1990s. Abrahamson's foundational work challenged the conventional view that organizational changes were strictly the result of rational decision-making based on maximizing efficiency. He proposed that management ideas spread through processes analogous to the diffusion of consumer trends or cultural fads, thus necessitating the term "fashion."

Abrahamson's initial theories centered on the idea of a ****Management Fashion Setting Process (MFSP)****, which involves both a supply side and a demand side. The supply side is constituted by

fashion setters--primarily management consultants, business schools, and specialized media--who invent, package, and aggressively promote new techniques as innovative solutions to widespread management anxieties. The demand side involves managers seeking legitimacy, status, and practical tools to navigate uncertainty, often leading them to adopt these fashions even if their utility is uncertain or the underlying theory is "unfounded and unclear," as observed in some early critiques.

Subsequent research expanded on Abrahamson's model, incorporating sociological theories such as institutional isomorphism and organizational mimicry. This body of work argues that the spread of management fashions is often driven by institutional pressures. Organizations adopt fashionable techniques not just to improve performance, but to signal competence and conformity to powerful external stakeholders (such as investors, regulators, and industry peers). This pursuit of legitimacy explains why many organizations adopt management fashions symbolically rather than substantively, often leading to superficial implementation and eventual failure of the technique itself.

3. The Role of Management Consultants and Fashion Setters

Management consultants and business school academics are critical actors in the creation and proliferation of management fashions. They function as ****fashion setters****, transforming nascent or obscure ideas into marketable, high-status commodities. This process involves the rhetorical packaging of ideas, often using memorable acronyms, proprietary methodologies, and compelling narratives of corporate transformation. Consultants benefit directly from the cyclical nature of fashion, as organizations constantly require new solutions when old ones fall out of favor.

The rhetorical framing employed by fashion setters is key to successful diffusion. New management techniques are often presented as universally applicable remedies for contemporary organizational ills, capitalizing on managers' perpetual desire for simple, definitive solutions to complex problems. Consultants frame these ideas as highly rational and necessary innovations, masking the underlying process of social and cultural contagion. They leverage platforms like high-profile business publications and lucrative speaking circuits to rapidly diffuse the ideology, creating a sense of urgency around adoption.

Business schools also play a significant role by legitimizing management ideas. When concepts like "Disruptive Innovation" or "Blue Ocean Strategy" are integrated into MBA curricula, they gain academic weight and become essential components of the managerial lexicon. This academic endorsement signals competence and relevance to the next generation of managers, institutionalizing the fashion and ensuring its widespread adoption across different industries and geographic boundaries.

4. Key Characteristics and the Fashion Lifecycle

Management fashions typically exhibit several defining characteristics that differentiate them from enduring management paradigms. They are characterized by novelty, simplification, universality claims, and high rhetorical appeal. Their trajectory usually follows a predictable lifecycle:

Invention and Naming: A new concept is articulated, often by a prominent consultant or academic, and given a catchy, marketable name (e.g., Six Sigma, Lean).

Diffusion and Hype: Through media coverage, conferences, and consulting campaigns, the idea spreads rapidly. A wave of intense positive publicity creates a "bandwagon effect," making non-adoption risky.

Saturation and Institutionalization: The fashion reaches peak adoption. Companies adopt it primarily for legitimacy or to mimic competitors, often leading to superficial implementation.

Disillusionment and Critique: As expected revolutionary results fail to materialize, critics emerge. Implementation challenges, high costs, and lack of sustained effectiveness lead to widespread disappointment.

Decline and Replacement: The fashion falls out of favor, often replaced by an opposing or slightly modified concept (e.g., TQM's decline giving way to Reengineering, which itself eventually faded).

This cyclical process is vital for understanding organizational change dynamics. It suggests that many organizational practices are transient cultural artifacts rather than permanent structural improvements. The rapid turnover of these fashions creates an environment where managers are constantly seeking the "next big thing," often leading to organizational fatigue and cynicism regarding change initiatives.

5. Significance and Impact on Organizational Behavior

The study of **management fashion** has profound implications for understanding organizational behavior and strategic choice. It reveals that the decision to adopt new practices is often less about internal rational calculation (Will this improve efficiency?) and more about external social dynamics (Will adopting this make us look legitimate and competent?).

One significant impact is the phenomenon of **organizational mimicry**. In highly uncertain or competitive environments, firms often copy the strategic or structural choices of successful or highly regarded organizations. Management fashions provide ready-made scripts for this imitation. By adopting the same methodology as a perceived industry leader, a firm reduces the appearance of risk and signals that it is modern and forward-thinking, even if the application is ill-suited to its specific context.

Furthermore, management fashions influence the managerial labor market. Proficiency in the current dominant management fashion (e.g., "Agile transformation" today, "Matrix structures"

decades ago) becomes a crucial skill requirement for executives. This creates pressure for managers to constantly update their knowledge and terminology, reinforcing the cultural significance of the fashion cycle and ensuring that management theories remain a constantly shifting landscape of jargon and temporary solutions.

6. Debates and Criticisms

While the management fashion perspective provides a valuable sociological lens, it faces several significant criticisms. A primary debate revolves around whether classifying an idea as a "fashion" inherently minimizes its potential rational utility. Critics argue that while exaggeration and hype are common, many management techniques that become popular, such as Balanced Scorecards or decentralized organizational structures, contain genuine, rational principles that offer real benefits when implemented correctly.

Another key criticism concerns the ambiguity of the boundary between a fashion, a fad, and a genuine paradigm shift. Fads are typically seen as extremely short-lived and superficial (e.g., hula hoops), while paradigms represent fundamental, enduring shifts in thought (e.g., Scientific Management). Management fashions occupy a middle ground, making their classification difficult. The initial critique leveled against Abrahamson's concept--that the theories put forward were sometimes "unfounded and unclear"--suggests difficulty in defining the scope and impact of these ideas rigorously.

Finally, critics note that focusing too heavily on the supply side (the consultants) risks portraying managers as passive victims of marketing hype. In reality, managers actively select and modify fashions, adapting them to their specific needs and organizational cultures. This active role suggests a more complex interaction where managers are not merely consuming trends but strategically utilizing fashionable concepts as tools for internal political maneuvering or external legitimacy claims.

Further Reading

[Eric Abrahamson \(Management Theorist\)](#)

[Management Fashion \(Abrahamson, 1996 article on the sociological forces\)](#)

[The Diffusion of Management Innovations \(General article on adoption and spread\)](#)