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SPECIAL ISSUE

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Mercury Magazine 2013, Spring/Summer (Special Issue on the Business of Consultancies), Issue 4, pp. 22-27.
Copyright © 2013 Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University [ISSN 2001-3272]
Mercury Reprint 04132227




CONSULTING, GURUS AND BIG IDEAS

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ne historical study reports that the ratio of consultants to managers grew from one to a hundred in 1965, to one to thirteen in 1995. During this period the management consulting industry experienced an almost uninterrupted period of positive annual growth with many years in double digits. There are many factors fueling the continued expansion of consulting like the importance of modern management thinkers and their ideas argue **Timothy Clark, David Greatbatch and Pojanath Bhatanacharoen.**



One of the most frequently commented upon facts about the management consultancy industry is the speed of its growth over the past forty years. When commentators explain the spectacular growth of management consulting, they typically emphasise the broader tilt in the balance of advanced Western economies from manufacturing to services, the focus of client firms on core activities and externalization of more peripheral activities, and the central role of knowledge in modern economies and consultants as knowledge generators and disseminators par excellence. Whilst the intellectual contribution to the early development of consulting by well-known advocates of Scientific Management, such as Frederick Taylor, Harrington Emerson and the Gilbreths has been acknowledged, the importance of subsequent management thinkers and their ideas in fuelling the continued expansion of consulting is overlooked. Indeed, the constant waxing and waning of management ideas fuels the growth of management consulting in several ways. First, it refreshes the knowledge base of consultancies and so supplies them with new ideas/services that can be sold to clients. Second, and related, this process of renewal sustains the general perception that there are lots of ideas around and that consultants provide access to them. In this article we focus on trying to explain why some ideas reach a threshold of popularity whereby certain management thinkers are ascribed guru status. In the next section, we briefly discuss the nature of a guru before examining the features they use to communicate their ideas through their books and lectures so as to maximise the chances of their ideas catching-on.

What is a 'Guru'?

The term 'guru' has become the label of choice when media commentators discuss influential and popular management thinkers and proselytisers regardless of the background of the particular individual. Although many of these individuals emanate from well-known management consultancies and some run their own consultancies and their ideas can be packaged and sold by many consultancies, their personal renown overshadows any particular organizational affiliation. Their profile is therefore driven not by their consulting activities but by the level of media attention they and their ideas garner on the basis of the success of their books and public performances. Gurus share a number of additional common features. Their ideas are inherently fashion-like in that they rise and fall in popularity partly because of changing attitudes in organisations and the media and the emergence of a new zeitgeist which may render ideas less relevant, or even redundant. Their ideas attempt to contribute to the understanding of the

problems faced by management and organizations by focusing on a factor or technique that the guru claims has the potential to make a transformational impact. Finally, unlike conventional consultants who work closely with clients on individual projects, the guru project is focused on disseminating their ideas and techniques through books and lectures to as broader an audience as possible. Gurus therefore rely on their personal charisma to gain authority, whereas consultants depend on their techniques.

Management Bestseller Books

Individuals regarded as management gurus are the authors of best-selling management books. It is their books that afford the gurus their celebrity status. These books have perhaps been the publishing phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s. Prior to the publication of Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* in 1982, management books – although some titles sold in large quantities – did not compete for a place at the top of bestseller lists. The sales generated by the management bestsellers of the 1980s and 1990s were of a different scale to these earlier books – millions rather than tens or hundreds of thousands of copies. The success of *In Search of Excellence*, and subsequently a number of other titles such as Senge et al.'s *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990 or Hammer and Champy's *Re-engineering the Corporation* in 1993, raised the profile of the genre as a whole and resulted in management books enjoying a more prominent position in bookshops, occupying positions at the top of best-seller lists and a gaining a broader readership.

The significance of these books in terms of their sales and therefore assumed impact on management thinking, as well as their crucial role in launching a number of major management fashions that permeated the management consulting industry in the 1980s and 1990s led to a series of academic studies aimed at examining the factors that accounted for their popularity. The key question driving these studies was what makes them a bestseller. In answering this question, some commentators have stressed the importance of a series of conventions and structures, which enhance the readability, understanding and applicability of the ideas for the intended audience. These include: a focus on a single factor; the contrasting of old ideas with the new such that the latter are presented as qualitatively better and superior; the creation of a sense of urgency, such that the introduction of the ideas is presented as pressing and unavoidable; an emphasis on the need for readers to reflect and change their practice; an individualistic focus in that readers are portrayed as having a moral responsibility and capacity for the improvement of themselves and/or their organizations; the

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linkage of the ideas to highly treasured management values; case studies of outstanding success, and a stress on the universal applicability of ideas.

Research by two of the authors indicates that the writing of these books is a collaborative endeavour in that book editors have a significant, if largely unseen, impact on the shaping of management ideas in book form. These editors work closely with authors, helping mould their ideas prior to publication to produce books in accordance with general rules or conventions about what has, or appears to have, been successful in the past. They therefore aim to present the ideas in accessible forms that have two characteristics: (1) a simple writing style and grammatical structure to ensure they are easy to read and, (2) an emphasis on their practical relevance. Indeed, this latter point is emphasized in several studies which reveal that these books are replete with examples that link the gurus' ideas to an apparently successful organizational practice. These make their ideas concrete and bolster their credibility by associating them with successful organizations and practices.

By drawing on these conventions, gurus and editors seek to publish a book that emphasizes a number of features so that the ideas – regardless of their inherent value – are presented in ways that resonate with the expectations and needs of the managerial audience for information and, in doing so, heighten their chance of becoming a bestseller. However, imbuing a book with the elements identified in the preceding paragraphs does not guarantee its success. Many books are carefully designed to contain all of these features but do not become bestsellers. There is therefore considerable uncertainty as to why one book is successful and another not. As some commentators of the creative industries note, it is a general principle that nobody really knows what is going to be success-



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“LAUGHTER MAY SEEM A TRIVIAL ACTION, BUT BY EVOKING AND PRODUCING LAUGHTER, THE GURUS AND AUDIENCE MEMBERS DISPLAY A COMMON PERSPECTIVE IN RELATION TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES AND EVENTS THAT THE GURUS DESCRIBE. THIS CONTRIBUTES TO A SENSE OF COHESION AND INTIMACY, WHICH SOFTENS THE AUDIENCE AND MAKES THEM MORE RECEPTIVE TO THE GURUS’ RECOMMENDATIONS.”

ful because not all elements can be controlled. Timing is everything. They have to resonate with the zeitgeist.

Guru Lectures and Seminars

In addition to writing best-selling management books, management gurus disseminate their ideas through live presentations on the international management lecture circuit. As perhaps the highest profile group of management speakers in the world, they use their lectures to build their personal reputations with audiences of managers. Many gain reputations as powerful orators and subsequently market recordings of their talks as parts of management training packages. Commentators have consistently argued that the gurus’ public performances are critical to their popularity and success and help promote and sustain the visibility of their ideas. The core objective of these events is to both entertain and persuade the audience to adopt a new perspective. How do they do this?

Research by the authors based on detailed analyses of video recordings of a number of gurus’ lectures reveals that they are very skilled at using a range of presentational practices that generate collective audience laughter during their lectures. In order to orchestrate a collective response so that individuals are not left in the potentially embarrassing experience of being the only person to laugh, the research found that the gurus regularly deployed a range of rhetorical techniques associated with ‘persuasive’ talk in

other forms of public speaking. These include the use of rhetorical devices which emphasise messages by making them stand out from surrounding parts of their speech and which enable audience members to coordinate their responses around clearly projectable message completion points. They also announce that they are about to say something humorous (“I am going to tell you a joke”) and use a range of nonverbal actions, including smiling or laughing and using ‘comedic’ facial expressions, gestures and prosody. The latter involve, for example, displays of mock disgust, disbelief, anger, horror and, amazement. The gurus also generally either invest their messages with multiple sources of humour or invite displays of affiliation with values that do not derive directly from their core management ideas and visions. This enables the gurus to elicit displays of affiliation/laughter, even in circumstances in which audience members disagree with or are non-committal about their core ideas and visions.

Laughter may seem a trivial action, but by evoking and producing laughter, the gurus and audience members display a common perspective in relation to the circumstances and events that the gurus describe. This contributes to a sense of cohesion and intimacy, which softens the audience and makes them more receptive to the gurus’ recommendations. Generally, speakers are unlikely to persuade audiences to empathize with their positions unless they create a sense of like-mindedness with audience members. Humour is therefore one means through which gurus and other public speakers create the conditions necessary to win and retain converts.

Lessons

In summary, we have sought to emphasize that the growth and vibrancy of the management consultancy industry is partly based on the constant churn of new ideas and knowledge. These are often generated by individuals who subsequently become labelled management gurus. What we have argued is that whilst there is a degree of luck in terms of timing, these individuals excel in packaging their ideas in the written and spoken form. Whilst we might ascribe this to personal brilliance and individual flair, there is nothing at all mysterious about the techniques that the gurus use. Rather than relying on esoteric techniques that are unavailable to others, the gurus use techniques that are associated with writing and speaking to persuade in a wide range of social contexts, including mundane conversation, that have been developed in other social contexts and industries where persuasion is key. What sets the gurus apart from less accomplished communicators is their ability to use these techniques effectively. Thus gurus not only offer novel insights into organizational issues but also illustrate many of the factors required to have an impact on a very mixed audience. ■

This article draws on Clark, T. Bhatnagar, P. and Greatbatch, D. (2012) ‘Celebrity consultants: The nature of management gurus’. In Kipping, M. and Clark, T. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Management Consulting*. Oxford University Press.

1 ACADEMIC GURUS

CHARLES HANDY

Son of an Irish Protestant vicar, Charles Handy left his position as management executive at Shell in 1965 to become Britain's leading management spokesman, educator and to co-found London Business School. He influenced much of British management education based on ideas he encountered while in the US. Famous for the concepts of 'portfolio worker' and 'shamrock organizations' Handy has authored more than 15 books among which *Gods of Management*.

GARY HAMEL

American, former Harvard and University of Michigan professor, Gary Hamel is most known for introducing the concept of 'core competencies' in his book *Leading the Revolution* (2000) co-authored with C. Prahalad. Hamel is also the founder of *Strategos* a Chicago-based international management consulting firm and co-founder of MIX (Management Innovation Exchange) and currently visiting professor at London Business School. His latest book *What Matters Now* was published in 2012.

ROSABETH MOSS KANTER

American Harvard professor and former editor of Harvard Business Review, Rosabeth Moss Kanter has focused in particular on change management and gender studies. Kanter co-founded *Goodmeasure*, a management consulting firm which she also chairs. Author of several books, Kanter is perhaps most known for *Life in Organizations*, *Men and Women of the Corporation* and *Creating the Future: The Massachusetts Comeback and Its Promise for America* which she co-authored with presidential candidate Michael Dukakis when she served as his economic advisor in his 1988 bid for the presidency.

MICHAEL PORTER

American Harvard professor Michael Porter is generally recognized as the father of modern strategy thinking. He has authored several influential books among which *Competitive Strategy* is perhaps the most recognized and widely used book on strategy. Porter is also engaged in consulting as the co-founder of The Monitor Group a strategy consulting company with international operations.

PETER SENGE

Affiliated with the MIT Sloan School of Business, American Peter Senge is the Director of the Center for Organizational Learning and founder of Society for Organizational Learning (SoL). He became widely known following the publication of his book *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990 which helped popularize the concept of the learning organization. In 1999 the Journal of Business Strategy named him as one of the 24 people who have had the greatest influence on business strategy.

2 CONSULTANT GURUS

STEPHEN COVEY

Steven Covey was an American management educator and author of several books. He is perhaps most known to the wider audience for his bestseller *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* first published in 1989. The book has sold more than 20 million copies and has been translated into 38 languages. Covey was also the co-founder of FranklinCovey, a global educational company focusing on leadership and organizational development drawing on Covey's books.

DANIEL GOLEMAN

Daniel Goleman is a two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee, psychologist and former science journalist with the New York Times. He has written several books and articles on leadership and is a sought after presenter and keynote speaker. He became internationally known with his 1995 bestseller *Emotional Intelligence*, which was named one of the 25 most influential business management books by TIME Magazine. He later co-authored another bestseller, *Primal Leadership*, with Professor Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee.

MICHAEL HAMMER

Michael Hammer was an American engineer, management author and professor of computer science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Hammer became known as one of the founders of the theory of business process reengineering. His book *Reengineering the Corporation* written together with James A. Champy and published in 1993 became a highly influential best-seller and was ranked by Forbes "among the three most important business of the last 20 years".

TOM PETERS

Tom Peters is an American management author, management consultant and partner at McKinsey & Company. He is perhaps most known for the best-seller *In Search of Excellence* written with Robert H. Waterman and published in 1982. In the book Peters and Waterman present eight basic principles of management based on an analysis of more than 40 best-run companies in terms of long-term profitability and innovation.

3 HERO MANAGERS

JOHN HARVEY JONES

John Harvey-Jones was an English businessman. He attended the Royal Naval College and later during WWII served in submarines on missions in the Baltic Sea. Harvey-Jones left the Navy and later joined *Imperial Chemical Industries* as a junior manager. He worked his way up and be-

came the chairman of the company in 1982. In 1989 he became the chairman of *The Economist*. John Harvey-Jones perhaps became best known for helping out struggling businesses in the BBC television show *Troubleshooter*.

LEE IACocca

Lee Iacocca had a long and distinguished career within the automotive industry. He started out as an engineer working for Ford and ended up as president of the company. After a conflict with Henry Ford II he was fired and moved on to become the president of *Chrysler*. Chrysler was on the verge of going out of business after severe quality problems for some of their models. He managed to turn around Chrysler and when he left the company in 1992 it was in great shape.

ALFRED P. SLOAN

Alfred P. Sloan started out as an engineer with a degree from MIT in a ball bearing company. He soon moved on to management and already at age 24 he was president of the company. The company was acquired by *General Motors* and Sloan became the president of GM in 1923. He reorganized the company into separate autonomous divisions for different types of cars and this model of organizing large companies became the norm during the 1900s. Sloan also introduced a systematic model for strategic planning for the divisions. With the help of this reorganization and strategic planning GM became the market leader and Sloan stayed on until 1956 as chairman of the company.

RICHARD BRANSON

Richard Branson is the founder and chairman of *Virgin Group*. He is a serial entrepreneur who started his first business venture at age 15, the *Student* magazine, and went on to start a record mail-order business and a chain of record stores later known as *Virgin Megastores*. He then added on a record label, clubs, an airline, a telecom company and many other businesses. He is also a very public figure as an adventurer and guest star in movies and television shows.

JACK WELCH

Jack Welch started out as a chemical engineer at *General Electric* in 1960. Dissatisfied with the bureaucracy at the company he wanted to leave already in 1962, but was persuaded to stay on. He became vice president of the company in 1972, senior VP in 1977 and chairman and CEO in 1981. During his reign as chairman and CEO he restructured the company by stating that each business unit, person and factory had to contribute positively to the bottom line. He created a simpler, less bureaucratic structure with clear guidelines and ruthlessly sold off units and fired staff that did not meet the standards. At the end of his period as CEO in 2001 GE was the biggest and most valuable company in the world.