

Management theory:
it's all a load of bollocks.

Sympathetic magic

The Witch Doctors: Making Sense of the Management Gurus

By John Micklethwait and

Adrian Wooldridge

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A Korean businessman changes his first name to Drucker. A huge billboard in downtown Beirut, amid pockmarked buildings and the Hezbollah's yellow banners, summons the faithful to a Total Quality Management seminar. In an Asian newspaper, a full-page advertisement announces that "the world's most competitive man"—management guru Michael Porter—is coming to town.

As such global enthusiasm suggests, management theory is big business. In 1995 alone, Americans spent \$750 million on business books and \$15 billion on management advice. Booming demand has created a predictable surge in supply: a theory's life cycle has shrunk to a year or less, and American managers used more than 14 "techniques" in 1995. But in most conversations on the subject, as the recently published *Witch Doctors* acknowledges, sooner or later someone uses the word *bullshit*.

Trickster gods

Authors John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, editors at THE HERRING's favorite magazine, *The Economist*, attribute management theory's fatuousness to its youth, calling it "an immature discipline, which awaits its Keynes, Hayek, or Friedman." For now, management is still in its primitive, witch doctor phase—decked out in voodoo rags, muttering dark, magical phrases. Even Peter Drucker, management theory's éminence grise, thinks that people use the term *guru* only because it sounds

nicer than *charlatan*. Academics are openly contemptuous. Publishers are privately astonished at how the stuff sells.

In all honesty, management theory has little to be proud of. *In Search of Excellence* became the quintessential management blockbuster in 1982 by naming 43 "excellent" American companies. But less than five years later, *Business Week* reported that two-thirds of these companies had ceased to be excellent, or to exist at all. In the public sector, management theorists have included Robert McNamara, the Vietnam War's presiding genius, and Ira Magaziner, Hillary Clinton's health care architect. *Reengineering* (which *The Witch Doctors* dubs "the fad in progress") launched *downsizing*, where companies enjoy huge savings the first year, then watch those savings vanish as personnel are retrained to do the jobs that discarded middle managers knew by heart. Lately, management theorists have damned the companies who slavishly followed their advice: when executives and shareholders, addicted to downsizing's initial, heady rush, repeated the medicine several years in a row, the gurus dubbed the companies "anorexic," like crack-heads on a terminal binge.

Book titles evoke the subject's ridiculousness: *Success Secrets of the Motivational Superstars*; *Jesus CEO*; *Make It So: Leadership Lessons from Star Trek the Next Generation*. Who is reading this stuff anyway? The intellectually timid and professionally nervous, according to the authors. The number of firms that do not reappear in the *Fortune* 500 from one year to the next has quadrupled since 1970, and managers are sure of only one thing: they'll go under if they

don't change with the times. They turn to management gurus for new ideas to update their intellectual portfolios.


An excellence adventure

The Witch Doctors aims to be a consumer report for managers who want to distinguish between the dross and metal of management theory but don't have the time. Chatterily intelligent, its prose recalls (unsurprisingly) *The Economist's* fluent house style: in point of fact, *The Witch Doctors* resembles an *Economist* feature too readily. This reviewer kept wondering if the book wouldn't have worked just as well as one of *The Economist's* 20-page supplements.

Without doubt, the oddest part of *The Witch Doctors* is the authors' barely suppressed distaste for their own project. In a discussion of the future of work, we read, "In any normal home there are plenty of distractions . . . that are not usually available in the office (try sitting at home and writing a book, particularly on management)."

It's disconcerting to suspect that a book's authors are manfully rolling up their sleeves and forcing themselves to finish a commission they no longer believe in. *The Witch Doctors* does describe some interesting things—new ways Asian

managers are organizing companies, the shareholder-vs.-stakeholder debate—but its only conclusion is that the best guide in business is common sense, and that the best theorists—Mr. Drucker and Tom Peters, in the authors' opinion—are good because they lucidly express the commonsense point of view. It's hard not to agree with an editor at *The Economist*, quoted in the prologue, who says, "You know, what worries me about your book . . . You won't say the obvious: that it's 99 percent bullshit."

The anonymous editor needn't have worried. Mr. Micklethwait and Mr. Wooldridge say it all right—over and over again. It's all harmless enough, but—as if the authors couldn't quite surmount their assigned subject—somewhat pointless. 

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