# Making Sense of Vague Management Ideas

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# Abstract

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There are many different interpretations of particular management ideas, e.g. TQM, BPR, knowledge management, and the learning organization. In the literature, these ideas are often described in general terms, with many different definitions in existence. This can be seen as an opportunity, but also as a problem. Employees and other stakeholders run the risk of being seduced by the use of ambiguous management ideas. Considerable resources are spent on consultancy, literature, and lectures concerning the ideas. Some kind of clarification seems to be necessary.

The literature on management ideas, in general, either suggests that these are unified and homogeneous (e.g. the management fashion perspective) or vague and that any specific management idea can be interpreted, more or less, in an endless number of different ways (e.g. action-network theory [ANT]; the translation perspective).

Based on a dialectic study of authors' and organizational actors' utterances about the learning organization, a middle-of-the-road approach is suggested. Inspired by pragmatism, it takes into account the need for clarity as well as the pluralistic nature of language. Exactly what a term like the learning organization means is assumed to be relative and context-dependent. There are two reasons for not proposing that a particular management idea be described in terms of a list of all interpretations of it. Firstly, man is a social and cultural being, thus the number of construction types could be assumed to be limited. Secondly, it makes no sense to take all variations into account. It is thus suggested that any specific management idea can be described in terms of a limited number of sub-ideas, or a set of sub-ideas.

The suggested perspective on management ideas is also being evaluated. It is argued that few managers would gain from descriptions of ideas based on sets of sub-ideas. The propensity to use ideas for seductive purposes would be diminished. Employees, as well as other interest groups, are provided with alternative languages to the vague discourses regarding management ideas that are currently so common. It is argued that there is a need for further research which categorises vague management ideas into sets of sub-ideas. Although the purpose of such research could be both normative and critical, it is claimed that the latter type is preferable since it is currently under-researched.

The main contribution made by the dissertation is the introduction of a perspective on management ideas that sees them neither as unambiguous nor infinitely ambiguous. This dissertation provides a systematic approach to making sense of vague management ideas.

## Appended papers

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