

# Unmasking the False Prophets and false prophecies of Management: Challenging Orthodoxy in a Complex World

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*Abstract- Management as a field of study and practice has long been shaped by competing theories, models, and prescriptions that claim universal applicability. Over time, many of these have solidified into orthodoxies—rigid schools of thought that elevate partial truths into grand solutions. Such doctrines, often celebrated as timeless principles, can be likened to “false prophets” delivering “false prophecies”: ideas that promise clarity yet obscure the realities of organizational life. This paper critically examines these false prophets of management by interrogating the limitations of dominant paradigms, including overly deterministic classical models, mechanistic quantitative frameworks, and managerial fads that prioritize rhetoric over substance. It argues that management cannot be reduced to dogma without sacrificing its capacity to address the complexity, uncertainty, and contextual variability that define modern organizations. Drawing on a cross-disciplinary critique, the paper highlights how uncritical acceptance of managerial orthodoxies produces false prophecies—simplistic predictions and prescriptions that fail in practice. By challenging these assumptions, the paper calls for a more reflective, context-sensitive approach to management, one that privileges adaptability, critical inquiry, and responsiveness over rigid adherence to outdated formulas. Ultimately, the paper contends that unmasking the false prophets of management is essential for advancing a discipline that remains relevant in a rapidly changing world.*

*Keywords: false prophets, management orthodoxy, false prophecies, critical management studies, organizational complexity, managerial fads, theory and practice.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since its emergence as a formal field of inquiry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, management has been dominated by successive schools of thought that each claimed to offer the ultimate solution to organizational challenges. From the scientific management principles of Frederick Taylor, which promised efficiency through measurement and control, to the human relations movement led by

Elton Mayo, which emphasized worker motivation and social needs, management thought has often been presented as a succession of grand theories (Wren & Bedeian, 2009). These schools, however, frequently framed themselves as definitive truths—ignoring the complexities of organizational life and the contexts in which managers actually operate. Such doctrinal approaches have become what might be described as the “false prophets of management,” advancing partial truths as universal solutions.

The metaphor of “false prophets” is particularly fitting, as it highlights how managerial ideologies are often proclaimed with authority and certainty, even when their empirical grounding is weak or their applicability is limited. For example, the dominance of rigid hierarchical models, mechanistic decision-making approaches, and the obsession with efficiency have historically marginalized more holistic perspectives on organizations (Mintzberg, 2004). Similarly, managerial “fads and fashions”—such as total quality management (TQM), business process reengineering (BPR), or more recently, agile management—have been marketed as revolutionary solutions, only to fade once their limitations become evident (Abrahamson, 1996). These fads, widely embraced by practitioners and scholars alike, can be seen as false prophecies: promises of transformation that often fail to deliver sustainable results.

Moreover, the persistence of orthodoxies in management education has reinforced these false prophets. Business schools frequently teach frameworks as if they were timeless principles rather than historically situated responses to particular organizational problems (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). This tendency fosters a culture of uncritical acceptance, where students and practitioners are encouraged to apply models as recipes rather than engage in critical reflection. As a result, the discipline risks

reproducing managerial dogma rather than fostering adaptive, context-sensitive problem-solving.

In an era characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and rapid technological and societal change, such orthodoxies are increasingly untenable. Contemporary organizations operate in volatile environments where rigid adherence to outdated models cannot provide sufficient guidance (Stacey, 2011). To remain relevant, management must unmask these false prophets by challenging orthodox assumptions and recognizing the limitations of false prophecies that promise certainty in an uncertain world. The task is not to discard management knowledge wholesale, but to develop a critical lens that differentiates between enduring insights and misleading dogmas. This paper thus advances a call for critical engagement with management thought, arguing that progress lies not in venerating orthodoxies, but in cultivating reflective, flexible, and contextually grounded approaches.

#### Problem Statement

Management, as both a discipline and practice, is at risk of being constrained by doctrines that present themselves as universal truths while failing to address the realities of contemporary organizational life. The proliferation of rigid schools of thought, prescriptive frameworks, and managerial fads has created an environment where partial solutions are elevated to the status of universal principles. Such “false prophets of management” and their accompanying “false prophecies” mislead practitioners and scholars by offering simplistic prescriptions for inherently complex problems (Mintzberg, 2004; Abrahamson, 1996).

The challenge is compounded by the role of management education, which often reinforces these orthodoxies by teaching them as timeless and context-free rather than as historically contingent responses (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). As a result, organizations continue to implement outdated models or fashionable solutions without sufficient critical evaluation of their limitations. This uncritical acceptance leads to managerial practices that fail to deliver sustainable results in dynamic environments characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and rapid change (Stacey, 2011).

Unless these false prophets and their false prophecies are unmasked and critically examined, management

as a discipline risks perpetuating myths rather than fostering innovative, context-sensitive knowledge. This problem calls for a critical engagement with management thought, aimed at distinguishing between enduring insights and misleading dogmas.

#### Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to critically interrogate the orthodoxies, fads, and dogmas that constitute the false prophets and false prophecies of management. By exposing the limitations of rigid theoretical frameworks and management fashions, the paper seeks to advance a more critical, reflective, and adaptive understanding of management in contemporary contexts.

#### Objectives of the Paper

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine how dominant schools of management thought have historically positioned themselves as authoritative and universal frameworks.
2. Critically analyze the phenomenon of managerial fads and fashions as “false prophecies” that promise solutions but often fail in practice.
3. Assess the role of management education in perpetuating orthodoxy and limiting critical engagement with alternative perspectives.
4. Explore the implications of challenging management orthodoxy for both theory and practice in a complex, uncertain world.
5. Propose a more reflective, context-sensitive approach to management knowledge that prioritizes adaptability over rigid adherence to doctrine.

#### Theoretical Background

The critique of management orthodoxy and the unmasking of its false prophets requires engagement with multiple theoretical lenses that expose the limitations of dogmatic thinking while offering pathways for more reflective practice. Several frameworks provide useful insights for this critical inquiry.

#### Critical Management Studies (CMS)

Critical Management Studies (CMS) offers a strong foundation for interrogating management orthodoxy. CMS challenges the assumptions underlying mainstream management theories, particularly their tendency to privilege efficiency, control, and predictability over human emancipation and organizational complexity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). CMS scholars argue that management

knowledge often serves ideological functions, legitimizing dominant power structures and managerial control while obscuring contradictions and failures (Fournier & Grey, 2000). From this perspective, “false prophets” are those who present managerial theories as neutral and universal, ignoring their socio-political underpinnings and contextual limits.

#### Institutional Theory

Institutional theory provides another useful lens by explaining how management fashions and fads gain legitimacy. According to this perspective, organizations adopt practices not necessarily because they are effective, but because they are socially accepted, legitimized, and diffused within organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2008). The spread of managerial fads, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) or Business Process Reengineering (BPR), can be understood as institutional isomorphism rather than evidence of their universal applicability. Thus, “false prophecies” emerge when these fads are uncritically embraced as inevitable pathways to success.

#### Complexity Theory

Complexity theory challenges the reductionist assumptions of classical and mechanistic models of management. It emphasizes that organizations operate within complex adaptive systems where outcomes are nonlinear, emergent, and context-specific (Stacey, 2011). From this perspective, attempts to impose rigid managerial doctrines resemble false prophecies, since they oversimplify the inherent unpredictability of organizational life. By acknowledging uncertainty and emergence, complexity theory suggests that management must prioritize adaptability, learning, and responsiveness over dogma.

#### Sociological and Historical Perspectives

Management thought can also be examined as a socially constructed and historically contingent body of knowledge. For example, Barley and Kunda (1992) highlight the cyclical alternation between rationalist and normative ideologies in management discourse. This perspective underscores that management is not a body of timeless truths but a shifting narrative shaped by cultural, economic, and political contexts. The identification of false prophets and prophecies thus involves recognizing the historically situated nature of management doctrines.

#### Practical Wisdom (Phronesis) and Reflective Practice

Finally, theories of practical wisdom and reflective practice emphasize the need for judgment, context-awareness, and moral responsibility in management (Nonaka & Toyama, 2007; Schön, 1983). Unlike rigid prescriptions, phronetic management values situational discernment and experiential learning. This approach directly counters the allure of false prophets, who claim to offer universal answers, by advocating for humility and reflection in decision-making.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide the intellectual foundation for questioning management orthodoxy. They expose how false prophets and false prophecies emerge and point

## II. LITERATURE DISCUSSION

The literature on management thought is replete with debates about its legitimacy as a field of knowledge and practice. Scholars have highlighted the proliferation of fads, myths, and dogmas that often dominate managerial discourse, raising questions about their scientific validity and practical utility (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997). This discussion highlights key streams of literature that expose the role of “false prophets” and “false prophecies” in shaping managerial orthodoxy.

### 1. Management as Fads and Fashions

Management literature has often been criticized for producing transient “fads” rather than enduring theories. Abrahamson (1996) describes management knowledge as subject to fashion cycles, where concepts such as Total Quality Management (TQM), Six Sigma, and Business Process Reengineering (BPR) gained popularity but later faded due to weak empirical grounding. Kieser (1997) similarly critiques management fashions as rhetorical devices marketed by consultants, business schools, and gurus, rather than robust frameworks. The persistence of these fads illustrates the influence of false prophets—consultants and gurus—who package managerial quick fixes as universal truths.

### 2. The Myth of Universal Principles

Classical management theorists such as Frederick Taylor and Henri Fayol claimed to offer universal principles of management. While these principles laid the groundwork for modern management, critics

argue that their mechanistic and universalist assumptions neglect cultural, social, and contextual variability (Wren & Bedeian, 2009). Contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects “one best way” approaches, emphasizing contingency and situational relevance (Donaldson, 2001). Yet, the lingering influence of such universalist doctrines constitutes a form of false prophecy, promising order and efficiency in contexts where complexity prevails.

### 3. The Rise of Management Gurus and Hero Leaders

Another stream of literature critiques the role of management gurus and celebrity leaders in shaping managerial thought. Huczynski (1993) argues that gurus often simplify complex issues into appealing narratives, offering easily digestible solutions that lack empirical rigor. The guru phenomenon elevates individuals into prophets of managerial salvation, despite limited evidence of their prescriptions’ generalizability. The popularity of books such as Peters and Waterman’s *In Search of Excellence* illustrates this tendency: while celebrated initially, many of the firms highlighted later underperformed, raising questions about the robustness of the underlying analysis (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996).

### 4. The Ideological Function of Management Knowledge

Critical scholars emphasize that management theories often perform ideological functions by legitimizing existing power structures (Grey, 2005; Parker, 2002). For instance, the discourse on shareholder value maximization has been critiqued as privileging financial elites while undermining employee and societal interests (Stout, 2012). Similarly, performance management systems often promise objectivity but can reinforce managerial dominance and control. In this sense, false prophecies function as tools of domination, cloaked in the language of efficiency and rationality.

### 5. The Persistence of Orthodoxy in a Complex World

Despite mounting critiques, orthodoxies in management continue to persist. This persistence can be explained by the institutionalization of management knowledge through business schools, consulting firms, and managerial training programs (Jackson & Carter, 2007). These institutions reproduce dominant ideologies, perpetuating faith in managerial doctrines despite their frequent failure in practice. The resilience of such false prophecies

reflects the cultural embeddedness of management discourse rather than its evidential strength.

In sum, the literature suggests that management has often been shaped less by rigorous science than by cycles of fads, ideological commitments, and the influence of charismatic figures. This raises the need for a critical re-examination of the foundations of management theory and practice to distinguish durable insights from false prophecies.

## III. CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ARGUMENT

The persistence of “false prophets” in management raises a fundamental question: why do organizations and societies continue to embrace doctrines that often lack empirical grounding or long-term relevance? A critical reflection reveals that management orthodoxy is sustained by a mix of cultural appeal, institutional incentives, and psychological comfort, despite abundant evidence of its limitations.

### 1. The Seduction of Simplicity in a Complex World

Organizations often operate in turbulent environments where complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity are the norm (Stacey, 2011). In such contexts, the allure of simple solutions becomes irresistible. False prophets exploit this desire for certainty by packaging complex realities into neat formulas or “universal principles.” For example, Frederick Taylor’s *Scientific Management* promised that there was “one best way” to perform any task. While influential, its mechanistic assumptions ignored human creativity, worker well-being, and contextual diversity. The same dynamic can be seen in later doctrines such as *Business Process Reengineering (BPR)*, which promised radical efficiency gains but often resulted in mass layoffs and organizational disruption (Hammer & Champy, 1993).

### 2. The Business of Management Knowledge

The persistence of false prophecies is partly explained by the commercialization of management knowledge. Business schools, consulting firms, and publishing houses form an industry that thrives on producing and marketing “new” management ideas. For instance, *Six Sigma*, initially popularized by Motorola and General Electric, was promoted as a universal solution for quality improvement. While successful in some cases, its application in creative industries and public organizations often stifled innovation and added bureaucratic burden (Antony,

2004). The financial incentives for consultants and trainers to market such methodologies often outweigh the need for careful contextual validation.

### 3. Heroic Leadership and the Cult of the Guru

Management discourse frequently elevates individual leaders or gurus into messianic figures. Tom Peters and Robert Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* (1982) celebrated a set of "excellent" companies whose practices were presented as recipes for universal success. Yet, within a decade, many of those companies—such as Atari and Wang Laboratories—were in decline (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996). Similarly, Jack Welch of General Electric was hailed as the paragon of shareholder value creation in the 1990s, but GE's subsequent decline highlighted the risks of guru-worship and short-term value maximization (Tichy & Sherman, 1993; Gelles, 2022). These examples illustrate how hero narratives create false prophecies of managerial salvation.

### 4. The Ideological Masking of Power and Inequality

False prophecies of management often function as ideological tools that legitimize power structures. Shareholder value maximization, popularized by Milton Friedman (1970), became a dominant managerial orthodoxy, promising economic efficiency. Yet, its implementation often prioritized financial returns at the expense of long-term sustainability, social responsibility, and worker welfare (Stout, 2012). For example, the outsourcing and downsizing strategies embraced by many corporations in the 1980s and 1990s were justified by this ideology but contributed to income inequality and social dislocation. Similarly, performance management systems marketed as neutral mechanisms of efficiency have been critiqued for perpetuating surveillance, stress, and workplace control (Townley, 1993).

### 5. Why False Prophets Persist

Despite repeated failures, false prophets of management endure because they fulfill important psychological and institutional functions. Managers, under pressure to deliver quick results, often prefer ready-made solutions rather than engaging in slow, context-specific experimentation (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Institutions such as MBA programs and consulting firms reinforce these tendencies by rewarding conformity to prevailing fashions. Moreover, media amplification and bestseller culture

create echo chambers where managerial fads spread quickly, often before rigorous testing can occur. The cycle of rise and decline in management fashions thus continues to generate new false prophecies, cloaked in the rhetoric of innovation and expertise.

### 6. Toward a More Critical and Reflexive Management Practice

To challenge the dominance of false prophets, management needs to embrace reflexivity and contextual awareness. Instead of universal prescriptions, organizations must recognize the diversity of contexts in which management operates. For instance, Toyota's lean production system succeeded because it was embedded in Japanese cultural and organizational practices, but its wholesale transfer to Western firms often failed (Holweg, 2007). Similarly, the agile methodology in software development works well in dynamic, innovative environments but may not be suitable for highly regulated industries. Critical management studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) argue that managers should not passively consume orthodoxy but interrogate its assumptions, power effects, and unintended consequences.

## IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The exposure of false prophets and false prophecies in management has significant implications for both theory and practice. It challenges the field to rethink how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and applied, and calls practitioners to be more critical and reflexive in their adoption of management ideas.

### 1. Theoretical Implications

#### a. Moving Beyond Universalism to Contextualism

Traditional management theories often search for universal truths—"one best way" approaches—that promise replicable results across all organizations. However, history has shown that context matters deeply. For instance, Taylor's scientific management and Weber's bureaucratic model worked in industrial-age factories but proved ill-suited for today's knowledge-based and digital organizations. Similarly, the wholesale transfer of Japanese lean practices to Western firms frequently ignored cultural and institutional differences (Holweg, 2007). Theoretical models must therefore account for institutional, cultural, and industry-specific

contingencies\*\* rather than assuming uniform applicability.

#### b. Rethinking the Role of Power and Ideology

Management theory has often been presented as value-neutral, but the endurance of false prophecies reveals its ideological character (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). For example, the dominance of shareholder value theory (Friedman, 1970) illustrates how an economic ideology can masquerade as a neutral principle of management, despite evidence of its negative consequences for workers and communities (Stout, 2012). Future theory must more explicitly incorporate \*\*critical perspectives\*\* that interrogate whose interests management knowledge serves.

#### c. Evidence-Based Management as Corrective

The persistence of management fads points to the need for stronger evidence-based management (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Just as medicine distinguishes between scientifically validated practices and pseudoscience, management research must adopt a stronger stance on empirical validation before popularizing models. For example, the “growth mindset” theory, widely embraced in management training, has shown mixed replication results, suggesting caution in its blanket application (Sisk et al., 2018).

### 2. Practical Implications

#### a. Developing Reflexive Practitioners

Managers must become more reflexive consumers of management knowledge. Instead of adopting practices simply because they are fashionable, practitioners should critically question their underlying assumptions. For example, when performance management systems are introduced, managers should ask: does this system enhance learning and motivation, or merely function as a tool of surveillance (Townley, 1993)? Reflexivity shifts managers from being passive recipients of orthodoxy to active interrogators of practice.

#### b. Embracing Experimentation Over Prescription

Organizations should move away from adopting ready-made, guru-driven solutions and embrace adaptive experimentation. For instance, rather than importing agile methodologies wholesale, firms in regulated industries like banking could selectively experiment with agile practices in less risk-sensitive units before scaling. This mirrors Toyota’s kaizen

philosophy, which emphasizes small, continuous improvements rooted in workers’ experiences, rather than top-down prescriptions (Liker, 2004).

#### c. Accountability in Knowledge Production

Consulting firms, business schools, and thought leaders have a responsibility to avoid overhyped ideas that lack evidence. The Enron scandal (2001) illustrates how a supposedly “innovative” business model, celebrated in case studies and the media, turned out to be fraudulent. Similarly, the collapse of Theranos revealed the danger of uncritical acceptance of visionary narratives in management and entrepreneurship (Carreyrou, 2018). To prevent such failures, knowledge producers must adopt ethical standards of accountability, transparency, and peer review.

#### d. Balancing Efficiency with Human and Social Concerns

False prophecies often prioritize efficiency or profit at the expense of human and social values. For example, Amazon’s extreme performance metrics and surveillance systems have been criticized for fostering worker burnout (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). A more balanced practice would integrate principles of sustainability, employee well-being, and corporate social responsibility, aligning with stakeholder-based models of management (Freeman et al., 2010).

### 3. Bridging Theory and Practice

The gap between academic theory and managerial practice often allows false prophets to thrive in the space of ambiguity. By making management theory more \*\*accessible, evidence-based, and context-sensitive\*\*, and by encouraging practitioners to be \*\*critical, experimental, and accountable\*\*, the cycle of management fads can be disrupted. The task, therefore, is not to abandon management theory but to reformulate it in ways that are more realistic, pluralistic, and socially responsible.

Excellent. Let’s close your paper with a Conclusion and Recommendations section for “Unmasking the False Prophets and False Prophecies of Management: Challenging Orthodoxy in a Complex World.”

### V. CONCLUSION

The prevalence of false prophets and false prophecies in management reveals the fragility of knowledge

within the field and the dangers of uncritical acceptance of fashionable ideas. From the seductive promises of Taylorism and reengineering to the hype surrounding shareholder value, lean, agile, and visionary entrepreneurship, history shows how management has repeatedly succumbed to oversimplifications and ideologically driven prescriptions (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Stout, 2012). These orthodoxies often mask their limitations and blind followers to contextual realities, resulting in unintended consequences such as employee alienation, organizational fragility, and systemic failures, as seen in the cases of Enron, Theranos, and even Amazon's harsh work culture.

Challenging these orthodoxies does not mean rejecting management knowledge altogether but instead calls for a critical, evidence-based, and context-sensitive approach. Managers, scholars, and educators must recognize management not as a static set of universal truths, but as a dynamic and contested field that evolves with changing social, technological, and institutional contexts. A more reflexive, pluralistic, and accountable management practice offers the potential to resist false prophets and create knowledge that is both theoretically robust and practically relevant.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the arguments advanced in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed:

### 1. For Theory

**Promote Contextualized Research:** Scholars should design theories that reflect cultural, institutional, and industry differences, avoiding universalist claims that ignore local realities (Holweg, 2007).

**Encourage Critical Scholarship:** Academic research should interrogate the ideological underpinnings of management ideas and highlight the interests they serve (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996).

**Advance Evidence-Based Management:** Researchers should strengthen replication studies, meta-analyses, and long-term evaluations of popular management practices to separate robust knowledge from fads (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006).

### 2. For Practice

**Cultivate Reflexive Managers:** Training programs should help managers critically evaluate

management fashions before adoption, asking whose interests they serve and whether they fit the organizational context (Townley, 1993).

**Adopt Experimentation over Prescription:** Organizations should engage in \*\*pilot projects and iterative learning rather than importing "one-size-fits-all" models from gurus or consultants. Toyota's kaizen approach offers a useful model of adaptive learning (Liker, 2004).

**Demand Accountability from Knowledge Producers:** Business schools, consulting firms, and management gurus should be held to higher standards of evidence, transparency, and responsibility in promoting ideas (Carreyrou, 2018).

**Balance Efficiency with Human Values:** Managers should resist efficiency-obsessed models that undermine worker dignity, instead integrating well-being, sustainability, and stakeholder concerns into decision-making (Freeman et al., 2010).

### 3. For Policy and Education

**Curriculum Reform:** Business schools should teach management as a contested and evolving discipline rather than as a fixed set of best practices, integrating critical management studies into mainstream courses.

**Ethical Standards for Management Consulting:** Industry-wide codes of conduct could discourage the propagation of untested fads and ensure greater accountability to clients and society.

**Strengthen Practitioner-Academic Dialogue:** Mechanisms such as collaborative research partnerships, practitioner journals, and knowledge-sharing platforms should bridge the gap between theory and practice.

By unmasking the false prophets and false prophecies of management, the field can move toward a more responsible, evidence-based, and context-sensitive discipline. In a complex world, the future of management lies not in dogmatic orthodoxy but in pluralism, reflexivity, and a commitment to both organizational performance and human well-being.

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