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**Less is sometimes more: Promising practices reconsidered**

David Simm

The Department of Management Learning and Leadersh  
Lancaster University Management School  
Lancaster LA1 4YX  
UK

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# **Less is Sometimes More: Promising Practices Reconsidered**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses upon the notion of the ‘promising practice’ which has recently been advanced as a potential resolution to the problem of the perceived gap in UK competitiveness. The promising practices in which such great faith is being stored include those of: TQM, JIT, BPR, quality certification schemes and lean manufacturing. Whilst accepting the underlying principles, the need for organization to engage in the acquisition, absorption and exploitation of knowledge, we proceed to problematise the current conceptualisation of promising practices by reference to the example of TQM.

Resultantly, we argue that organizations that attempt to follow the advice based upon such a conceptualisation are likely to face difficulties. These include the scale of intervention, the temporal and financial costs involved, and the reliance upon codified knowledge. However, a final concern is perhaps the most demoralising of all. The notion of adopting TQM, or any other generic management philosophy as a promising practice, is incongruent with contemporary understandings of competitive advantage which hold that such advantage is gained via inimitability. Thus, we argue that it is unlikely for truly promising practices to be willingly shared and hence, we advance an alternative conceptualisation of a promising practice, that of Strategic Social Engineering, in an attempt to avoid the aforementioned obstacles.

# **Less is Sometimes More: Promising Practices Reconsidered**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A considerable amount of attention has recently been placed on the issue of the UK's competitiveness, resulting in a series of Competitiveness White Papers (DTI 1995; 1996; 1998; 2001). The Department of Trade and Industry's report on UK Competitiveness (2001) states:

[T]here is a significant productivity gap between the UK and its main competitors in other G7 economies (Germany, France, Italy, US, Canada and Japan)' (DTI, 2001, p. 5).

This echoes earlier Government reports that single out productivity as a root cause of the lack of competitiveness of UK companies, an interest that represents a major change in the evolution of UK industrial policy (Keep and Mayhew, 1999). This poetic reading of competitiveness as productivity (Krugman, 1996) is explicitly stated in virtually all Government documents, and led to the development of Competitiveness Indicators to monitor performance (DTI, 1999). Initially, 34 aspects were identified that contributed to the UK's performance (DTI, 1999), with annual comparisons drawn between the UK and other G7 countries.

One of the central aspects emerging from this Governmental interest in productivity and competitiveness is the perceived need for organizations to 'acquire, absorb and

exploit knowledge to develop new products and processes' (Wren, 2001, p. 850). In response, the idea of adopting and adapting promising practices as vehicles for creating organizational competitive advantage has been advanced (Leseure et al., 2004). Built on insights drawn from the extensive literature on best practice (Szulanski 1996), promising practices are presented as 'promising' rather than 'best' due to the need to adapt generic practices for specific organizations, thereby avoiding a one-size fits all mentality. Hence promising practices can be seen as emphasizing the need to customize so called best practice according to the specific context the organization finds itself in.

Although we broadly agree with the need for organizations to acquire, absorb and exploit knowledge this paper draws attention to the problematic notion of promising practices. Through a close reading of the existing arguments, and exemplars presented, we argue that current conceptualisations may be too broad in scope. Resultantly organizations may encounter numerous difficulties when attempting to implement the advice extolled. An alternative conceptualisation is presented to demonstrate that, if re-considered, adopting and adapting promising practices could have more immediate impact on organizational competitiveness.

## **THE LOGIC OF 'PROMISING PRACTICES'**

Although a well accepted concept in education research (Hallinan, 1994; Provenzano, 1985; Scott et al., 2005; Camino, 2005), the concept of promising practices has only recently been introduced to management discourse (Leseure, 2004). In a systematic

review Leseure et al. (2004) summarize management research into promising practices:

- The research is about archetypes of management practices which have been developed and tested outside a focal firm which is considering adoption.
- Although typically a collection of ideas, values, procedures, techniques and tools, promising practices form a coherent, integrated whole, which can be described as a commonly repeatable configuration of distinct elements.
- Although not new to other firms, which perform well, these practices are new to the focal firm. It is because these practices have been associated with performance elsewhere that they are 'promising' to the focal firm.
- They are 'promising' only rather than 'best', because they may need customization now and in the future before performance improvements are experienced. (2004, p. 170).

Two factors are immediately apparent in this presentation of promising practices. First, the focus is placed on organizational, rather than nation-state competitiveness. Second, we can draw a clear parallel between the studies in education research and management in terms of promising practice being based on knowledge transfer into a target population. The importance of the distinction between organizational and nation-state level competitiveness is considered later in the context of current understandings of how competitive advantage is achieved. Yet, even at this early stage we can note that organizational competitiveness is assumed to lead to nation-state competitiveness

The emphasis on internal adoption of external knowledge can be seen as built upon early studies of innovative organizations (March and Simon 1958), which suggest that innovation is often the result of borrowing ideas rather than internal invention. This insight was confirmed by Mueller's (1966) study of Dupont between 1920 and 1950, which observed that original sources of inventions mostly came from outside the firm. One reason for this is that firms may well find it less costly and faster to source externally available knowledge than to develop competencies internally (Mansfield, 1988).

Such insights have spawned research on knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), knowledge transfer (Asakawa and Noda 1998; Inkpen and Dinur 1998) and the internal sharing of knowledge in organizations' (Zollo and Winter 2002). Increasingly the focus has been placed on the codification of knowledge to facilitate efficient and effective transfer and diffusion (Winter 1987; Zander and Kogut 1995; Zollo 1998). It is upon these foundations that the logic of adopting and adapting promising practices is built, with advocates providing the following list of exemplars:

Total Quality Management (TQM), the adoption of quality certification systems (ISO 9000), Just-in-Time practices (JIT), Business Process Re-engineering, High Performance Work Practices, Supply Chain Partnering, lean manufacturing and so forth. (Leseure et al 2004: 170).

We argue that the fundamental problem with the current conceptualisation of promising practices is the focus on old, well known, business ideas. Although we must recognize that the spread and adoption of new ideas takes time, old, well known

ideas will only be of use to those organizations that have lagged behind competitive firms, as evidence suggests (cf. Leseure et al., 2004). But the inference is that large numbers, if not the majority, of UK organizations are unsophisticated non-adopters. Resultantly these laggards are non-competitive. This may be the case, and if so promotion of adopting and adapting promising practices as currently understood may have a real impact on UK competitiveness.

However, at least four problems emerge from this understanding: (a) in the best case scenario, UK firms will adopt these generic practices. But these will only be of real use if organizations can adopt and adapt them successfully; (b) the examples presented do not provide us with an idea of the temporal and financial costs involved; (c) potential benefits associated with knowledge transfer are subject to numerous problems associated with knowledge codification; and (d) the conceptualisation of competitiveness underpinning our current understanding appears to be at odds to how competitive advantage is achieved by organizations.

To demonstrate the limitations of current conceptualisations of promising practices in more detail the following sections examine the literature on TQM to highlight the problems of adoption and adaptation, before addressing the logic of knowledge transfer through codification and our understanding of competitiveness.

### **TQM: THE MOST PROMISING OF ‘PROMISING PRACTICES’?**

Of all the ‘promising practices’ advanced by Leseure et al. (2004), TQM has arguably received most attention from academics and practitioners alike. It has now achieved

paradigmatic status (Watson and Korukonda 1995) and has even been described as the ‘third industrial revolution’ (Lema and Price 1995). In view of such obvious prominence, the example of TQM is now used to contradistinguish it (by concentration upon its associated problems of genericness, required investments and uncertain benefits) from the authors’ preferred suggestion of a promising practice.

### **A generic concept**

Defining ‘TQM’ has long been problematic – even to advocates of the concept. It has been variously described as ‘fuzzy’ (Kekale, Fecikova et al. 2004), ‘notoriously imprecise’ (Hill and Wilkinson 1995) and ‘a hazy, ambiguous concept’ (Dean and Bowen 1994). Even several decades after publication of the seminal works of the concept’s pioneers (see e.g. Juran 1945; Juran 1951; Ishikawa 1976; see e.g. Crosby 1979; Deming 1982; Deming 1986), TQM ‘remains poorly defined’ (Kujala and Lillrank 2004). Certainly, for potential adopters, such concerns over diorism and the resultant decisional difficulties concerning program design and implementation are both fuelled and compounded by the bewildering array of the concept’s key constituent elements.

For example, in their first TQM measurement instrument Saraph et al. (1989) identified the following eight ‘critical factors’: the role of management leadership and quality policy, role of the quality department, training, product service design, supplier quality management, process management, quality data and reporting, and employee relations. A later examination by Black and Porter (1996) distinguished ten such key elements. Worryingly, a comparison of these two studies reveals only a

limited commonality between the factors identified (Black and Porter 1996). More perturbing, however, are the findings of Sila and Ebrahimpour (2002) who, in their extensive review covering 347 survey based TQM studies published between 1989 and 2000, distinguished no fewer than 25 crucial elements<sup>1</sup> - merely in those 76 cases determined to be employing a 'holistic approach'. As Black and Porter (1996) lament:

This has meant not only an absence of a practical model that could be used by organisations in developing their TQM systems, but also a lack of easily applied methods for identifying areas for improvement in current TQM programmes.

Such claims are, partially at least, at odds with the earlier cited assertion of Leseure et al. (2004) that TQM (as a promising practice) represents a 'commonly repeatable configuration of distinct elements'. Such 'distinct elements' are, in the case of TQM, a source of much debate and confusion.

The generic nature of TQM is further reinforced by its claimed universal applicability. Many who espouse TQM assert such universality (Watson and Korukonda 1995). Many of TQM's gurus have either argued or implied such extensive utility for the concept (Crosby 1979; Deming 1986; Juran 1986). Deming (1982) specifically attributed universal applicability to his 14 principles of quality and as Spencer (1994) notes 'principles' imply a 'one best way' of managing which endorses such notions of ubiquitous appeal. It is claimed that such principles can apply to all sectors, with no exceptions. Indeed, it is the very generic nature of such principles and philosophies that allow such claims to be advanced in the first place.

Not only is it alleged that TQM applies to all sectors, the concept itself implies that quality is necessarily the sole source of competitive advantage. This claimed universal applicability has been questioned by many quality management scholars (*cf* Das et al 2000; Sousa and Voss, 2001), and in certain industries is clearly a dubious premise. The car industry is a classic case in point. Here, although Garvin (1988) notes the existence of several dimensions of quality, quality is now almost taken for granted: it is the 'price of entry' into the industry but not a basis of competition (Harari 1993). This does not mean that organizations adopting TQM will become increasingly similar, but rather that competitive advantage may lie elsewhere. As Wolfgang Reitzle, then chairman of Rover Group and former deputy chairman of the management board of BMW, a company renowned for its emphasis upon quality, has observed (cited by Brady and Lorenz 2001):

The products are at an increasing level of quality. There are almost no bad cases on the market, even for mass-produced products, quality is now a given, not a matter of differentiation.

The aggregate effect of individual organizations adopting similar practices is to lessen the extent of industry diversity (Dimaggio and Powell 1983), resulting in the impact just described. In essence, TQM is not only an ill-defined concept originally designed as a universal approach, it is also lacking due to the failure of its proponents to provide a definitive but manageable list of component 'practices' (Lawler III 1994; Zabada, Rivers et al. 1998). Such issues merely confirm the generic nature of the concept. Moreover, the issue of manageability is even further exacerbated by those components over which consensus has been reached and which include JIT, quality

certification systems, HRM and continuous improvement. Although there is some evidence that ‘bundles’ of practices can be created to increase performance (MacDuffie, 1995; Shah and Ward, 2003), many of these component practices are described as promising practices in their own right, thereby adding to the confusion.

### **TQM: ‘philosophy’ and investment**

TQM is not merely the implementation of a set of technical management systems: it necessitates fundamental changes to the ways in which the organization satisfies customer requirements (Hackman and Wageman 1995; Kujala and Lillrank 2004). TQM is perhaps better seen as a challenge to conventional management techniques and the theories that support them, as it cannot be grafted on to extant management systems (Grant, Shani et al. 1994). Thus, TQM is most frequently referred to as a new management ‘philosophy’ (Saylor 1992; Lawler III 1994; Hackman and Wageman 1995; Ho and Cicmil 1995; Yusof and Aspinwall 2000; Kaynak 2003; Soltani, Gennard et al. 2004).

Equally, in consequence of the appeals of its famous founders e.g. those of Deming ‘...to instill pride in quality’ and Crosby who advocated ‘...a genuine belief by employees in the importance of quality workmanship, good designs and service’ (Lemak, Mero et al. 2002) and the various definitions of culture advanced by various theorists (e.g. Schein 1996), ‘philosophy’ is either interpreted as being synonymous with organizational culture, or else such cultural change is perceived as a, if not *the*, vital component of any potentially successful TQM program (Glover 1993).

Therein lies a crucial problem for any attempt to enhance organisational performance via the route of TQM: the complexity, extent and duration of the required change. Cultural change has long been viewed as highly problematic and often results in unintended consequences (Harris and Ogbonna 2002). Small wonder then, that management teams frequently do not understand the complexity inherent in TQM implementations (Glover 1993). Whilst any planned organizational change can be problematic (Reger, Gustafson et al. 1994), the implementation of TQM is surely one of the most complex and problematical of all possible organizational changes (Kanji and Barker 1990; Glover 1993; Yusof and Aspinwall 2000).

Even if one accepts the possibility of accruing benefits, such will only materialise in the 'longer term' (Whyte and Witcher, 1992, p. 1) as TQM is not a 'quick fix' approach (Grant, Shani et al. 1994; Halachmi 1995). This is arguably because the implementation of TQM consumes considerable resources, both of finance and time (Durant and Wilson 1993). Indeed, the time it takes for the new 'philosophy' to become embedded within an adopting organization can be very significant: 'estimates of up to seven years...are not unusual' (Hill and Wilkinson 1995).

Consequently it is quite clear that TQM represents a major investment by any UK organization. This investment could still be valuable to organizations, if time and finance allowed for the adoption and adaptation of TQM, provided that the benefits of adoption and adaptation accrue real returns. However, the literature on the return on investment is far from encouraging.

### **Contested benefits**

Thus far we have demonstrated that the time investment required to adopt TQM is significant, but the time taken to realise any benefits (if any are realised) is equally so – up to five years (Sila and Ebrahimpour 2002). There are various studies purporting to demonstrate the aetiological connection between this particular intervention and an outcome of some measure of enhanced performance (Ittner and Larcker 1996; Hendricks and Singhal 1997; Lemak, Reed et al. 1997; Belen, Llusar et al. 2001). Others (Powell 1995; Samson and Terziovski 1999) argue that where improvements are evident they are merely in consequence of such elements as open culture, employee empowerment and top management commitment and are thus not necessarily solely the preserve of TQM. Similarly, there are many who fail to demonstrate such causal connection (Staw and Epstein 2000). Harari (1993; 1997), in reviewing the research of various management consulting firms, Arthur D. Little, Ernst & Young, Rath & Strong, McKinsey & Co. and A. T. Kearney, asserts that:

...only about one fifth – at best one-third – of TQM programs in the United States and Europe have achieved significant or even tangible improvements in quality, productivity, competitiveness or financial returns. This is a frightening conclusion given the hype that has accompanied TQM for years.

In response to such claims, and the above cited failures to find a correlation between TQM and a performance outcome, some researchers have argued that the issue is one of implementation rather than the conceptual design of TQM. Hence, a variety of studies have been conducted employing only those corporations deemed to have fully implemented TQM. In such cases, the focus of attention has largely centred upon the

analysis of the organisational performances of either quality award winning companies (Hendricks and Singhal, 1997b) or else the highest-scoring applicants to such competitions (General Auditing Office 1990).

Nevertheless, even the employment of such exemplars reveals much contradictory evidence. Whilst various studies using such designs have demonstrated a correlation between award winners and performance (Hendricks and Singhal, 1997b), there have similarly been a number of high profile failures amongst those so distinguished. In America, Wallace Co. Inc., a Houston-based industrial distribution company, won the 1990 Baldrige Award yet in the following year filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection (Yong and Wilkinson 1999). Florida Power and Light, the 1989 Deming prize winner, ultimately dismantled most of its quality systems and procedures (Harari 1997; Yong and Wilkinson 1999) in consequence of considerable investment and bureaucracy and only modest benefits.

In the UK, Rover Group won the 1994 UK Quality award (now The UK Business Excellence Award) designed to be a direct competitor, and similar in stature to the Malcolm Baldrige Award (USA) and the European Quality Award (Underwood 1997). As a consequence of winning such a prestigious award Rover Group's TQM Handbook was adopted by numerous organizations including British Steel, Shell, London Underground and several Police Authorities, in support of their own TQM programme launches (Rover Group, 1994).

Despite being a most widely cited 'Learning Organization' (Bower 1993; Burnes 1996; Marquardt 1996) and an exemplar of TQM practices (Hakes 1995; Ho 1995;

Tennant 1995; Tennant 1998), Rover Group, after being ‘dumped’ by BMW has now suffered its final ignominy – the recent initiation of administrative receivership. Whilst performance enhancements may (or may not) result from the adoption of TQM, these enhancements do not necessarily represent a sufficient condition for sustained organizational success.

In sum, TQM is a controversial approach to organizational improvement whose impact and utility are contested (Hackman and Wageman 1995). As the experience of Rover Group demonstrates, this has not deterred many organizations from attempting to adopt TQM by adopting and adapting codified knowledge contained in handbooks, thereby attempting to imitate perceived best practice (Rover Group, 1994).

As noted earlier such knowledge codification is presented as facilitating knowledge transfer, and yet codification is itself problematic. The literature discussing all of the pertinent aspects of knowledge codification is too broad to adequately review here. Consequently we limit our discussion to highlight three fundamentally important problems.

## **PROBLEMS WITH KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER**

Zander and Kogut (1995) note that although codification of knowledge facilitates the diffusion and mobility of knowledge, this diffusion is not limited to the codifying firm. Codification facilitates imitation by competitors, and hence reduces the potential competitive advantage offered by a promising practice.

Secondly, codification converts procedural knowledge into declarative knowledge (Zander and Kogut, 1995, p. 78). Here Zander and Kogut remind us that procedural 'know-how', often highly reliant on tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958), that may be seen as embedded in routines (Nelson and Winter 1982) and organizational practices (Lave and Wenger 1991), has to be converted into declarative 'know-what'. 'Bedding-in' this new declarative knowledge requires extensive reinforcement because existent procedural knowledge is more slowly forgotten than declarative knowledge (Singley and Anderson 1989; Kogut and Zander 1992). The implications are that without sustained reinforcement people will slip back into old routines and habits rather than adopting new activities.

Third, under experimental conditions where slow decisions are penalized, people use old routines when more optimal, even more obvious alternatives are available (Zander and Kogut, 1995, p. 78). In today's global market where the emphasis is often speed, the temporal implications for adopting a promising practice like TQM may mean that old routines could be used in preference to the new.

Resultantly we argue that organizations that attempt to follow advice based on the current conceptualisation of promising practices are likely to face difficulties. These difficulties have been demonstrated in relation to the scale of intervention, the temporal and financial costs involved, and the reliance on codified knowledge. Our final concern is perhaps the most demoralising of all. The notion of adopting TQM, or any other generic management philosophy as a promising practice, is actually at odds with our contemporary understanding of how organizational competitive advantage may be secured.

## **LEADING CONCEPUALISATIONS OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

Discussion of competitive advantage inevitably commence with the question of which conceptualisation of competitiveness is favoured. Taken at the nation-state level competitiveness is understood as ‘the ability to produce the right goods and services of the right quality, at the right price, at the right time’ (DTI, 1994, p. 9). Although this ability may be the consequence of alliances and nation state trade agreements, where knowledge sharing is fundamentally important, in the context of competition between individual organizations the situation is very different. This can be demonstrated through exploring how competitive advantage is seen to be achieved, according to the two arguably dominant views of the firm in contemporary debate.

Drawing on Penrose’s (1959) notion of firms as collections of physical, human, and intangible resources, the resource-based view of the firm (Wernerfelt 1984) suggests that competitive advantage is intimately linked to a organization’s idiosyncratic and difficult to imitate resources. Performance is ultimately dependent on meeting the VRIN conditions: resources need to be valuable, rare, inimitable or imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable (Barney 1991). Such resources have been termed ‘core competences’ (Prahalad and Hamel 1990), ‘architectural competence’ (Henderson and Cockburn 1994), and ‘routines’ (Nelson and Winter 1982), all of which seek to establish a direct link between the internal characteristics of an organization and its competitiveness. The key aspect of this approach to securing competitive advantage is summarised by Teece et al. (1997) as the belief that:

competences can provide competitive advantage and generate rents only if they are based on a collection of routines, skills, and complementary assets *that are difficult to imitate* (Teece et al., 1997, p. 524, emphasis added).

In an associated vein the capability-based theory of the organization suggests that competitive advantage is secured through distinctive capabilities (Leonard-Barton 1992; DiBella, Nevis et al. 1996; Grant 1996). Here the organization must constantly re-invest to maintain and expand existing capabilities in order to inhibit imitation by other organizations (Mahoney 1995). This re-investment supposedly leads to an organizational ‘capability differential’ (Coyne 1986) that maintains competitive advantage. Ulrich (1997) sums this up by stating:

Capabilities are the DNA of competitiveness. They are the things an organization always does better than its competitors do

(Ulrich, 1997, p.10)

Even a cursory examination of the literature provides evidence of such unique capabilities, including Wal-Mart’s cross-docking capability (Stalk, Evans et al. 1992), Honda’s management and product realization through relationships with dealers (Luoma 2000), and 3M’s ability to manage trans-national interdependencies (Seibert, Hall et al. 1995).

What is characteristic about both the resource-based and the capability-based approaches is the fundamental belief that competitive advantage comes from what is *unique and difficult to imitate*, whether that be resource, competence or capability.

This understanding is explicitly stated in the 1998 White Paper on Competitiveness, when it states that organizations have to ‘compete by exploiting capabilities which competitors find hard to imitate’ (DTI, 1998, p. 6). Clearly the actual willingness of organizations to share knowledge within and across industries, the fundamental assumption underpinning the current conceptualisation of promising practices, is questionable at best. Organizations are reluctant to share certain knowledge as it is seen as the source of competitive advantage (Kogut and Zander, 1996). This seriously undermines the management claims advanced for promising practices, and forces us to reconsider that which we advocate. We suggest that one promising means of doing so is to focus more explicitly on practices.

## **PROMISING    *PRACTICES*    NOT    PROMISING    MANAGERIAL PHILOSOPHIES**

If we return to the understanding of promising practices used by education research, as noted earlier, a clear divergence is identifiable between education and management in terms of the scope of knowledge transfer. Education research presents promising practices as individual, specific activities to overcome immediate issues, whereas management scholars currently advocate grand pseudo-philosophies. For example, Scott et al. (2005) advocate functional behaviour assessment as a proactive practice initiative for school children, and Camino (2005) suggests three specific practices to address three particular problems associated with youth-adult partnerships in youth development activities. Rather than advocating grand schemes like TQM we could consider adopting the education research understanding and look for specific, targeted, and direct practices that respond to immediate issues. Acknowledging that knowledge

transfer is the core concern, we suggest that rather than attempt to obtain knowledge through codification and dissemination technologies organizations could consider a more direct means.

## **STRATEGIC SOCIAL ENGINEERING**

Although we may think of issues relating to knowledge transfer as recent phenomena, Gilfillan's (1935) pioneering work reminds us that this is not the case.

Gilfillan suggests that labour mobility erodes the differential level of knowledge among firms. This suggestion is supported by Arrow (1962) and Moen (2000), who also note that labour mobility is a major channel for knowledge 'spillovers' between organizations. Rather than leave knowledge transfer as an accidental aspect of labour mobility we suggest that a truly promising practice is Strategic Social Engineering.

Strategic Social Engineering is perhaps best known as an aspect of human resource management, where individuals with key skills and abilities are recruited and selected for employment. However, social engineering has another aspect to it in the knowledge based economy. Following Dosi (1988; 1988), we suggest hiring people away from a rival organization is a way of transferring knowledge that is otherwise immobile.

The real promise of this particular practice is based on the fact that human mobility can serve as a mechanism for the acquisition of externally developed knowledge and skills (McKelvey 1996). This idea has been explored and confirmed by authors in various fields. For example, network theorists have argued that the recruitment of

managers is an important means by which firms gain access to new information (Granovetter 1973).

In institution theory the movement of personnel is seen as an important precondition for learning from competitors (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and advocates of the resource-based theory of the firm (Barney 1991) note that recruitment of talent enables organizations to acquire causally ambiguous and poorly codified skills. This is because when individuals move between organizations they can apply their knowledge to new contexts, thereby effectively transferring the knowledge across firms (Argote and Ingram 2000).

In the context of new organizational development Penrose (1959) suggests that growth cannot be achieved without requisite managerial skills, and that this constraint could be overcome by actively recruiting experienced managers from other organizations. Brittain and Freeman (1980) state that luring talent from rivals increases the likelihood that recruits will have the required knowledge of routines, that they will teach the routines to others, and will generate confidence in the supply of resources from other organizations. Aldrich (1999) confirms these suggestions by demonstrating that recruitment from competitors enables organizations lacking knowledge to recreate industrial routines and achieve growth.

Other studies demonstrate the strategic benefits of social engineering by indicating that recruits drawn from competitors bring in new routines that enable organizations to introduce strategic changes (Boeker 1997; Kraatz and Moore 2002). This is possible because knowledge about strategies and operations needed to succeed in a

particular industry is often limited to insiders already employed in the industry sector, especially when such knowledge is not codified (Nelson and Winter, 1982; Penrose, 1959). This transfer of otherwise immobile knowledge is only possible because experience in an industry equips an employee with contextual and tacit knowledge, and increases their ability to acquire related knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). Hence, firms can overcome resource constraints on product and service innovations by acquiring talent from competitors (Zajac and Kraatz 1993).

These conclusions have been empirically demonstrated in numerous areas including: the introduction of professional courses in colleges (Kraatz and Moore, 2002), enabling product market entrance (Boeker 1997), and the pattern of inter- and intra-organizational knowledge flows in engineering (Almeida and Kogut 1999). In one of the most interesting cases Kim (1997) argues that Samsung's entry into the semiconductor industry was a direct result of a deliberate strategy to hire scientists and engineers from US firms. Kim also notes that through hiring employees the organization acquires capabilities that can facilitate further knowledge transfer and building. This is because through strategic social engineering the organization effectively acquires not only the embodied knowledge of the individual but also access to the individuals' social network (Song, Almeida et al. 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has sought to problematize the managerial conceptualisation of promising practices by engaging directly with the observations and exemplars provided. Rather than recommending promising *practices* management scholars are advocating grand

managerial philosophies, such as TQM. By focusing on four main areas of difficulty associated with the organizational adoption and adaptation of TQM we argue that the current managerial conceptualisation should be reconsidered, especially when contrasted with work conducted in education research.

Although such grand schemes could produce some final benefit, we suggest that encouraging organizations to attempt to adopt and adapt managerial philosophies could be a hazardous route to take, especially when the potential promise is likely to be outweighed by the actual temporal and financial costs involved. Furthermore, the current conceptualisation of promising practices is actually far more in tune with an idealised notion of knowledge sharing, than with actual organizational competitiveness.

When considering competitiveness we need to consider scale carefully. Promising practices, as currently understood in management, equate to the policy position regarding the competitiveness of the UK. Yet as clearly indicated, these generic managerial philosophies do not promise much for individual organizations that secure competitive advantage by producing difficult to imitate knowledge.

Hence the UK Government is caught in a knowledge sharing paradox. To increase the competitiveness of the UK, policy has to try and encourage free knowledge sharing. However, to achieve this UK Government has to overcome the vested interests of organizations who achieve competitive advantage by not sharing knowledge freely. This internal contradiction, to share organizational knowledge to increase UK competitiveness yet by doing so simultaneously destroy individual organizational

competitiveness, may appear insurmountable. Yet by reconsidering the scope of promising practices this paper offers an alternative position.

We suggest that at the organizational level promising practices may be better considered as specific and targeted knowledge activities like strategic social engineering. At the nation state level strategic social engineering represents a generic, easily understood and adopted practice. The promise for the individual organization comes not from the generic nature of the practice but through the strategic use of the practice to obtain specific and valuable knowledge. Evidence drawn from numerous fields of research and various theoretically informed approaches lend weight to our summation, and provide clear implications for future theoretical and practical development. Fundamentally we need to refocus our collective efforts on actual specific practices rather than generic managerial philosophies.

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<sup>i</sup> These 25 'critical factors' of TQM (in order of frequency of occurrence) were determined as: (1) Top management commitment, (2) social responsibility, (3) strategic planning, (4) customer focus and satisfaction, (5) quality information and performance measurement, (6) benchmarking, (7) HRM, (8) training, (9) employee involvement, (10) employee empowerment, (11) employee satisfaction, (12) teamwork, (13) employee appraisal, (14) rewards and recognition, (15) process control, (16) product and service design, (17) supplier management, (18) continuous improvement and innovation, (19) quality assurance, (20) zero defects, (21) quality culture, (22) communication, (23) quality systems, (24) JIT, and (25) flexibility  
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