

# **Tom Peters and Management: A History of Organizational Storytelling**

## **Introduction**

### **Introduction**

In 1981 Tom Peters was unemployed. He was that lonely, awkward thing; a middle-aged, furloughed management consultant and the would-be author of a business book that, frankly, no one expected would sell more than a few thousand copies. Just two years later however he was famous across Europe and the USA as the leading writer within a new and fast-developing, global, market now known as ‘popular management’.

Since 1982, when Peters, in partnership with Bob Waterman published *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) the market for ‘popular management’ has mushroomed. Most of those active in the arena of ‘popular management’, we should note, have bloomed briefly and have since faded from public consciousness. Tom Peters is therefore distinctive in this arena for at least two reasons. Firstly, his pioneering work on the business of management and his success as an author effectively seeded what is, now, a billion dollar market for management knowledge (Collins, 2021a). Commenting upon the spectacular growth of this market segment, Kiechel (2010: 156) confirms Peters’ position within this industry. Popular management is, he tells us, ‘the house that Tom Peters built’. Secondly, while others have blossomed briefly and have subsequently fallen from public consciousness<sup>i</sup>, Peters has remained prominent in the field of popular management. Indeed he continues to reap the harvest that he, in the company of a few others, sowed some forty years ago (see Peters, 2021 for the most recent bounty).

This book has been designed to explore the development of this market for management knowledge and Tom Peters' place within it. Indeed this book on 'Tom Peters and Management' has been timed to coincide with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of text which launched Peters on to the international stage. But this book is not just about *In Search of Excellence*, it is in fact concerned, more broadly, with 'the excellence project'; the 40 year continuing revolution in thinking and practice that Peters has wrought in the fields of business and management.

In this, introductory chapter, I will set the scene for this analysis of Tom Peters and the excellence project. As the title of this work suggests this book is, at one level, an account of the manner in which Tom Peters, as the phrase goes, entered and altered the field of management (see Crainer, 1997; Collins, 2007; 2021a); changing the ways in which we think about management, talk about management and indeed act managerially. A key aim of this book is therefore to allow readers to understand the changes demanded by Peters in the name of 'excellence' *and* the ways in which academics, journalists and practitioners of management have attempted to come to terms with these developments.

I recognise, of course, that Peters has many fans who will regard the year 2022 and the anniversary of the publication of *In Search of Excellence* as a very real cause for celebration. While it is difficult to estimate his sales (partly due to the complexities of licensing agreements and, frankly, counterfeiting (see Collins, 2007)) it would not be unreasonable to suggest that Tom Peters has now sold in excess of 10 million books. And

he has by his own estimation offered presentations to some 5 million people. More modern indicators of success and persuasion are, we should note, similarly impressive: Peters has in excess of 168,000 followers on *Twitter* and has logged more than 55 million hits on *Google*. I also recognise however that there are many others who would more happily craft a 'death notice' for a text and project that have been attacked as being, variously, flawed and faddish. Typically I stand between somewhere between these positions on the excellence project but my approach is nonetheless uncompromising: Tom Peters and what became, in hindsight, his excellence project are, I will argue, hugely important. Indeed I will demonstrate that the impact of the excellence project is both, significant and enduring. Furthermore I will show that Tom Peters and the excellence project which he, with the help of a few others spawned, merits detailed scrutiny. I will leave it to you, however, to decide whether the excellence project deserves a jamboree or a funeral pyre. Yet no matter what you decide; whether you cheer or complain I am very clear in my own mind that this is an anniversary that should be observed, if only, because it offers an opportunity a) to offer an account of (and an education on) the genesis of the 'excellence project' that might b) provide a timely assessment of its core concerns; its impact and, crucially, its legacy. There are consequently at least two market segments for this book. For those under the age of, say, 40 this book will offer a critical introduction to a time and to a movement that is, fast becoming, part of what Thompson and McHugh (1990) would describe as management's pre-history<sup>ii</sup>. To those born after 1982 therefore I offer this book as a critical, yet reliable, introduction to an author who has become central to the practice of management and to a movement that has altered, quite fundamentally, the manner in which we think about and talk about management.

All of which, surely begs the question: If Peters is so central to modern management practice why is this book necessary? The answer is, I suggest, straightforward: While Peters has (re)shaped the very essence of that we which we, too glibly, reduce to ‘management’, his preferred representation of the business of management is seldom, fully and properly, scrutinised in those materials that have been designed to provide a formal education on the business of management. Thus my experience suggests that readers of this book, aged under 40, will know very little of the work of Peters. Indeed, my guess is that this (imagined) constituency will not have studied Peters ‘in the original’ and if they know of his work will have derived this understanding through second-hand summaries that are, typically, very short and, too often, hagiological in nature (Collins, 2000; 2019; 2021a). Recognising that the work of Tom Peters

- *will* have shaped the education in management offered to those aged under 40
- and *will* have shaped the manner in which this (loose) grouping thinks about managing; and indeed acts managerially, this book has been designed to provide the resources necessary to allow (these) readers to locate their own managerial practices, within an account of the key ideas that will have shaped their conduct.

To those over the age of (say) 50<sup>iii</sup>; to those who may have read (some of<sup>iv</sup>) *In Search of Excellence* and who may well have been introduced to the academic critiques ranged against this text in the 1980s, this book offers, both, ‘a refresher’ and a balanced appreciation of the manner in which the excellence project has continued to evolve and change since its inception. While recognising the essential veracity of those critiques that

have questioned a) the conceptualisation of ‘excellence’ and b) the methodology that Peters employs to gauge business practice, this text will demonstrate that criticisms constructed in conventional academic terms largely misunderstand the excellence project. Indeed I will argue that *In Search of Excellence* and the excellence project as a whole is largely immune to conventional forms of academic critique. Thus I will argue that the excellence project does not seek a correspondence with empirical facts and with *the truth*. Rather ‘excellence’ is to be read and understood as a narrative projection that in portraying business as a noble endeavour, and management as an heroic calling, seeks to connect with more general and enduring romantic *truths*.

I am of course not the first to highlight this. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) for example suggest that the primary function of ‘popular management’ is to persuade those who must deliver on its promise that managerial plans for change are necessary; useful; commendable. In a similar fashion Frank [2000] (2002: 192) notes that the role of popular management texts such as *In Search of Excellence* is ‘not to oversee the change [whether this be downsizing, delayering, out-sourcing or disaggregating] but to legitimize it, to explain why the new “marketized” corporate form [is] in fact, the ideal productive model, the source of efficiency as well as democracy’. Yet I am perhaps the first to locate this appreciation of the excellence project within an empirical analysis of the tools that it has used to advance and to substantiate its core concerns.

In this text I will demonstrate that ‘excellence’, is a project which calls upon the arts of the storyteller to secure its meanings and effects. Furthermore I will show that we may

build upon an empirical analysis of Peters' stories and indeed his storytelling practice a) to explore and b) to reconsider the enduring and underlying priorities that c) bring shape and meaning to the excellence project. To this end the book as a whole is structured as follows:

In chapter one I will offer an account of the genesis of the excellence project. Textbooks on management generally agree that *In Search of Excellence* builds upon what has come to be known as 'The McKinsey 7-S Framework' (which is often reduced to, either, 'the 7-S framework' or, less often, 'the happy atom'). This framework, as we will learn, was developed in the early 1980s and in suggesting that business is built around 'seven hunks of complexity' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 11) was designed to demonstrate that successful managerial practice depends upon securing a balance between the human, or 'soft-s' elements of business and the 'hard-s' factors such as 'strategy' and 'systems'. Most textbooks prepared for students of management observe that in considering the balance between these 'soft' and 'hard' factors, Peters and Waterman argued that their 'excellent' organizations demonstrated eight common attributes, which set them apart from their less successful counterparts and competitors. Yet few textbooks linger over these developments. In chapter one, I will remedy this. I will consider the circumstances that brought a key artefact of the excellence project – the 7-S framework - to public notice and in so doing, will take my cue from Bruno Latour (1987).

### **Ready-Made Science *versus* Science-in-the-Making**

Latour (1987) complains that the ‘lay appreciation’ of science is based upon a ‘ready-made’ narrative. This ‘ready-made’ narrative, he warns us, offers an account of scientific endeavour that is constructed *after* all the controversies have been resolved. In this respect the ready-made narrative of science is a cold dish, served long after the heat has gone out of the debate. Recognising the manner in which this ‘ready-made’ appreciation of science limits our understanding of human endeavours, I will offer an account of ‘science-in-action’ designed to reveal and to explore the controversies that shaped the ‘McKinsey 7-S framework’. While reflecting upon the development of this framework I will contrast *In Search of Excellence* with a notable contemporary account – *The Art of Japanese Management* (Pascale and Athos, [1981] 1986) which, as we shall see, actually show-cased the McKinsey 7-S model. Comparing these texts, and the commercial success enjoyed by Peters, (if not Waterman<sup>v</sup>) in the light of the more modest performance of *The Art of Japanese Management*, I will offer reflections on the relative fortunes of these analyses of the business of management. While rationalising the success of Peters and Waterman I will nonetheless suggest that, in the 1980s, the field of ‘management’ had a choice to make and selected *In Search of Excellence* as its core guide to the business of management. Yet I will argue that in so doing the field took a wrong turn. Indeed I will suggest that the fork taken has, for a generation denied, us the opportunity to secure an approach to management, which while based within a market economy, might have been founded upon a genuinely reciprocal policy of social enterprise.

In chapters two and three I will offer a critical analysis and review of *In Search of Excellence* and of the key works that Tom Peters has published since 1982. Chapter two will focus upon *In Search of Excellence* and *A Passion for Excellence* (Peters and Austin, 1985) while chapter three will offer an account of the remaining, key texts published between 1987 and 2018.

In other contributions to this debate I have suggested that we may group Tom Peters' works according to their underlying narrative structure (see Collins, 2007). In chapters two and three, however, I will offer a more conventional, chronological, analysis designed to allow readers (whatever their birth date) to form an appreciation, if you will allow a slightly paradoxical suggestion, of the dynamic stabilities in Peters' work.

In chapter four we will consider core debates on organizational storytelling. In addition I will offer an account of the methodology that underpins the analyses offered in chapters five, six, seven and eight. Many practitioners of management, thanks in part to the activities of Tom Peters, will now vouchsafe that management is, at root, a communication process rooted in and dependent upon the persuasive arts of the storyteller. And this claim is, of course, broadly truthful. Yet this bald assertion, while accurate at root, remains problematic because it fails to acknowledge a) the continuing debate as to the essential nature of stories and b) the efficacy of those approaches, which simply assume that storytelling offers managers a genuinely reliable means of animating and orientating others within organized contexts. In chapter four, I will consider these debates while calling upon a rich array of narrative and storytelling resources. I will

acknowledge that Tom Peters *has* genuinely changed the manner in which we conceptualise the work of ‘management’, yet I will focus particularly on the contests associated with:

- sensemaking and sensegiving
- narrative and ante-narrative perspectives
- elaborate stories and terse tales.

I will argue that these (often unacknowledged debates) oblige us to qualify the untested and now commonly-held conviction that ‘management’ is *simply and reliably* a communication process rooted within storytelling.

In chapters five, six, seven and eight I will build upon the knowledge of the excellence project (developed in chapters one, two and three) and upon our new appreciation of the debates that shape storytelling within an organized context to offer a ‘re-view’ of Peters’ core approach and key concerns. Chapter five, as we shall, see builds upon and yet updates an earlier analysis timed to coincide with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the excellence project (Collins, 2007; 2008). Chapter five will therefore offer an account of Peters’ changing storytelling practices and will consider the extent to which Peters’ preference for the epic story-form actually facilitates his project.

In chapter six, I will consider the key characters featured in Peters’ storyworld. Tom Peters’ heroes, as we shall see, have changed over time. Yet, as we will learn, the heroics of the excellence project remain largely unchanged. While mapping these heroes and

their heroics, this chapter will also observe a shift in Peters' place within the storyworld. Noting the author's transformation from 'narrator' to 'hero'; from *guide on the side* to *sage on the stage* I will argue that Peters' narratives – at least in their written form – often lack the seductive qualities necessary to win converts to his credo.

In chapter seven I will offer reflections upon Tom Peters' storyworld, which builds upon the work of Martin et al. (1983). The work of Martin and her colleagues, as we shall see, was developed around the same time as *In Search of Excellence* and, like the excellence project, focuses upon organizational storytelling. Yet, despite these overlaps Martin and her colleagues essay an approach to storytelling that is quite different to that preferred by Peters. Thus Martin et al., explore an enduring organizational paradox which may be rendered as follows: Typically, organizations proclaim their uniqueness in cultural terms. Yet when organizational members are invited to justify such claims to uniqueness they tend to render tales of management and organization that are remarkably similar.

Accounting for this paradoxical outcome, Martin and her colleagues assure us that the stories commonly rendered across a range of contexts are developed and maintained within organized settings because they express and account for the enduring anxieties that shape the experience of paid employment. Reviewing Peters' texts in the light of this observation I will argue that his storyworld lacks authenticity insofar as it offers a top-down projection of the world that simply fails to concede the presence of those enduring anxieties, which in being directly associated with the experience of paid employment, shape the storyworld at the bottom of the organizational pyramid. Chapter eight in

contrast will consider the presence/ absence of women in the excellence project. I will argue that women are under-represented and under-valued in Tom Peters' storyworld and, despite a very public epiphany, are seldom granted full organizational membership within his accounts of the business of management.

It may be useful to observe that I had planned, initially, to include a chapter offering critical reflections on Peters' seminar performances and on the manner in which Peters uses tales of organizational life within such contexts a) to substantiate his concerns and b) to maintain the affiliation of the audience present. I regret that due to limitations of space I have been unable to fulfil this plan. I regret this omission I hasten to add because I accept that any account of the work of Tom Peters that reduces his contribution to 'management' to a consideration of written, textual sources alone is in some sense limiting. Yet having offered this concession I will take this opportunity to remind readers that I have written on this topic only recently *and at length* (see Collins, 2018; 2021a). And since, I have little further to add to the discussion at this point in time, and no space here to rehearse my core concerns, I will politely suggest that those keen to learn more about the performance artistry of Tom Peters might consult my most recent contribution to this debate *Management Gurus: A Research Overview* (Collins, 2021a). This account of Peters is, I will add, distinctive insofar as it offers a) critical reflections on the extant academic literature within this arena while b) exploring the similarities evident between Tom Peters' performances and those offered in the context of stand-up comedy!

In our final chapter; chapter nine, I will build upon the critical ‘re-view’ developed throughout this text to offer reflections on the legacy of Tom Peters. While conceding that Peters has genuinely altered the manner in which we think about; talk about; and act managerially I will nonetheless suggest that the impact of Peters’ preferred approach and credo is undone by two key limitations. These being, firstly the failure to promote a genuinely social policy of enterprise; and secondly the tendency to render tales of managerial endeavour that lack an authentic connection with the lives and concerns of key organizational stakeholders. But before we get to all of this it will be useful, now, to introduce our subject: Mr Tom Peters.

### **Introducing Tom Peters**

Tom Peters – the man feted world-wide as a, if not *the*, guru of management (see Collins, 2007; 2021a) – was born in Baltimore in 1942. Despite being ‘let go’, by McKinsey and Co., Peters was, by his forty-third birthday, publicly acknowledged (and celebrated) as, both, a key commentator on ‘management’ *and* a powerful orator on the contemporary problems of business. Indeed by the mid-1980s Peters was to his surprise and indeed to the surprise of his publisher a best-selling author who spent the bulk of each year ‘on tour’; spreading his distinctive gospel of management on the international lecture circuit that has grown up to educate and to edify managers. When not travelling the world to spread his message Peters, at this point in his life, tended to divide his time between a home in Palo Alto (a legacy of his former employment within the San Francisco office of McKinsey and Co.) and his, 1,600 acre farm in rural Vermont. This farm we would do well to note was purchased with the proceeds of *In Search of Excellence*, which had in

the year of its first publication out-sold every other text bar one; that text being a new edition of the bible<sup>vi</sup>. Commenting on the (surprising) success of this text, Kiechel (2010: 147) reminds us that while Bob Waterman had negotiated a very lucrative furlough settlement for his colleague, which afforded Peters the time and space to craft the first draft of *In Search of Excellence*, he himself had no contractual entitlement to the royalties that would flow from this text. Indeed Kiechel observes adds that McKinsey did little to acknowledge Waterman's role in the birth of the excellence project and, what is worse, did nothing to sustain his commitment to the firm: 'when *Bantam* approached [Bob Waterman] with a lucrative deal for a second or third book and McKinsey replied, in his words "it all belongs to us," he felt he had to leave the firm' after twenty-one years of faithful service.

During the last two decades Peters has altered his working practices a little. He has reduced his time on the road (or perhaps more accurately 'in the air') for business and has become a regular visitor to New Zealand, retreating there to escape the harsh winters of the north eastern United States. Peters now holds an adjunct faculty position with the University of Auckland's Business School. Indeed his most recent major work (Peters, 2018) was developed on the back of the modest teaching commitment that he now fulfils as a condition of his appointment. When in America, Peters and his wife now divide their home-life between their farm in Vermont and an island retreat off the coast of Massachusetts.

Peters has built his career as management guru by lambasting corporations for their (over)dependence on ‘hard data’ and for the litany of sins consequent upon conglomerate ownership and committee decision-making. Given this, his academic and intellectual background may come as a surprise: Peters holds two engineering degrees from Cornell University (BCE, MCE) and two business degrees from Stanford University (MBA, PhD). In addition he holds a number of honorary degrees including a doctorate from the State University of Management in Moscow, which was awarded in 2004. Yet despite this academic pedigree Peters, remains sceptical as regards the relevance and capacity of formal educational qualifications – in the managerial field at least. For example he routinely protests that the internationally recognised qualification in management which has been designed to prepare participants for ‘executive’ and ‘leadership’ positions - the Master of Business Administration qualification – should be redesigned as the Master of Business Arts<sup>vii</sup>.

In *Re-imagine* (Peters, 2003) Peters offers us a concrete illustration of a) his misgivings about the nature of management education and b) his frustrations as regards the conduct of corporate America. He reports that in 2002 he tried (and failed) to return his Stanford MBA following the scandal, which surrounded Enron’s collapse. Peters took the decision to return his degree, he tells us, after he had watched Robert Jaedicke – an Enron Board member and chair of the Board’s Audit Committee – insist, in a live television broadcast, that he knew nothing of the peculiar transactions and accounting methods that ruined this company (and the pensions of many employees). Explaining his, apparently, extreme reaction to Jaedicke’s protestations of innocence Peters observes that, thirty years

previously, this man had been the Professor on the ‘Advanced Accounting’ within his MBA curriculum:

‘When a guy who served as Enron’s *audit* boss...the last bastion of bean counting...invokes the “Clueless” defense, it makes you wonder: Did he have any clue as to the usefulness of the curriculum at the school where he’d been dean? Did he have any clue as to what lessons I’d extract from his “advanced” accounting course?’ (Peters, 2003: 8 emphasis and ellipses in original)

Thankfully Peters’ knowledge of work, management and indeed ‘advanced accounting’ is not, solely, derived from the tuition he received at Stanford University. Between 1966 and 1970, for example, his knowledge of organized systems was broadened and deepened by his service in the US Navy (see Peters, 2003; 2018). During this time in the navy, Peters made two active service deployments to Vietnam where he served with the Navy’s construction battalion (commonly known as the Seabees). In addition Peters spent some time on secondment with Britain’s Royal Navy. Pointing to a sense of humour that is not always readily apparent in his early written work this, former sailor, points out that that during his Navy career he also survived a gruelling tour of duty in the Pentagon.

Following his service in the Navy, Peters worked for the consulting firm Peat Marwick Mitchell in its Washington office (Blackhurst, 2003). Following a brief sojourn with this company, Peters took up a post in the White House as a senior drug-abuse advisor. In 1974 however he left the White House to join the, now, famous consultancy firm McKinsey and Company. Between 1974 and 1976 Peters worked on a variety of consulting projects for this firm. However, his career with McKinsey was interrupted in January 1976 when a kidney complaint forced him to take an extended period of sick leave. During this period of, enforced, absence from work Peters completed the PhD

thesis which he had begun while studying for his MBA at Stanford University. This thesis, he tells us, was the first to focus upon strategic implementation and in this regard may be considered to be, perhaps, the first stirrings of the discontent that would become the excellence project.

Having completed his, previously, stalled programme of research Peters returned to McKinsey and Company in early 1977 and was made a partner of the company in that same year. During this second period with ‘the firm’ Peters began work on a project, which in 1982 would propel him to more-or-less instant and, certainly, lasting fame. This programme of work, whose genesis and orientations we will examine in more detail in the chapter that follows, was designed to explore ‘organizational effectiveness’.

Peters it seems enjoyed this eighteen month assignment but he was becoming increasingly unsettled at McKinsey and Co. In 1981, armed with a modest, advance payment of \$5,000 from his publishers, he resigned from McKinsey and settled down to write-up the findings of the research that he, with others, had been developing into ‘organizational effectiveness’.

Thanks to his senior colleague at McKinsey and Co., Bob Waterman, Peters was granted a severance package of \$50,000 from his employer on the understanding that the firm would receive 50% of any royalties on his first 50,000 book sales. This was, frankly, a generous settlement. Given the, then, reading habits of the general public, both, author (Peters only later invited Bob Waterman to become his co-author as he struggled to

develop a lucid and compact account of business effectiveness) and publisher were sanguine about the potential of this book. Crainer (1997) for example notes that the publishers estimated that the book which became *In Search of Excellence* might sell somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 copies nation-wide, and so, commissioned an initial print run of 15,000 books for the US market. Peters (2018: 62) it is worth noting has a different recollection: ‘the publisher had low expectations, and the first print run was a meagre five thousand’. This dispute as to the initial print-run, of course, matters little today because to the surprise of all concerned, *In Search of Excellence* quickly became a best seller in the United States. Indeed in April 1983 this text became the first (non-biographical) book, directly, concerned with the nature and processes of managing to top the prestigious *New York Times* best seller list. Furthermore it remained atop this list for two years until it was toppled by Peters’ next book entitled *A Passion for Excellence* (Peters and Austin, 1985).

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that *In Search of Excellence* defined and created a new market segment for the publishing industry (Collins, 2021a). The book was, and remains, a world-wide phenomenon. Despite focusing on American companies and on the American economy the book has achieved mass sales in Britain, in Continental Europe and in the Far East (see Lorenz, 1986a; Huczynski, 1993). Indeed Crainer (1997) reports that when Tom Peters travelled to China, for the first time, in 1988 he was greeted by five publishers each of whom had produced best selling (and unlicensed!) *ersatz* Chinese editions of *In Search of Excellence!*

Tom Peters has now produced 19 books on management (see Figure One). In addition he has written many articles for the popular business press. Indeed, for a time he produced a regular newspaper column that was widely syndicated. Furthermore he has, as we shall see, inspired many, many more academic and journalistic analyses of his contribution to the business of management.

When not engaged in these writing projects, Peters is often to be found on stage and/ or in company boardrooms offering presentations on his core philosophy and current concerns. His consulting/ touring schedule is altogether less frenetic now than in the early years of his guru career. Nonetheless he is, and has for many years been, one of the most highly paid speakers on this very lucrative lecture circuit. Describing his own pricing strategy he offers an insight into the humour that has become a hallmark of his seminars. Thus he confides that his pricing strategy is really quite simple. He tells us that he endeavours to ascertain what Nobel prize-winner, Henry Kissinger (perhaps the leading figure on the international seminar circuit) is currently charging and comes in at a price just below this rate of exchange.

And how much does he charge? Quoting an off-the-record yet nonetheless reliable source, Collins (2007) observes that in the early noughties Peters could command a fee of \$85,000 for a one hour speech. Recent off-the-record discussions with a similarly reliable source, however, suggest that Peters now demands \$101,000 for a similar engagement. This 16% price rise, in the light of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the austerity

measures that have gripped so many of us since that date, suggests that the guru business – or at least that segment occupied by Peters - may be pretty much recession-proof!

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

Peters' reputation within the field of management and his notoriety within the popular press has led to the production of three 'professional biographies'. I call these texts 'professional biographies' because they are focused, almost exclusively, upon matters that relate, narrowly, to his working life. Accordingly, Tom Peters' private life remains for the most part, just that. Consequently those elements of Peters' life, which may have had an important impact on his work as a writer and commentator – his early days; his three marriages; his time in therapy (Durman, 1997) – remain, for the most part, beyond the purview of the biographers of his career, this one included!

The first of these 'professional biographies' was penned by the British, business, journalist Stuart Crainer (1997) who, for a time, was a part of a team retained to conduct research and to write field-reports on behalf of Tom Peters . Crainer's often insightful text offers a useful account of the genesis of the excellence project and interesting reflections on the birth of the modern guru that is Tom Peters. Importantly this work also provides occasional glimpses of Peters' complex character.

The second 'professional biography' written some three years later by the British journalist, and founding editor of the journal *Management Today*, Robert Heller (2000)

is, for our current purpose, altogether less satisfactory. Reading Crainer's biography of Peters one senses in the author a frustration. I have read this work on numerous occasions and genuinely enjoy the text. Yet I sense that the author was slightly disappointed with his book. It seems to me that, despite Crainer's attempts to find out something about the man behind the myth, the subject of this professional biography chose to remain aloof throughout the production of the text and co-operated with his former employee only to a very limited degree. Consequently Tom Peters appears as a complex, yet elusive and somewhat enigmatic presence throughout what is, actually, a fairly lengthy book (see also Postrel, 1997). When I read Heller's account of Tom Peters I am, likewise, struck by a sense of frustration. Yet in this case the frustration is mine alone. Heller's text is we should note shorter and is, altogether, less substantial than that produced by Crainer. Yet there is nothing in this work to suggest that Heller is less than completely content with a text, which tends to lack, both, critical intent and insight.

The third of the three professional biographies alluded to above was produced by Collins (2007) and was timed to coincide with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982). The text written by Collins offers an account of Peters' career and critical reflections upon the major works produced by this author up to and including the year 2003. The book which you now hold in your hands up-dates, revises, and extends this earlier work. Thus the contribution to the 'history of organizational storytelling' developed here considers the works published since 2003 (Peters, 2010; 2018) and adds to the earlier analysis a) sustained, critical reflection on the

genesis of the excellence project b) a consideration of the authenticity of Peters' storyworld and c) reflections on the place of women within this canon.

It is perhaps worth noting, too, that this book departs from the work produced in 2007 insofar as it offers – meekly and genuinely – an apology. In *Narrating the Management Guru* (Collins, 2007) I offered an account of Tom Peters that was, to be honest, strident and forceful to the very point of rudeness. Despite this and in subsequent exchanges – face-to-face; *via* e-mail and/ or on *Twitter* – Tom Peters has been unfailingly polite. Doubtless Peters will suggest that, together, we owe our experience to his upbringing and to the wise counsel of his mother. Given the tales of Peters' mother that pepper, especially his later works, there is every reason to suspect that this is an accurate supposition (see Peters, 2010; 2018). Some years on from my discussion of the excellence project in its silver jubilee year I now realise that I might have done better to reflect upon my own mother and upon my own upbringing even as I took cheap shots at Peters. In the light of this self-reflection, I hope that this text, and these introductory remarks, will be read (and accepted) as an overdue apology. That said, I must point out that I do continue to believe that my earlier analyses of the work(s) of Tom Peters remain, substantially, correct. I do, however, regret those elements of my analyses that more even-handed commentators would understand to be, strident up to *and beyond* the point of rudeness. In this text, therefore, while offering a re-view and reappraisal of the excellence project that is 'critical', I will work to moderate my expression. While maintaining the energy and the plain speech that I do believe recommends my work to the reader (see Gabriel, 2008 for a review), I will endeavour to keep things 'sporting'<sup>viii</sup>

(see Collins, 2021b). Yet before we proceed to this analysis of Peters' works, it will be useful to pause in order to consider what I will term, 'the guru question'.

### **Is Tom Peters a Guru?**

In earlier works (see for example Collins, 2007; 2019; 2021a) I have suggested that Peters should be considered to be not just 'a guru' but *the* guru of management. Indeed I have suggested that Tom Peters should be considered to be the prototype that became the archetype of the modern management guru. Yet unlike those who have developed hagiological accounts of popular management (see Collins, 2000; 2019; 2021a) I remain mindful of the origins of the term, 'guru' and have, consequently, chosen to deploy this term in a manner which invites more careful reflection on what it is that management's gurus would do in our name.

#### *What's in a name?*

Tom Peters has been labelled as a guru of management; as the uber-guru of management; as the Ur-guru of management and (of course) *the* guru of management<sup>ix</sup>. Many of the commentators who use this terminology to applaud Tom Peters have suggested that the gurus of management are very special individuals. They are, we are assured, quite unlike lesser commentators in the field of management insofar as they generate ideas and tools that are novel and which offer enduring benefits to organizations. In earlier works (Collins, 2000; 2019; 2021a) however I have suggested that these claims simply do not bear close scrutiny. Organizations, I have argued, are simply too complex; too pluralistic to allow us to assert that any particular change programme, or innovation, will carry

benefit for *the organization* as a whole. For example it is plain that the radical downsizing associated with ‘business process reengineering’ (Hammer, 1990) placed costs upon some components of ‘the organization’ even while it allowed others to maximise their bonuses and stock options! In addition we should note that innovations such as ‘business process reengineering’ tend to impose costs upon the communities that host those organizations downsized in the name of reengineering (Collins, 2000). We may therefore reject the suggestion that *the gurus* are special because they offer unalloyed benefits to organizations!

Grint (1994) has also considered the merits of the term, ‘guru’. He offers a simple rebuttal to the suggestion that the gurus generate novel ideas and solutions. Indeed Grint suggests that the ideas conveyed within popular management texts secure, however fleetingly, a market presence *precisely because they lack novelty*.

I have by my own admission often treated Tom Peters harshly. Indeed I have suggested that *In Search of Excellence* is a deeply flawed piece of writing (see Collins, 2000<sup>x</sup>). Yet I continue to insist that the term, ‘guru’, is useful in this context. My willingness to acknowledge Peters as a guru is however forged within a context which recognises that there are some, prominent within the field of management studies who continue to doubt his contribution to ‘management’. Hindle (2008) notes, for example, that in 2003 *Harvard Business Review* conducted a survey which invited a number of key business thinkers to nominate the leading gurus of management. Peter Drucker, he notes, came first in this listing with James March second. Tom Peters however, featured not at all!

Yet for every account that would exclude Peters from ‘the pantheon’ there is at least one alternative source that would place this individual comfortably among a small A-list grouping. Collins (2007) for example notes that the publisher *Bloomsbury* named *In Search of Excellence* the best business book of all time! In addition Peters (2018: 30) draws our attention to an additional source that while it does not, quite, place this individual at the summit of Mount Olympus does suggest that the excellence project remains a very important innovation that has had a broad and enduring influence on the business of management. Thus Peters observes:

‘In 1999, a book was published by AMACOM, titled *The 75 Greatest Management Decisions Ever Made*, featuring Julius Caesar, Ted Turner, Henry Ford, Warren Buffett, and others of their ilk. Number forty-eight on the list, to my astonishment. Was the spur-of-the-moment decision by John Larson to ask me to give a presentation to Dart Industries on Good Friday 1978.’

We will return to this very important Friday in our next chapter as we consider the genesis of the excellence project. For the moment however we must continue to explore ‘the guru question’ for it is clear that despite the endorsements noted above, many of my contemporaries do continue to dispute the utility of the guru label.

*Should we love our gurus?*

Jackson and Carter (1998) suggest that anyone with a developed appreciation of etymology *should* choose to oppose the application of the term, guru within the field of business and management. They observe:

‘The word “guru” means a spiritual leader, and it derives from the Sanskrit word for venerable. “Venerable” means worthy of worship, and its Latin origins are

connected with Venus, the goddess of love: we should worship our gurus as fountains of love for us.' (Jackson and Carter, 1998: 153-154)

Pio (2007: 184) offers a similar analysis. She notes:

'The Sanskrit word *guru* is derived from *gu*, meaning darkness, and *ru*, meaning light or the removal of the darkness of ignorance through enlightenment. The guru is expected to live up to what he or she preaches. The guru is also seen as the bridge between the individual and god and a channel for divine grace.'

Plainly the spiritual origin of the term, guru, presents difficulties for Jackson and Carter.

Indeed they simply refuse to countenance the suggestion that those who have, in recent years, acted to reshape the business of management actually spread enlightenment, and so, deserve our veneration. Pattison (1997) recognizes the power of this sentiment. Yet he suggests that the term, management guru, has utility in this context because it offers insights into the ways in which these actors secure and solidify their representations of the world. Thus Pattison argues that the label – management guru – might be retained even by archly critical scholars because it highlights the manner in which those commentators who form the leading edge of popular management are able to shape how we think, feel and act. Expanding upon this point, Pattison suggests that the gurus of management acquire and sustain followers in a fashion that is similar to that commonly employed by religious leaders and scholars. Thus he argues that gurus (secular and otherwise) act to threaten our sense of self and in so doing promise to provide – if not redemption – then at least a release from our more pressing problems and dilemmas (see also Jackson, 1996; 2004). Offering a concrete example of this more general process, Pattison suggests that Tom Peters' second work, produced in concert with Nancy Austin (Peters and Austin, 1985) amounts to a secular re-telling of the story of Noah and the

flood and, like this biblical tale, promises salvation to those who are prepared to embrace what we might now term *the rapture of business excellence*.

Greatbatch and Clark (2005) however dispute the suggestion that the leading edge of ‘popular management’ is actually populated by individuals who deserve to be known as ‘gurus’. They do concede of course that the guru label enjoys common currency and has been deployed within academia to focus attention upon the representations that ‘gurus’ use to substantiate their core concerns. And yet they insist that the label is inappropriate in this context. In an attempt to substantiate this complaint<sup>xi</sup> they insist that there is, in fact, no evidence to suggest that those who read guru texts, or who listen to what these individuals have to say about the business of management, actually undergo a conversion experience.

Yet we must wonder what it is that Greatbatch and Clark (2005) actually expect of *the gurus!* To suggest, for example, that practitioners of management have simply failed ‘to convert’ to the philosophies of management’s gurus is surely to overlook the extent to which managers and politicians of all hues do, now, think and speak about ‘culture change’, ‘customers’, ‘quality’, ‘TQM’ and ‘BPR’! Indeed the fact that so many managers now speak of their work in terms of narratives, symbolism and storytelling is largely down to the influence exerted by Peters and just a few others (see for example Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Kanter, 1989). But these facts do not seem to be enough for Greatbatch and Clark (2005). Indeed it would appear that the authors are willing to acknowledge as gurus only those who could pass ‘the Kool-Aid test’.

### *The Kool-Aid Test*

In the 1970s the Reverend James Jones and around 1,000 followers established a utopian commune in a settlement named, modestly enough, Jonestown in the Guyanese jungle. In 1978 a delegation of five individuals led by US Congressman Leo Ryan traveled to the commune to investigate claims of abuse. The members of this delegation were murdered however on November 18<sup>th</sup> 1978. In the aftermath of this crime Jones, flanked by armed guards, ordered his congregation to consume *Kool-Aid* that had been laced with cyanide and sedatives. Most did as they were instructed. Nine hundred died.

Reviewing the appeal and legacy of those dubbed ‘management’s gurus’, Greatbatch and Clark (2005), as we have seen, complain that these individuals simply do not deserve this accolade. Management gurus they assert are unworthy of the term because they have failed to manufacture converts to their cause. We have already suggested that, the gurus of management (with Peters prominent in this loose collective) have genuinely *converted* the corporate world to a new (albeit loose) credo that is built around a commitment to, customers, culture and change that depends upon symbolism and storytelling. But do we need really to find evidence of zealous converts fired with new managerial passions in order to apply the term guru in this context?

To portray Peters as a guru is it, truly, necessary to assume that his followers would, as the phrase has it, ‘drink the Kool-Aid’?

The Scots journalist Kenneth Roy (2013) offers us useful guidance on the nature of the religious conversion and renewal experience. Roy's reflections, as we shall see, suggest that Greatbatch and Clark simply expect too much of management's gurus.

Reflecting upon Billy Graham's evangelical mission to Scotland in the mid-1950s, Roy (2013:180) readily affirms his subject's oratorical and persuasive powers: two-and-a-half million people (one half of Scotland's population), he tells us, attended Graham's events in Glasgow or watched the proceedings on relayed broadcasts. Yet despite this quite staggering level of engagement, Roy notes the general absence of converts moved to a new life in Christ. Indeed Roy notes that, despite Graham's Scottish mission of 1955, and despite a subsequent visit in the late 1980s, membership of the Church of Scotland has continued to decline from its mid-1950s peak of 37% of the adult Scottish population to its present-day standing of less than 9%. Furthermore Roy observes that the reaction of Scotland's 500,000 Roman Catholics to Graham's mission of 1955 (and to subsequent visitations) was 'negligible'.

Given Scotland's experience of Graham's evangelism and given that Peters' interventions *have* truly changed the manner in which we conceive of management as a social practice it seems sensible to suggest that, in opposing the guru label, Greatbatch and Clark (2005) actually

- *misrepresent* the reach and appeal of management's gurus and in so doing
- *misunderstand* the nature of religious evangelism.

In short, the opposition of Greatbatch and Clark (2005) to the guru label seems to be based upon an abstract and idealized account of the religious conversion experience. And this benchmark, we should note, sets the bar too high - even for Billy Graham!

I submit therefore that while Peters would plainly (and thankfully) flunk ‘the Kool-Aid test’, any analysis of his texts and any well-grounded analysis of his *modus operandi* (see Collins, 2021a<sup>xii</sup>) demonstrates the utility of the guru labeling device insofar as it reminds us that Peters, *the* guru of management trades in *fear* and *hope* as he works to secure converts (*yes* converts) to his agenda for change.

My position on Peters’ status as *a/ the* guru of management therefore resolves in opposition to that suggested by Greatbatch and Clark (2005). Thus I suggest that most mature and sensible commentators would concede that Peters (in the company of a few others) has changed quite fundamentally the manner in which we think about; talk about and act managerially. Indeed I am prepared to concede the existence of a small A-list of managerial commentators who have a) enjoyed popular acclaim and b) volume sales because they have, c) through writing and public speaking d) constructed an account of the business of management that e) threatens and redeems managerial identities. The contents of this A-list will vary geographically and, I suspect, with your date of birth (see Collins, 2021a). Nonetheless it seems sensible to suggest that Tom Peters (despite the misgivings of Greatbatch and Clark and despite the prejudices of those who read the *Harvard Business Review*) would make the list. And beyond this observation, frankly, I have no real or sustained interest in debating who is and who is not ‘a guru’. Nor do I

wish to debate which individuals would occupy a ‘top 10’, ‘top 50’ or even a ‘top 100’ collection of gurus. Such activity is to my mind a toxic distraction; a form of *listeria* if you will. Yet we do not need to conclude our discussion on this downbeat because Huczynski’s (1993) account of ‘guru theory’ offers crucial insights on the nature and appeal of popular management.

### **Guru Theory**

Huczynski (1993) observes that managers have been able to purchase books designed to revolutionize the practice of management since at least the 1900s. Nevertheless Huczynski reminds us that the growth of a mass market in ‘popular management’, and the related rise of management’s gurus are very much products of the 1980s. Yet unlike others who have sought to personify the gurus of management (see Collins, 2021a), Huczynski warns us against any attempt to reduce *the* gurus to a compact or regimented collective. Indeed he argues that when we make reference to *the* gurus we are actually highlighting the existence of a diverse grouping and the presence of a rather loose bundle of ideas. Nonetheless Huczynski does suggest that those who have been labeled as management’s gurus tend to belong to one of three broad classes of commentator; these being the academic guru; the consultant guru; and the hero-manager. Reflecting upon the ways in which these classes of individuals derive their authority and appeal, Huczynski argues that the academic and consultant gurus tend to highlight their education and training whereas the hero-managers trade more upon their experience. Suddaby and Greenwood (2001), however, question this categorization. They suggest that this categorization fails to capture the complexity of the CVs which these actors possess. At

one level, of course, this is fair criticism. Tom Peters, who remains, I insist, among the leading ‘consultant gurus’ holds advanced degrees in civil engineering and in management. He is, consequently, *at least* as qualified as his academic counterparts. Likewise the modern executives who run our corporations and who are, from time-to-time, celebrated as ‘hero-managers’ are, thanks to a revolution in management education (see for example Khurana, 2007), often qualified to a very high standard nowadays. Yet, despite this Huczynski is, I believe, correct in his assertion that the gurus tend to speak in different registers. Thus the consultant and academic gurus *do* generally play upon their training whereas the ‘hero-managers’ prefer to trade upon their experience and upon their intrinsic leadership capabilities.

Reflecting upon the marketability of the gurus of management, Hindle (2008) reminds us that the career prospects of these commentators are far from assured. Thus Hindle observes that, aside from a ‘famous five’ (Peter Drucker, Douglas McGregor, Michael Porter, Alfred Sloan and FW Taylor) who have sustained prominent positions in the market for management knowledge (and in the listings of ‘top gurus’), most of those who have been dubbed ‘management gurus’ flourish briefly and then fade (sometimes ignominiously) from public life (see Collins, 2021a for a discussion of Al Dunlap). Huczynski (1993) however adds an important caveat to this discussion: while *gurus* come and go, *guru theory* endures.

Outlining the nature and character of ‘guru theory’, Huczynski (1993: 38) concedes that

‘the term “guru theory” is used as a convenient label to refer to [the] different contributions that have been so influential [since the 1980s]. The label

encompasses a rag-bag of prescriptions which include the importance of innovation, more teamwork, more empowerment of the individual, more employee participation, fewer levels of hierarchy and less bureaucratization (38).'

Huczynski insists however that there is a deeper structure of orientations and representations which, if you will allow, draws the strings of this 'rag-bag' together. Indeed he suggests that modern guru theory develops and retains an audience by focusing upon presentation and by cultivating an ideological focus which serves to enhance the rights and privileges of management. Fleshing out this point Huczynski suggests that what is often reduced to 'guru theory' might more usefully be conceived as a broad family of ideas. Tracing the genealogy of this family Huczynski suggests that it exhibits three, common, core traits and, within these traits, twelve interdependent, complementary and overlapping features.

Guru theory, therefore, articulates an understanding of the world of work which is:

1. Readily communicable through acronyms, alliteration or slogans. For example the 3Cs of Business Process Reengineering (Hammer, 1990) and the McKinsey 7-S framework which underpins, both, *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and *The Art of Japanese Management* (Pascale and Athos, [1981] 1986) spring readily to mind.
2. Focused upon the presumed capacity which leaders have to change the conduct of others.
3. Happy to assert that human thoughts and feelings are malleable in the hands of the skilled leaders lauded at point two.

Exploring the second trait said to typify guru theorizing, Huczynski suggests that successful representations of managerial work have been designed to enhance the status of the intended purchaser. Marketable representations of managerial work he suggests:

4. Provide legitimation and self-affirmation for those engaged in this endeavour.
5. Build upon a unitary account of managerial work (see Fox, 1985; Collins, 1998) which suggests that there is no room for meaningful dissent with respect to organizational ends or indeed the means used to secure these goals.
6. Allow local modifications which enable managers a) to tailor the model to local problems and contingencies and in so doing allow practitioners b) to voice the suggestion that they have usefully and meaningfully acted on their own initiative.
7. Focus upon 'leadership' and in so doing suggest that colleagues will volunteer their support even to the point of altruism (see Pettigrew, 1985).

Examining the third trait, Huczynski focuses, unsurprisingly, on practical application.

Thus he argues that successful forms of guru theory:

8. Promise control over market conditions otherwise notable for their volatility.
9. Outline a limited number of steps that, in execution, will deliver useful, planned, change (see Collins, 1998).
10. Suggest that the idea, tool, or initiative enjoys universal applicability.
11. Carry authorization or proof but not in the traditional academic or empirical sense. Commenting upon this Lischinsky (2008) observes that popular management ideas rarely build upon original empirical research but depend instead upon 'persuasive examples'.

12. Has ready applicability and can be utilized without special tools or knowledge.

Commenting upon this dimension, Grint (1994) suggests that guru theory is appealing to users because it implies that, while others must change (and are in fact defined as being ‘other’ precisely because they are in need of change) the conduct, preferences and predilections of the prime users may proceed unchallenged.

As this text will make plain Peters is, in the terms outlined above, fully deserving of the management guru label. He has

a) sustained a prominent position in the competitive market for management knowledge over four decades and has

b) brought to prominence the understanding that business success is, to a considerable extent, derived from the ability to manage the ways in which people feel about their work.

I will, of course, leave it to you to decide whether Peters’ influence in this arena is truly a cause for celebration but will add this warning: Yet no matter whether you come to praise or to bury Peters he cannot be ignored and it is simply wrong to suggest – as the contributors to the *HBR* survey have done – that he is not a leading shaper of the social principles and practices of that complex endeavour that we, too readily, reduce to the noun ‘management’.

*And on that bombshell...* I will conclude these introductory remarks with a few final reflections on the manner in which the work of Tom Peters has been handled by those who have attempted, in any sense, to come to terms with ‘the gurus of management’.

\* \* \* \* \*

By my own admission I have, in the past, been (unnecessarily) rude in my treatment of Peters and his work. I do now regret these comments and now willingly reiterate my apology. Yet as we shall see my commentary while muscular is notable in one additional respect beyond its testiness, and is different to that which has been developed by at least some of my peers. Thus while I may have been overly harsh in my comments; my words and opinions have been based, always, upon a reading of Tom Peters that develops from primary sources. Glaring errors and omissions in the works of others who have written on Tom Peters, however, suggest that many contemporary critiques do not proceed from such a careful reading. Indeed the sheer quantity of these errors and omissions, as we shall see in chapter two, suggests that Peters belongs to that category of writers who *must be criticised but need not be read*.

In what follows therefore I offer you, this reassurance. While attempting to moderate my tone, I will continue to offer an account of ‘Tom Peters and Management’, which while it is certainly critical is, nonetheless, based upon knowledge of the man and his work that has been developed over 30 years of sustained personal research and careful scholarship!

## Concluding Comments

This introductory chapter has been designed to offer a map of the book and to establish Peters' position within the pantheon of popular management. I have acknowledged that Peters has often been unnecessarily abused and/or impugned, sometimes by me, but more often by those who have simply chosen to write about this guru without, first, reading his work. With this issue to the forefront our next chapter will take time to reflect upon the very foundations of Tom Peters' guru career. Thus chapter one will consider the genesis of the excellence project; the birth of the idea that propelled Peters' to guru status; to riches and to international stardom. As we shall see, the excellence project and the McKinsey 7-S framework, which provides its foundation, have become key components of the modern management curriculum. Students are, of course, typically introduced to these ideas at an early stage of their studies and are expected – however half-heartedly – to apply these tools in their assessments. Yet the textbooks developed for our students seldom offer any discussion of the context within which these tools and ideas were developed. In our next chapter we will remedy this as we consider the birth-pangs of the excellence project. The genesis of the excellence project is, I will demonstrate, an engaging tale that really is worth telling, in part, because it has rather a lot to teach us about economics; about politics; in short about all those things that shape the managerial world but which seldom feature in the textbooks!

---

<sup>i</sup> I have borrowed this allusion from Robert Burns. In the song *Willie Stewart* (written as a birthday gift and tribute to his friend, Burns writes (beautifully):

*The flower it grows; it fades it fa's  
And nature cannot renew it  
But love and truth, eternal youth  
We'll gie tae Willie Stewart*

<sup>ii</sup> When Thompson and McHugh first employed this phrase they used it to refer to a pre-Taylorist period. The processes of modern education and the reading habits of both students and instructors I fear have

---

moved this ‘pre-historical’ period to a point in the calendar that I continue to regard as pretty contemporary!

<sup>iii</sup> I am aware that there is a gap of some 10 years in my account of the book’s key constituencies. I am however trying to be fair. Some of those aged 40 and over, I accept, may well have encountered the work of Tom Peters. My experience however suggests that this will be a small grouping. Likewise some of those aged over 50 may have passed a managerial career in ignorance of Tom Peters. Yet, again, my experience suggests that this will also be a small grouping. For good or ill, therefore, I have chosen to assume that my main constituencies are aged under 40 and 50 and over. If you are aged between these limits please do not feel slighted: you should, of course, feel free to read on!

<sup>iv</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that many practitioners have not in fact read any of the guru texts they own and there is, in addition, good reason to suspect that among those who have actually opened their copies, most have merely ‘dipped into’ these texts.

<sup>v</sup> As we shall see Bob Waterman had no contractual rights to the royalties earned by *In Search of Excellence*.

<sup>vi</sup> John Lennon it has been suggested once observed that The Beatles were bigger than God. That was, for some, an inflammatory comment. Peters’ sales figures do not suggest that he is bigger than God. They do suggest however that Peters ran Her a close second.

*And that’s how you make an inflammatory comment.*

<sup>vii</sup> As Peters voices this complaint he makes common purpose a) with Peter Drucker who, in the 1950s (see Whyte [1956] 1961: 95) suggested that a vocational education in management would be one that involved ‘the writing of poetry or short stories’ and b) with C Wright-Mills (1978) who suggested that sociologists of organization had much to learn from novelists. Collins (2021c) has recently produced a short monograph which builds upon this advice in an attempt to redeem culture through stories and storytelling.

<sup>viii</sup> To employ a footballing analogy I will play the ball and not the man.

<sup>ix</sup> Peters has, I believe, always been slightly uncomfortable with the guru moniker, preferring instead to be labelled as ‘curmudgeon’ or, more positively, ‘gad fly’. Nowadays he is often introduced as (and seems to take pride in being known as) ‘the Red Bull’ of management. This term of course signals the extent to which Peters is, through his writing and seminar presentations, considered to be an organizational stimulant and catalyst for business change. Stewart [2009] (2010: 279) takes this a step further but suggests a more guarded position as to the influence of Peters: Tom Peters he suggests is a corporate ‘amphetamine’.

<sup>x</sup> In this text, for example, I quip (unkindly) that the public claims which Peters makes of/ for his work represent a breach of the Sale of Goods Act (1979).

<sup>xi</sup> The complaint is I suggest pretty half-hearted and is I add pretty self-serving insofar as it is later openly contradicted by Clark. Working with others, for example (see Groß et al., 2015) Clark not only applies the guru label to a group of speakers on the management lecture circuit but does so in a fashion that is casual and pretty careless. In short, and despite his earlier comments concerning the utility of the term, Clark now seems content to use the guru label. Indeed he now deploys this term in a fashion that is essentially unqualified.

<sup>xii</sup> In this text I argue that the work of Greatbatch and Clark (2005) is not at all well-grounded and is, in fact, undermined by problems conceptual, methodological and empirical.

Figure One:

A catalogue of Tom Peters' books on the business of management

- (1982) *In Search of Excellence* (joint with Robert Waterman)
- (1985) *A Passion for Excellence* (joint with Nancy Austin)
- (1987) *Thriving on Chaos*
- (1992) *Liberation Management*
- (1993) *The Tom Peters Seminar: Crazy Times call for Crazy Organizations*
- (1994) *The Pursuit of Wow!*
- (1997) *The Circle of Innovation: You can't shrink your way to greatness*
- (2003) *Re-imagine! Business Excellence in a Disruptive age*
- (1999a) *The BrandYou 50*
- (1999b) *The Project50*
- (1999c) *The Professional Service Firm50*
- (2005a) *Tom Peters Essentials: Design* (joint with Marti Barletta)
- (2005b) *Tom Peters Essentials: Talent* (joint with Marti Barletta)
- (2005c) *Tom Peters Essentials: Leadership* (joint with Marti Barletta)
- (2005d) *Tom Peters Essentials: Trends* (joint with Marti Barletta)
- (2005e) *Sixty*
- (2010) *The Little BIG things: 163 ways to pursue excellence*
- (2018) *The Excellence Dividend: Meeting the Tech Tide with Work that Wows and Jobs that Last*
- (2021) *Excellence Now: Extreme Humanism*