The Use of Metaphors in Organizational Transformation

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Failures in managing change smoothly are largely attributed to human relations and communication failures. Metaphor - based analyses are being increasingly used in varied areas of organizational practice to understand organizational situations and problems.

The essence of metaphor is developing understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. As metaphors carry connotations on a cognitive, emotional and behavioral level in a holistic way, they can influence the way people construct reality and may lead to activities and outcomes that are desired to transform organizations.

It is unfortunate that the communicative power of metaphor is not fully exploited by managers and practitioners in managing change in organizations. If the management is ignorant about the methods of recognition and value of metaphors, an essential dialogue is missed that can only lead to misunderstandings and conflict. Organizational goals can thus be threatened. Through two case studies the researcher has attempted to show how metaphors work; types of metaphors in organizations; their functions and limitations; and how they can be used in organizational change analysis

Form and Substance

If language is not correct,
then what is said is not
what is meant;

if what is said is not
what is meant,
then what ought to be done
remains undone.

- Confucius

Failures in managing change smoothly are largely attributed to human relations and communication failures. A Global survey result of views of executives from around the world on Organizational Transformation published by McKinsey Quarterly in July 2008 also indicates that among the companies that transformed successfully, engaging the organization through ongoing communication and involvement was the most frequent tactic. One such tactic is the use of metaphors in managerial communication. It is unfortunate that the communicative power of metaphor is not fully exploited by managers and practitioners in managing change in organizations. Just as managers might use metaphors, consciously or unconsciously, to influence employees, the employees too can use counter metaphors reflecting attitudes and claims that may hinder the intentions of management. If the management is ignorant about the methods of recognition and value of metaphors, an essential dialogue is missed that can only lead to misunderstandings and conflict. Organizational goals can thus be threatened. There is therefore, an urgent need to sensitize managers on the communicative

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complexities of managing change since communication may be handled quite presumptuously by them.

Sense-making and influence are fundamental processes in the instigation of change. The essence of metaphor is developing understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. Metaphors, as mental pictures, can be used to conceptualize, understand, and explain vague or unfamiliar phenomena to the employees. Metaphors can help refocusing on the familiar and show it in a new light. This can help in 'de-freezing' the status quo.

Metaphors can also provide a clear picture of the future and the tangible actions that may require to be taken. Since metaphors carry connotations on a cognitive, emotional and behavioral level in a holistic way, they can influence the way people construct reality and may lead to activities and outcomes that are desired to transform organizations. Metaphors can prove very useful in accomplishing the challenging task of changing beliefs and basic assumptions that are collectively held in the entire organization.

Metaphors in organizations are identified through a study of talk and text in context. A study of the exchange of words and meanings in an organization as the people within and outside these establishments work towards accomplishing organizational objectives provides the basis for understanding virtually every human process that occurs in organizations. In this article, I shall cover definition and significance of how metaphors work; types of metaphors in organizations; their functions and limitations; and how they can be used in organizational change analysis.

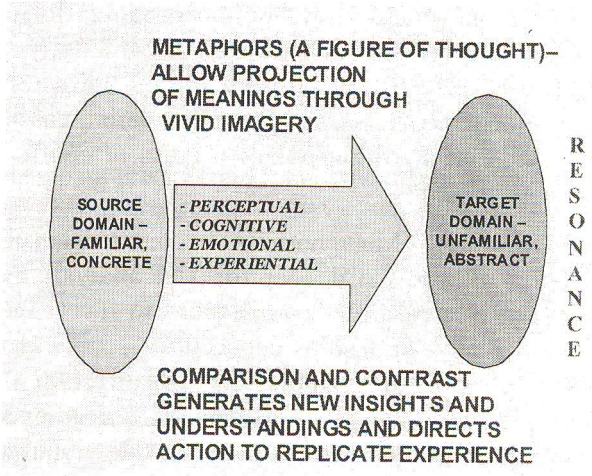
Definition and Significance of Metaphors in Organizational Studies

The Oxford English Dictionary defines metaphor as "the figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable." Metaphor is one of the primary tropes, known commonly as figures of speech, but which are actually "figures of thought" (Oswick et al,2004) since they allow ways of knowing through analytical reasoning and creative processes. Metaphors are used as a communicative device because through vivid and memorable imagery they allow the projection of meaning at the perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential levels from a known domain (called source domain), which is familiar and concrete, to a lesser known domain (called target domain) which may be unfamiliar and abstract, to generate new insights and understandings about the target domain. Metaphors can thus simulate experience of the target domain and direct action to replicate that experience. The power of metaphor, like poetry, leans on shared experience. Metaphor leads to understanding through comparison and contrast.

New concepts develop primarily from metaphors, that is, by seeing an unfamiliar phenomenon in terms of something else that is familiar. Metaphors are useful research devices for they allow an illuminative description of objective realities in organizations and when used as analytical lenses can provide accurate diagnosis of organizational situations and problems.

How do Metaphors Work?

Metaphors assert certain similarities between the source and target domain usually in an implicit manner (e.g. The industry is sick; My French is a bit rusty). Metaphors involve the simultaneous equating and negating of attributes of two different ideas or objects thus producing a tension or vibration in the mind, a high state of energy in which a creative perception of the meaning takes place non-verbally (Tsoukas, 1993).To obtain this correct tension and therefore the correct perception - called resonance - the choice of metaphor becomes important so that there is a balance or overlap between similarity and dissimilarity of the domains compared.



In addition, other ways, that have an explanatory utility, of expressing explicit similarities between domains, , are similes (e.g. 'Milk is like water') and analogies (e.g. 'Culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual').

Multiple Metaphors in Organizations

Multiple metaphors exist simultaneously in any organization and a study of these is needed to comprehend the organizational realities. While one could search for the best metaphor within the context to describe a particular organizational situation, the study of multiple metaphors in use will produce a wider range of understandings and interpretations of the problem under investigation. Multiple metaphors can be found at different points of time in the same location, being most appropriate at that time, and different metaphors appropriate to different locations may also exist that allow analysis of different parts of the organization at the same point of time (Palmer and Dunford, 1996).

Root Metaphors. Just as the roots of a plant are vital to its survival but are generally below ground and not immediately visible, there are root metaphors in organizations that are often unobtrusive with regard to their frequency of usage in ordinary discourse but they help capture a fundamental, underlying world view of the organization. When we observe use of several metaphors in the organization, we can normally form clusters that can lead to deeper abstractions or roots. Root metaphors can provide an inferential base for understanding more discrete attitudes and behavior. The identification of root metaphors can lead to unraveling of how meanings and interpretations develop over time and can reveal the current reality of the organization. Root metaphor analysis can help articulate the unquestioned rules, assumptions, values and beliefs that constitute the world-views of the organizational members. "Changes in and competition among root metaphors can illuminate struggles between organizational members over appropriate definitions of reality and can highlight potential areas of conflict (Eisenberg, 1987)".

Sub-Metaphors. Metaphors also accommodate sub metaphors to allow a deeper form of analysis by considering second order comparisons to reveal the multiplicity of relationships between the source and target domains. For example, the 'organization as family' metaphor may accommodate at a deeper level the metaphoric counterparts to the father role, siblings, family feuds, family values and expectations (Oswick et al, 2004).

We should think of metaphors as microscopes of differing powers, all potentially relevant to an examination of the same issue or phenomenon. The acceptance and sharing of a common metaphor by collectives is more likely to produce coherent, well directed actions. When there is sharing of the same underlying metaphor(s) across the organization, there is usually agreement and focus on what to do (Marshak, 1993).

Metaphors in Organizational Change Processes

Metaphors can influence employee's thinking, feelings, and their construction of reality in ways that facilitate acceptance of change. "Metaphors have been used as guiding images of the future, as ways of increasing organizational effectiveness, as tools for organizational diagnosis, as methods for simplifying organizational life, as ways of understanding individual perceptions about change, identify resistance to change, unearth emotions related to change and identify gaps in individual acceptance of proposed changes" (Palmer and Dunford, 1996:692). Marshak (1993) regards managing metaphors of change as a critical competency for leaders and change agents.

Some of the functions of metaphors in change processes are as follows:

(a) **Rendering vague and abstract ideas concrete**. A change involves unsettling the status quo which is known and moving to a new and unknown state. The uncertainties produced can be reduced by using metaphors that relate changes to known experiences. By giving concrete meaning to new ideas, managers can make their vision clearer to people.

(b) **Transmitting information holistically.** Metaphors are mental pictures conveying information holistically as a coherent whole. Like a picture that can substitute for a thousand words, metaphors draw upon knowledge, activities, emotions and the atmosphere of a situation. Such an association suggests certain courses of actions and feelings towards the new situation on the basis of the context of the original situation. However, while metaphors may evoke similar connotative meanings in most people, this does not guarantee that all the people would have had similarly connotative experiences and some people may develop different understandings and display different behaviors (Sackmann, 1989).

(c) **Triggering Perceptual Shifts**. Choice of a metaphor implies choice of perspective of what attributes of organization and what ways of functioning need to be looked at and from which angle (Morgan, 1980). This quality of selective emphasis through framing can be used to innovatively perceive and

interpret certain problems, information and events (Oriony, 1975).

(d) Legitimize Actions. A function of metaphor/ myth is that they place explanation beyond doubt and argumentation. Myths involve fantastical elements that are not subjected to constraints of logic or a demand for empirical proof. Thus, metaphors can draw on the strength of myths and symbolic realities that have gained unquestioned acceptance over time in organizations to legitimize actions.

(e) Metaphorical Ambiguity Facilitates Change. Effective managers and employees use metaphors strategically to facilitate a sense of cohesiveness and at the same time allow for a variety of individual interpretations (Eisenberg, 1984).Maintenance of a diversity of interpretations can aid an organization in adapting to change. Because of its inherent ambivalence of meaning, metaphor can fulfill the dual function of enabling change and preserving continuity.

(f) Creating Shared Understandings. Implementers often fail to see the central role of creating shared understanding about a change event. They assume that others' values and perceptions naturally match their own and this may lead them to make hasty decisions without regard to the symbolic impact of their actions. In turn, they may likely be unaware of the responses to their actions. Managers must be attuned to the organization's cultural values in order to locate both facilitators and inhibitors of change. Failure to understand the multiple and possibly divergent beliefs within the culture will likely amount to increased resistance if not sabotage or outright rejection of the proposed changes (Morgan, 2001).

(g) Expression of Strategic Vision and Intent. Managers construct the priorities and parameters of change at senior levels of the organization, through an expression of strategic vision and intent (Pitt, 2001). Intent can be conceived and captured in quite parsimonious and holistic terms by means of expressive action metaphors. It is obvious that in order to develop organizations in accordance with the mental models of senior managers, other members need to capture their conceptions of intent comprehensively and economically.

(h) Achieving Cognitive Reorientation. Strategic change involves in essence a cognitive reorientation of the organization. The success of strategic change efforts depends not only on the organization's ability to undergo a shift in direction, vision and values, but also the ability of stakeholders to understand and accept a new conceptualization of the organization. To achieve this both language and action and sometimes planned inaction are symbolic.

Limitation of Metaphor - Promoting a Constrained View

While metaphors direct attention to certain interpretations of situations, they may draw attention away from others. Use of a metaphor can become persuasive by not representing alternative formulations and subtly repressing alternatives. Interpretations of metaphors may be so selective that they may promote a narrow and constrained view or course of action. This can curb innovativeness in organizations as people will not think and act out of the metaphorical 'box'. Key metaphorical images that name a situation are known as generative metaphors because in naming a situation, metaphors frame the situation and then set the problem.

Boland and Greenberg (1988) give the example of how a product development team was assigned the task of improving the product. The original generative metaphor was provided by naming the product as 'brush'. This set the problem as of brushing paint onto a surface and how paint clung on to the bristles before being rubbed off to the surface. Later, a more productive generative metaphor was introduced by saying that the brush was like a 'pump'. This shifted the attention away from the bristles and how paint would stick to it. Renaming the situation set the problem in a different way and suggested different relationships and functions as the key ones to consider. While the generative power of metaphor is important for all, the fact that it promotes a constraining view must not be lost sight of.

In the following sections, we look at some of the ways that metaphors have been used for organizational analysis and change.

I. Imposing Metaphorical Resonance for Organizational Change

Organizational Development practitioners, attempt making changes in organizations by encouraging managers to eliminate, replace or control organizational metaphors. Organizational members too can make a mistake of borrowing metaphors from popular management literature and try to impose it in their organizations without discovering ground realities.

Practitioners need to recognize the fact that language shapes how we see and make sense of the world and therefore study of the language in existence in organizations is essential before any metaphorical prescription is suggested. If managerial change ideology is imposed, the dominant change language tends to uphold preferred ways of designing and implementing change and at the same time, suppressing interests, opinions and discourses that fall outside the dominant agenda. Policies and practices adopted consistent with an imposed imagery may not always correspond to the actual needs in organizations and thus blind organizational members to other more suitable courses of action and could also lead to conflicting situations (Oswick et al, 2004; Morgan, 2001).

The Case of *"Turning off the Lights"*

Illes and Ritchie(1999) warn that while evoking the appropriate metaphor can be a powerful force for transformational change, those who attempt to manipulate metaphors as a way of influencing behavior should be aware that such intervention can backfire and cynicism, mistrust and counter-metaphors can produce the opposite impact from the desired strategy. Illes was herself a Human Resources Manager of a semiconductor manufacturing plant that used the euphemistic terminology of *'turning off the lights'* to refer to the plant closure. The metaphor of turning off the lights became a dominant theme and many employees were angered whenever the metaphor was used as if the process of downsizing 1000 people was as simple as flicking a switch. The metaphor reinforced the gulf between the management and employees and robbed the employees of a sense of dignity and humanity. The corporate management was perceived by employees as the enemy as the press used the metaphor of 'handing out pink slips' even though it was not the actual practice. The externally imposed metaphors failed to resonate with those who experienced the plant closure first hand. A generous financial package to relocate, retrain, and set up placement services was offered by the management. The transition process became a metaphor of grieving as if there were a serious death or disease in the family. Employees who were more receptive to the grieving process metaphor were the ones who became more proactive in dealing with the necessary business of reemployment. This metaphor became transformational to many employees in its power to move them beyond their current predicament to a future filled with hope and possibility. Unfortunately, some employees used the metaphor only to focus on the grieving process, and for them, it became a negative cue.

Illes points out how metaphors can have both intended and unintended effects. The metaphor of turning off a switch was intended to communicate a "business as usual" message, but unintendedly, also trivialized a traumatic event and alienated those affected from those who weren't. The "pink slips" metaphor was externally imposed by the media and intended to promote sympathy to a common plight but unintendedly perpetuated a false notion that did not correspond to reality. Illes and Ritchie (1999) found that if a metaphor is evoked too frequently or glibly, organizational constituents will sense they are being manipulated and respond accordingly. There will always be those who remain apart from the effects of organizational metaphor and associated vision but if metaphor aligns with the values and objectives of most constituents, it can be a powerful agent of change. Organizational metaphor is rarely neutral. Thus, success of organizational change can hinge on the appropriateness and shared acceptance of a given metaphor.

Therefore, in organizational analysis, metaphorical imagery is not something to be imposed on organizations. Such use of metaphors is called prescriptive and must be used only after deliberate diagnosis of organizations (Oswick et al, 2004). Thus this method needs to be used with caution.

II. Exposing Metaphorical Resonance in Organizations

The emphasis here is on exposing existent metaphors through scrutiny, analysis and interpretation of texts and conversations in organizations. By analyzing naturally occurring metaphors (emergent metaphors) in organizations, perceptions regarding a change event can be gathered. Congruence in metaphors may signal congruence in values and mismatched or conflicting metaphors may suggest the opposite. Congruence in change language might also point to the internalization of a dominant change rhetoric that leads to consent. This duality of interpretation can help change agents, who through studying metaphorical talk can identify various perspectives regarding change and then these perspectives can be used to develop a shared vision of the new organization that is reflective of the multiple interests in the change process. Thus, metaphors can be used to reveal, resist, or reform change ideologies in the organization (Morgan, 2001). By studying emergent metaphors, researchers can understand change events

and point to possible opportunities and pitfalls towards achieving success. Change agents can use the power of imagery to explain how emergent metaphors can direct thought, attitude, and in the end, action towards a mutually constructed goal. Examples of studies in exposing resonance are discussed below.

Research on Strategies of Announcement of Change

Smeltzer (1991) studied communication strategies for announcing organization –wide change within speech act theory framework in 43 organizations. He suggests that two factors, the nature of change and organizational dynamics, influence communication strategy which includes the message style, the channel and the time in which the message is sent. While analyzing textual data, he paid special attention to the use of metaphors. The managers were found to relate to an attitude consistent with the conduit metaphor. Common expressions in the data were "We told them", "We let them know", "They were kept informed", and "We don't keep any secrets." Common game metaphors were "new rules", "the score has changed", "it's a new game"," a new set of players" and "let them know the game plan". Organizations less effective in announcing change as well as top executives were found to use a large number of negative game metaphors. Also, organizations that had ineffective communication strategies used proportionately more similes implying that communication is like a conduit.

Example of Incongruent Metaphors

An example of incongruent metaphors in one of my researched cases was when the Union leader asserted, "*Management-union relationship is like a railway track; we need to keep consistent distance so that the train does not derail.*" At the same time, the management was stating, "Our attempt has always been to *reduce the distance between the management and the union, so that there is absolute convergence* in what both speak to the workers." A hidden tension emerges as the Union desires to balance its loyalties to the employees as well as to the Management. The management seeks absolute convergence while the Union sees a consistent distance from the management to maintain its identity. Unions have to tread a thin line to manage the right perception of fulfilling their role. This tension in the process between the Union and Management was managed through the use of metaphor of *collaboration* and *partnership* in communication.

III. Exposing Resonance through Root Metaphors

This approach is similar to exposing resonance but aims at identifying root metaphors in organizations. Root metaphors can unconsciously guide the thinking in organizations but can surface in the language used. Root metaphors can reveal current realities as well as future possibilities open to organizations. Multiple variations can evolve from a root metaphor. Growth firms can see their progress as a journey and organizations that consider themselves as a 'living organism' may talk of 'births' and 'deaths'.

Conflict at Disneyland

Smith and Eisenberg (1987) used the new interpretive methodology of root-metaphor analysis to study the symbolic and dynamic aspects of organizational conflict at Disneyland. They illustrate in their research how management and employees developed interpretive frameworks or world-views that were incompatible.

Eisenberg argues that researchers interested in motivating change in social systems should distinguish between first order change in overt attitudes and behaviors, and second order change, in orientation, world-view, and the rules of the game. World-views function similar to group ideologies in that they constrain what count as legitimate topics for thought and action and can thus repress differences that remain latent over a long period of time. Identifying world views through root metaphor analysis can enable us to anticipate, understand, and address second order conflicts through understanding the underlying reasons of the conflict.

This study of Smith and Eisenberg (1987) illustrates that sometimes, the production and consumption of metaphors can also result in dissonance and ambiguity leading to conflict. In this case, the management and employees of Disneyland, operated from different metaphorical positions. The management's root metaphor of Disneyland as a 'drama' clashed with the employee's metaphor of it as a 'family' leading to resistance to layoffs, which the labor regarded as violation of the 'family' metaphor. When underlying metaphors are different, conflict can arise over how to do and what to do. People may fight over causes and cures to the problem without realizing that their differing and unexpressed metaphorical reasoning may prevent them from understanding each other

'Butcher' and 'Baker' Strategies in Indian Companies

This researcher (Kumar, 2008) undertook a metaphorical analysis of communication in the downsizing process of two large Indian manufacturing companies – one in the private sector and one in the public sector. Metaphors in use during the entire change process were explicated. Both the companies studied faced similar challenges of survival and finally achieved successful turnaround albeit in different ways. While the metaphors of *survival* and *performance* were used in both cases, the execution strategies differed.

It was found that the actions of the company in the private sector coincided with the 'butcher' strategy (Reich, 1993, 1994, cited in Dunford and Palmer, 1996) which is one that emphasizes cutting away the fat. Pulling out of non-core businesses was regarded as critical by the MD of this Company. Faced with a Union whose actions were governed by the metaphor of *Rebellion*, the management adopted the *Military* metaphor to achieve its business goals. Many *battlefronts* were opened up. Both sides *bled*. The Union gave in to the *siege* but not without extracting a heavy price through a *truce*. Post downsizing, the metaphor of *rebellion* continued to guide the Union's actions, albeit at a very small scale due to massive reduction in their own ranks.

On the other hand, the public sector Company saw the downturn as an opportunity for improvement and used an aggressive strategy leading to enhanced competitiveness. A Government approval for restructuring was regarded as a *breather* in the Company's *'journey towards profitability'*. In contrast to the 'butcher' strategy, this public sector Company adopted a 'baker' strategy' (Reich, 1993, 1994, cited in Dunford and Palmer, 1996), which involved enhancing the value of all ingredients leading from a staid public sector culture to a competitive culture of private enterprise. The root metaphors of Journey, Growth and Family guided its downsizing process. The Chairman of the Company described the process as wringing a wet towel dry to mean extraction of innate potential and capacity.

The baking metaphor meant that more attention was directed towards actions such as employee involvement, profit sharing, training and employment security. Such an approach has been highly correlated with competitive success. The public sector company focused on the strategy of regeneration of the organization in which reduction of manpower was just one of the elements.

Conclusion

Metaphor is a flexible analytical tool that can be used to understand an organizations culture and to evoke change in past practices. What metaphor one should use for social analysis is not a matter of how valid or appropriate the metaphor is in describing reality, but rather how useful it is in discovering it. The acid test of whether a particular metaphor can be useful in understanding organizations is what organizational insights the use of an analogy yields for understanding a phenomenon (Mangham and Overington, 1987). The key is to first identify, discover and analyze metaphors in contextual action in organizations. It is only after the resonance has been exposed through root metaphors, that reveal dominant ways of seeing and actions, can elimination, replacement or controlling of organizational metaphors be suggested. Such an approach can be useful in organizational problem solving and catalyzing organizational change.

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