The Power of Metaphors to Transform Teams
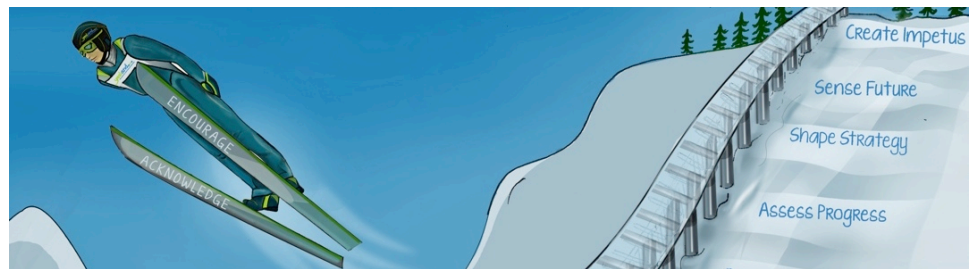
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Yes! And...

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How metaphors can help you to think more creatively when working with teams.

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Great creative leaders (witness Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech) use metaphor a great deal to illustrate, persuade and inspire. Metaphors influence how you think and how you act.

In this document, you will learn how to use metaphor and its structure. You will see how metaphors help shape your thinking and the thinking of others and how you can use them in practical ways in work and workshops.

Introduction

My colleague and I were running an interactive focus group to gauge people's reaction to a proposed training course on innovation. We had received a positive reaction but I was not convinced we were hearing all opinion. I asked if anyone had any concerns.

One of the group, an experienced manager, emitted an exasperated sigh and exclaimed, "Personally I think this course will be a waste of **###** time." That perked the group up a bit!

"What's your reason for stating that?" we asked. "Well, there's no money to do anything, even if we do come up with innovative ideas." He then used his hands to describe an obstacle in front of him. "The budget is a huge wall around us, it stops us doing anything."

We nodded, thanked him and noted his reaction; we weren't there to argue the case.

Driving home afterwards, I mused on what he had said. It was a great example of how people use metaphors to simplify and describe complex situations.

It was also an example of how the metaphors people use can influence how they approach a situation. From his point of view, it was not worth doing anything because the budget was finite, an "insurmountable obstacle" or at least one he seemed no longer willing to overcome.

"It was also an example of how the metaphors people use can influence how they approach a situation."

Although he may not have realised it, he had explained the issue in terms of a **conceptual metaphor** (*obstacle*) and **metaphorical linguistic expressions** (*the budget as a wall around him*); (*Concepts in green from: Zoltan Kovecses ~ "Metaphor: A Practical Introduction"*).

What relevance has this story to creative leaders and facilitators?

In summary, people, consciously or unconsciously use metaphor to:

- Make sense of complex and confusing situations (for example, their lives)
- Communicate their understanding (sense) of situations
- Work out how to tackle those situations

A definition of metaphor

The Oxford English Dictionary says a metaphor is: *"A figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity."*

Our manager, by referring to the budget as a wall, is helping to describe his situation to others. However, theorists, perhaps contradicting the OED, consider metaphor is more than a method of expression; *it is fundamental to how you think.*

Why use metaphor?

You are bombarded with information every day that you shape largely in terms of what you already know. Some of this is simple; you can categorise literally that the green matter outside your window is grass, that tall brown object is a tree, that object with four wheels, is a car. You have seen these objects before. However, you don't always have a literal reference, so, to reiterate,

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you may often use metaphor or analogy to help you:

- **Make sense of a situation**. "The Cuban missile crisis was the rutting of stags" (my metaphor), gives a sense of two powerful animals (the USA and USSR) in a battle over territory or a female (Cuba).

- At other times you may understand the situation but need metaphor to help you **communicate the situation in a simple way**. "The new manager is drowning" is not literally true (unless perhaps he/she works as a lifeguard), but does help you convey to another person that the manager is out of control. This allows the listener to share the image of the manager using your "filter" (the metaphor) and relate to it.

- Thirdly, you may use that metaphor as the basis to **tackle a situation** – e.g. your response to our drowning manager metaphor is, "Can we throw them a lifebelt?" Which perhaps, leads you to offer them coaching.

- One other factor we have found helpful when coaching and facilitating is to have people express themselves through metaphor because to **discuss a situation**

through metaphor can be less emotive than discussing the literal situation, as if it removes the "you" from the situation.

For a diversion, here are two examples from the arts, of using metaphor to communicate:

Example 1:

Emeli Sande in her song River sings metaphorically of her unrequited love for someone: *"I'll be your river, river, I'll move the mountains for you."* She may have moved people at the London Olympics but don't expect to see her literally shifting mountains anytime soon.

Example 2:

Witness this poem by Winthrop Aldrich (Artificial Poetry ISBN 0 – 934276 – 02 – 1):

An irreverent gardener once, for a fee,
Contracted to edit an evergreen tree;
So he struck off some branches to polish the style,
And fixed up the syntax, but after a while
It shed all its needles, and withered, and died.
The gardener weathered the blow to his pride,
Though he knew 'twas his editing had, by some quirk,
*Constrained the tree's Author to withdraw his work.*

How might you interpret this poem? Perhaps he had his work badly edited at some time, or is the gardener a manager, easily capable of destroying people's work through poor skills or bullying.

This ability to express alternative concepts is both a strength and weakness of metaphors.

The structure of metaphors

Conceptual metaphor

I joined the British Royal Air Force at sixteen as an apprentice and left eleven years later as a Corporal. In terms of rank, I did not *progress very far*. Yet when I started civilian work, *the pace of* my career picked up and after *overcoming some obstacles* I *reached my goal* of attaining a certain level within the organisation. On *reaching my goal,* I felt my life was *at a crossroads* and eventually I *took the path* of running my own company.
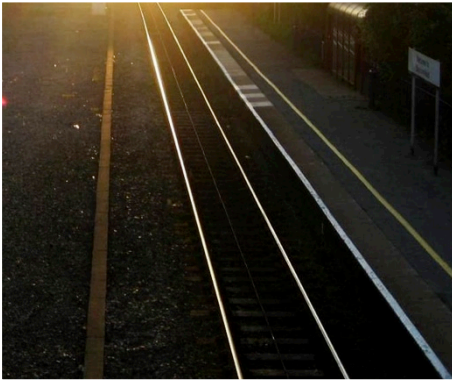
I use that description of my career as an example of one aspect of the structure of metaphor. "Life as a journey" is an example of a CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR (that is, the internal idea behind the metaphor).

Another example is Nelson Mandela's book "Long Walk To Freedom", which depicts his life as a journey.

Lakoff and Johnson in their book "Metaphors We Live By" identify other classic CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS such as Argument is war; Love is a journey; Theories are buildings; Ideas are food.

What conceptual metaphor did the manager use when describing his budget?

Linguistic Expressions.

We express these conceptual metaphors in METAPHORICAL LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS, how the internal idea can be externalised in words. For examples, refer to the italicised phrases in the paragraph on my career describing "life as a journey." Or think of "the wall."

Other examples from *Lakoff and Johnson* are:

ARGUMENT IS WAR

- He attacked her argument
- I've never won an argument with her
- If you use that argument, he'll wipe you out
- He outflanked her opening argument

IDEAS ARE FOOD

- The paper has raw facts and half baked ideas
- I can't swallow her proposals
- She devoured the article
- Let's put that idea on the back burner for now

Source and Target

Examining the metaphors above, you can begin to identify other aspects of metaphor, that of the SOURCE and the TARGET. In the cases above, "war" and "food" are the SOURCE and "argument" and "ideas" are the TARGETS. We map characteristics of war to an argument

Below, you can relate this concept to business by using the example of mapping the characteristics of a plant to an organisation.

You should note parallels between the characteristics of the plant and the organisation. Knowing this can help you later when you review a tool for using metaphors.

SOURCE: Plant	TARGET: Organisation
The whole plant	The organisation
The growth of the plant	The growth of the organisation
Pruning the plant	Reducing the organisation
Flowering	Reaching organisational targets
Not watering	Starving of resources
Fruit or crop	The benefits the organisation gains

How would you relate the SOURCE "Navigation" to the TARGET "Organisation"?

Other Features of Metaphor

Implicit and Explicit Metaphors

"His spirits soared every time they met." If this sentence strikes you as very positive,

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it is probably because of the implicit understanding that "good" is "up" and "bad" is "down" in Western culture (some metaphors apply globally whereas others vary). In brief, many of the metaphors people use are not easy to identify as metaphors. **Like "good is up" they are "implicit".**

Let's look at this in more detail. John Martin, in "Practical Thinking", (Open University course, sadly no longer in print) highlights the use of "manager" in business. A manager is a concept to which we are all accustomed. We literally manage. There is no metaphor there, is there? Why then are so many management related phrases to do with "hands" e.g. "I'm *handing* over responsibility"; "I can *handle* that situation"; "We should *grasp* this opportunity"; "We are within *reach* of a solution"; "The team were putty in her *hands*"?

Perhaps a clue is that the root of the word "manager" is the Latin word "manus" – a hand – as in manipulating something. Henry Mintzberg, *(management consultant and author)* made the IMPLICIT metaphor EXPLICIT when he compared the skills of a manager with those of a potter "shaping" the "clay" of an organisation.

The Context of Metaphor

Recall my sentence, "His spirits soared every time they met." You might interpret this as positive, he was pleased to see them; but what if his spirit soared because the other person was down on their luck? This gives a different interpretation and raises another important facet of metaphor: **metaphor can often only be understood correctly if those sharing it know the context**. Therefore you need to ensure that you have a shared context when using metaphor.

Linguistic and cognitive

We have said that metaphors form a large part of the way we communicate, both consciously and unconsciously hence *Lakoff* and *Johnson's* assertion that we should not make the mistake of thinking that metaphors are merely a linguistic device. Metaphors are fundamental to the way in which we think and reason.

Evidence of this can be seen in the work of Lawley and Tomkins (based on the work of David Grove) in which they use Symbolic Modelling model to help clients achieve change in their metaphorical perception of their world. In essence, the client describes metaphorical symbols (e.g. a wall) and forms a

metaphorical landscape that the client subsequently changes through questioning.

As *John Martin* says, "Metaphor is a point where psychology, scientific enquiry, literature, the arts and even religion all meet together. It is literally a (perhaps the) foundation of thinking."

So an understanding of how metaphors influence you and other people is important, especially when dealing with implicit metaphors that may influence thinking in a negative way. How does "up" is good and "down" is "bad" influence thinking in organisations? You might try to find an organisational chart with senior management positioned at the base, (outside of a customer service book).

In terms of your organisation, how might metaphor influence you and how might you use it?
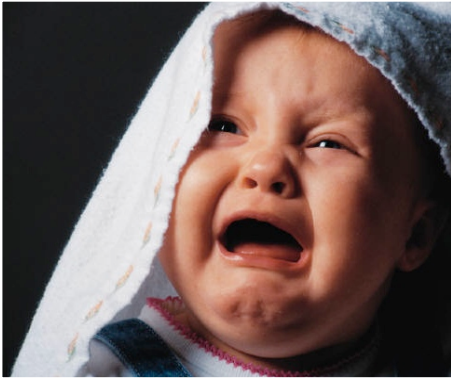
Another concept that Kovecses identifies is that of UNIDIRECTIONALITY. What this means is that a TARGET does not usually work as a SOURCE. Why is this? Kovecses says it is because the target is usually more abstract and the source more concrete (to use a metaphor). Saying "the Cuban missile crisis was the rutting of stags" is very different from saying "the rutting of stags is a Cuban missile crisis."

Therefore, we might say that **metaphors help us to make the abstract more concrete.**

For example, organisational climate might be an example of an abstract concept you might find easier to describe in metaphorical terms.

Is your organisation an Olympic Village (lots of team spirit and superb performers) or a bad night at the BRIT Awards (full of prima donnas and mayhem)?

Using metaphor in organisations

Organisational change

Having reviewed the basic structure of metaphors and their use, how might you as a creative leader or facilitator use them in an organisation?

Gareth Morgan in his work "Imaginization" explains that the metaphors social scientists used previously for organisations i.e. the machine and the organism, limited how people viewed the organisation. Why is this? Metaphors can help reveal a lot about situations but also limit what we can discover. Thus, if we see the organisation as an efficient machine, we may overlook that there is a climate of fear because the characteristics of a machine would not reveal this.

Morgan therefore added additional metaphors such as the "brain" and "instruments of domination" to the repertoire, but crucially was *"at pains to avoid asserting the supremacy of any given metaphor... because I want to encourage the reader to realise that there is no one metaphor... that is going to provide all of the answers... that we must forge our own understanding and interpretations of the issues we face."* In other words, devise a number of your own metaphors for your organisation to help describe it.

Example Use

How can this help creative leaders and facilitators? Imagine you run a function within an organisation. The CEO has requested a review of that function to understand what value it adds and how it might progress.

As a first step, you would like to know what your peers think about it and the way it might develop. You hold a workshop and you ask individuals to think of metaphors [SOURCE] that represent the function [TARGET] as it is today.

Next, you ask them to work with others and represent these metaphors in some way as a small group, perhaps by drawing, perhaps by telling a story or by acting them out.

In this step, you have the group explain the CONCEPT of their metaphors (there may be more than one), the associated characteristics of the concept and how these relate to your function.

We should note here that asking your peers to discuss "your baby" (your function) might be painful, especially if

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they see it as a "whingeing brat", but we need to understand what others truly think. The use of metaphor can be helpful in enabling people to express themselves freely.

Next, ask your peers to represent metaphorically the function working at the peak of its performance in the future and truly adding value. Again, you have them explain the **CONCEPT** of the metaphors, the associated characteristics and how they relate to your situation.

Let us post a health warning here. Metaphors are not in themselves going to make the changes you and the organisation desire but they will provide you with a number of different perspectives and may help remove some of the emotional blocks to change that exist.

Tackling Challenges

Metaphor can be used for organisational change but also in narrower areas of change. I developed a model (please see Page 9) for use with MBA students and have adapted it with experience.

It takes familiar concepts of metaphorical characteristics and applies them to our situation, but also asks, "How might we counter or enhance them?"

You can use the model on your own perfectly well, although using it with others tends to stimulate more ideas, builds involvement in the challenge and is often more fun. It has been used by scores of people on work challenges and usually works successfully, much to the surprise of the sceptical.

Example Use

The following shortened example of the model in action (please see Page 11) uses a real situation. In a previous role, my team had to transfer the operation of a telephone call centre to the US from the UK. We wanted to ensure the thirty staff in the UK found new jobs.

We set up a workshop with HR, team representatives, the team manager and me, using this model as a tool in the workshop on the challenge: "How can management and staff make it easier to find jobs for staff when the centre closes?"

The model is self-explanatory though P/N represents a Positive or a Negative characteristic. (You should balance negative & positive characteristics to ensure a balanced view).

You will note that the model works on similar principles to those discussed in the section on organisations. In this case, the **CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR** was "search" and we chose "finding a job is like a treasure hunt" (driving round the country in cars searching for "treasure") as our **LINGUISTIC METAPHORICAL EXPRESSION.**

It is better to use the model by working through column by column as this encourages divergent (creative) and convergent (judgement) thinking at appropriate times.

The advantage of using such a model is that it is systematic. It helps people who consider themselves methodical and "uncreative" (however irrational that belief) to conceptualise, but in a style with which they are comfortable.

HOW MIGHT YOU USE THIS MODEL TO EXPLORE THE "WALL" METAPHOR YOU READ ABOUT EARLIER?

As mentioned earlier, there is no **right** metaphor. The more metaphors you use, the more perspectives you will gain on the situation and the greater your chance of finding novel ideas.

One way to use this model in teams is to select different metaphors for the same challenge and have different teams work on them.

CRITICISM OF THE MODEL

One criticism of using the model (and metaphors) is that you may not reveal novel insights in to the situation. This is valid. No technique or tool can guarantee that, but the model does enable you to develop a lot of ideas from different perspectives very efficiently.

To Close

In Morgan's words "metaphor is not just a literary or linguistic device for embellishing or decorating discourse. It is a primal means through which we forge our relationships with the world. Metaphor has a formative impact on language, on the construction and embellishment of meaning and on the development of theory and knowledge of all kind... The challenge is to become skilled in the art of seeing, understanding, interpreting and reading the situations we face."

As a creative leader and facilitator, you can use metaphors and similar devices to:

- Make sense of a situation
- Communicate the situation in a simple way
- Tackle situations
- Discuss situations less emotively
- Metaphors are fundamental to the way in which we think and reason.
- The structure of metaphors is:
- CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR - The internal idea behind the metaphor
- METAPHORICAL LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS – How you express these conceptual metaphors
- They have a SOURCE and a TARGET. A target does not usually work as a source, this is the principle of UNIDIRECTIONALITY
- They can help you describe a situation and so MAKE THE ABSTRACT MORE CONCRETE.
- You may not always realise that you are using metaphors, because metaphors can be IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT
- To truly understand metaphors, people must have a SHARED CONTEXT

- To use them more powerfully, YOU MUST USE SEVERAL METAPHORS to analyse a situation
- We trust this article will help you develop your teams and your organisations in creative and interesting ways so that, perhaps, you can help them put the ball over the competition's wall and into the net!

Contact Us

If you would like to discuss how you can transform teams or would be interested in a half-day workshop on using metaphors for team transformation, please contact us. See front page.

METAPHOR; SIMILE; ANALOGY?

There are other linguistic devices in the English language similar to metaphor, analogy and synonym being two. Although the theorists make distinction between these, in practical terms it can be useful if you do not get too concerned with correct usage as this poem explains:

Metaphor and simile
Like peas in a pod, at least to me.
We can argue, their similarity,
But let's not stoop to analogy.
Just use these tools as ways to see,

Your challenge more creatively.

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CHALLENGE: How can management and staff make it easier to find jobs for staff when the centre closes?			
Conceptual metaphor: Search		**Linguistic metaphor**: Finding a job is a treasure hunt	
CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH LINGUISTIC METAPHOR	P/N	**WHAT DOES THIS REVEAL ABOUT THE SITUATION?**	**HOW CAN WE COUNTER OR ENHANCE THIS?**
Some people don't arrive at the end until too late	N	Some people may not find jobs by the time of transfer	Be positive but honest about reality. Inject the need for action.
Some people like to mislead other seekers	N	This may get competitive	Emphasise helping each other. Share successful job finding strategies.
People argue as well as have fun	N	This is a stressful time for staff	Be around. Make the environment better. Celebrate people finding jobs.
There are lots of clues to enable you to finish	P	Staff may need information	Provide info packs. Find other call centres needing staff.

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