Addressing the Metaphorical Mess: A Model for Management Education?

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ABSTRACT

Metaphors are an integral aspect of management communication, education and training. Rhetorically, we use them with little or no thought. Cognitively, we have the option of sending strong or weak messages. One way or the other they direct and restrict our thinking for, as stated by Burrell (1996: 645), they (as well as paradigms, discourses and genealogies) are “incised lesions on the body of organizational life”. Their associated analysis is “the death or at least the mutilation of that which is analyzed”.

What are they? How are they applied to management? What is a ‘mess’? What is the metaphorical mess of management education? Is formulation (or addressing) of the mess a useful model for management education? Drawing upon the extensive literature on metaphors and its rich array of examples, such questions are explored and evaluated.

Keywords: metaphor, mess, management education, systems thinking
INTRODUCTION

Stroll through the historical mindscape of management education. You may first observe the manicured lawns and cultivated gardens of environments that were relatively simple and stable. Occasionally you may stumble into a godforsaken desert. Eventually you may find yourself exploring the dark forests and urban jungles of a more recent, complex and dynamic world. There will be boredom, beauty, wisdom and bewilderment. Over time the teachers and theorists in the changing panorama have offered no less.

It is worth our while not only to appreciate the strengths of conceptualisations of the past and present but also to understand their weaknesses. “Unless uncovered and dismantled, they [that is, misconceptions about reality that display self-fulfilling qualities] outmanoeuvre and outlive assaults aimed at uprooting them” (Gharajedaghi, 1999: 118).

The specific conceptualisation we will focus on will be the use of metaphors. We will consider what metaphors are, how they are applied to management, what a ‘mess’ is as defined by a systems thinker, how management education can be seen as a metaphorical mess, and whether formulation (or addressing) of the mess is a useful model in this context.

We seek a way forward.

WHAT METAPHORS ARE

What are metaphors (or what is metaphor, for they can be seen as scatterings or groupings of items or a single part of speech)?
Examples of definitions are: “A metaphor is a way of seeing a thing as if it were something else” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980); “A metaphor is the application of a descriptive form to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable” (Flood, 1999: 125); and metaphors involve “the transfer of images or ideas from one domain of reality to another” (von Glyczy, 2003: 88).

In each case there is an indication of a target domain (management of change, for example) and a source domain (Darwinian evolution, for example, as described in detail throughout his article by von Glyczy, 2003).

Metaphors, in terms of type, can be seen as rhetorical or cognitive (von Glyczy, 2003: 88). The former are conveyed (and received) with little thought and are typically well-used figures of speech like, indeed, “figures” of speech or, for example, taking a “broad brush” approach to an activity. The latter require deeper thought. For example, in Gods of Management: The Changing Work of Organizations, Charles Handy (1995) uses Zeus (the leader or king of the gods), Apollo (the god of order and reason), Athena (the warrior goddess) and Dionysus (the god of wine and song) to symbolize different ways of managing the cultures that exist in organizations. The cultures that attach to each god in turn are the “club” or entrepreneurial culture (typical of a small business), the “role” or bureaucratic culture (typical of a hierarchical pyramid-structured corporation), the “task” or project-based culture (typical of a matrix-structured problem-solving culture such as an opportunistic advertising agency or information technology consultancy), and the “existential” or professional organization (such as a legal firm or university). The relatively profound message stemming from these cognitive metaphors is that different gods and cultures are needed for different tasks.

Cognitive metaphors are “food for thought for” (a rhetorical metaphor), and the “real business of” (another rhetorical metaphor), management training and education.
METAPHORS FOR MANAGEMENT

Metaphorically, management and its contexts can be represented in diverse ways. For example, it can be a military operation or a grouping of symbiotic partnerships. Its organizational structures can be pyramid shaped or seen as global and cellular, changing and pulsating in dynamic fashion. The possibilities and preferences are as wide, broad and deep as the human imagination.

Not surprisingly, then, the use of metaphor in literature on management and organization has been accompanied by numerous books and articles of analysis and comment (for example: Bolman and Deal, 1984; Brink, 1993; Burrell, 1996; Deetz, 1986; Deetz and Mumby, 1985; Fiol, 1994; Koch and Deetz, 1981; Krefting and Frost, 1985; Manning, 1979; Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1993; Pepper, 1995; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982; Pondy, 1983; Putnam et al., 1996; Stohl, 1995; von Glyczy, 2003). Clearly, the topic is taken seriously.

Morgan’s book, Images of Organization (1986), stands out as a classic in the field. As indicated by Burrell (1996: 652), “its influence in teaching has been considerable, for the text and the notion of metaphors generally has become a key organizing principle for many courses”. Morgan indicated in his book that key categorizations of metaphors for management include machines, organisms, cultures, psychic prisons, brains, political systems, and instruments of domination.

Often, in management education and practice, the metaphors have been macho. Bierck (2000) has identified three types of such metaphors: expeditionary, military (or martial), and sports. For example, in achieving a goal we might “knock the bastard off” (like Sir Edmund Hillary with Tensing Norgay in relation to Mount Everest), or “win a battle if not the war”, or “hit a competitor for six”.

Also from a macho or masculine perspective, metaphors can be instrumental and precious as indicated in the title of Murphy’s book, Studs, Tools, and the Family Jewels: Metaphors Men Live By (2001).
Despite an apparent proliferation of macho conceptualizations, feminine metaphors for management and organization have held some sway. For example, pet projects are sometimes conceived of as “my baby” or “your baby” and Rosabeth Moss Kanter trips the light fantastic in various ways in her well-read and highly regarded book *When Giants Learn to Dance* (1989). Occasionally, too, people and firms are “seduced” into partnerships and there is a “nurturing” of relationships.

**A MESS**

A *mess* is “a system of problems”. It is the future implicit in the present behaviour of a system, “the consequence of the system’s current state of affairs”. Formulate it effectively and you can make “a convincing case for fundamental change and set the stage for effective redesign” (Gharajedaghi, 1999: 118-119).

Formulation of a mess, according to Gharajedaghi (1999: 118-128), is a three-stage iterative process involving:

- Analysis of the system in terms of its environment, structure, process, function, obstructions, and dynamics
- Mapping of interdependent thematic relationships
- Story-telling of the current reality and its implications for the future.

Management education as it is at present is a mess in the Gharajedaghian sense. If it can be better formulated it stands to reason that it will be more effective in terms of appropriate cognitive, affective and behavioural change in learners. Why not, then, from teaching and learning perspectives, take the opportunity to focus on improvement in metaphorical usage? Why not identify metaphorical usage at
each mess formulation stage and throughout each iteration with an eye to appropriateness, refinement
or substitution for the way forward to effective systemic redesign?

FORMULATION OF THE MESS

First, let us put the focus on cognitive rather than rhetorical metaphors. The reason for this is that
they provide us with an eye to discovery and learning. In addition to Handy’s example above, let us
explore the example of the strategic process in business being akin to the deliberations and activities
that go into wine making. As explained by Eccles and Nohria (1992: 111):

> Expert wine makers are the world’s most underrecognized strategists: they deal with
contingencies from start to finish, they make an enormous number of different judgments –
and yet, when all is said and done, they produce a wine with distinctive identity almost year
after year. How do they do it? To begin with, good wine makers think in terms of situations
rather than formulas. There are unending, path-dependent decisions that wine makers must
manage with good situational judgment as their main strategic weapon. In fact, Michel
Lafarge, one of the most respected wine makers from France’s Burgundy region, has been
described as liking to change his entire strategy of fermentation in order to meet the specific
conditions of each growing season: “You must ask yourself each year, ‘What type of
vinification will bring quality?’ Each year we vinify differently and may change the length or
vary the temperatures.”

Consistent with the thematic step of mess formulation, Eccles and Nohria’s message is that
approaches to wine making and strategic decision-making in business are much the same. In both
cases there are many factors to be taken into account and the decisions depend on particular sets of
circumstances. Trial and error is very much a part of both processes. They state (op. cit.): “Choices
are constantly made, each one adding in some way to an identity that, like individual identity, is
always a work-in-progress.” Such is the substance of meaningful management education.

Second, let us appreciate that cognitive dissonance is not a bad thing. It is suggested by von Glyczy
(2003: 90-91) that it is important to look for “fault lines” while mapping target and source elements.
These indicate points of difference between the two sets of elements. For example, if we revisit
Handy’s metaphors above, we can agree that it is useful to compare Greek gods with leaders or
managers but also that Greek gods are not the same as modern-day leaders or managers. Zeus, Apollo, Athena and Dionysus had powers and privileges that will never be shared precisely by the authority figures and administrative facilitators of today’s enterprises and cultures. Zeus could throw real thunderbolts; a metaphorical equivalent is the best real-life leaders and managers can offer. In the words of von Glyczy (2003: 90, 88): “Metaphors can be good or bad, brilliant or poorly conceived, imaginative or dreary – but they cannot be ‘true’.” And: We should look for “troubling differences” rather than “reassuring parallels” – “cloudy metaphors to explore rather than clear models to follow”.

Of critical importance is the recognition that a metaphor is not a model. “The model represents closure at the end of a search for validity; the metaphor is an invitation to embark on a road of discovery” (von Glyczy, 2003: 90). For example, Kolb (Kolb et al., 1976) has developed a model of the experiential learning cycle in which there is a process of four stages – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Metaphorically, we might suggest that the stages fit the attributes and preferred organizational cultures of the Greek gods selected by Handy – perhaps in the matching order of Apollo, Dionysus, Zeus, and Athena. In the case of a model, the aim would be to find a perfect fit between behaviour studied in real environments. If it were less than perfect, we’d look to change the model. In the case of a metaphor, the aim would be to test the fit and recognize both the good aspects and the discrepancies. If the fit were “good enough”, most likely we’d stick with the metaphor. If it were really bad (and that could well be the case in the example of the Greek gods and Kolb’s model), only then would we feel the need to seek a new metaphor. Such would be the iterative considerations in our formulation of the mess.

In terms of management education, a key teaching point is that “Models and metaphors don’t compete with one another for relevance; they complement each other” (von Glyczy, 2003: 90). However, it is important to keep in mind - consistent once again with our iterative process - that the situation is
dynamic, not static. The use of metaphor may question the relevance of a model and lead to a new conceptualization. Also, a bad fit of metaphor to model might demand a new choice or set of choices.

Another point of note is that binocular vision can be used as an integrating metaphor. “Two metaphors taken together can provide a better picture of the reality under investigation than a single metaphor” (Morgan, cited in Burrell, 1996: 652). For example, Mintzberg (1998) compares managers of professionals with the conductor of an orchestra. Based on the conclusion that knowledge workers and orchestra members respond to inspiration and not supervision, he surmises, “Maybe it is time for conventional managers to step down from their podiums, get rid of their budgeting batons, and see the conductor for who he or she really is.” In another example, Sergiovanni (1995: 127) sees a manager of professionals (a school principal, specifically, in this instance) as “a leader of leaders, follower of ideas, minister of values, and servant to the followership”. His metaphor is “leader as servant” or “leader as minister”. By comparing and contrasting the metaphors of orchestra conductor and minister (source domains) with manager of professionals (target domain) we provide ourselves with the opportunity of developing an integrated and holistic conceptualization of the manager. (It may lead, also, to different views of the conductor and minister. The former may be seen, for example, as less dictatorial and the latter as more directive.)

Further, in recognizing that the power of metaphors lies in their communication between people, it is suggested that education in their use be presented as two phases involving a shift from an individual to a group perspective. First, a good cognitive metaphor exists as the oscillation between two domains within a single mind. As put by Hirsch and Andrews (1983) this can be understood as a system of beliefs about figure and ground relationships which serve to highlight certain features while suppressing others. In the second phase, as the cognitive metaphor matures, it takes the form of an oscillation of ideas among many minds.
Finally, it is proposed that metaphors for management can and should be mixed. As indicated by von Glyczy (1993: 94), “While it may be bad literary style to mix one’s metaphors, no such stricture exists in cognitive pursuits.”

The mixing of metaphors is consistent with pluralist perspectives (Morgan, 1986), binocular vision (ibid.) and the suggested training process of Flood (1999). It fits, also, with an ongoing critical perspective. Fulop and Linstead (2004: 5) emphasize that learning about management requires such a perspective and is guided by four key processes of inquiry:

1. Identifying and challenging assumptions;
2. Developing an awareness of the context in which management ideas have evolved historically, culturally and socially;
3. Always seeking alternative ways of seeing situations, interpreting what is going on, understanding why an organization is configured the way it is, and speculating about the way the organization could be managed differently and in ways that disrupt routines and established order;
4. Being appropriately sceptical about what one hears and reads about management.

The processes, compatible with formulation of the mess of management education, are iterative.

**APPROPRIATE USAGE**

In line with the literature on the topic, and in the interests of ongoing formulation of the mess and redesign of management education, metaphors should be offered as examples of good practice when:

- They are an invitation to embark on a road to discovery. For example, a well-chosen metaphor might see a context of management as “permanent white water” rather than a tranquil environment. Vaill (cited in Sergiovanni, 1995: 43) indicates that such a metaphor was suggested to him by a manager who observed:
Most managers are taught to think of themselves as paddling their canoes on calm, still lakes. They are led to believe that they should be pretty much able to go where they want, when they want, using means that are under their control. But it has been my experience that you never get out of the rapids! There are lots of changes going on at once. The feeling is one of continuous upset and chaos.

- They can tie the familiar to the unknown (Hawkes, 1972). The familiar in this instance is the source domain and the unknown the target domain. For example, March (cited in Peters and Waterman, 1982: 7), introduced the “garbage can” as an organizational metaphor. As stated by Peters and Waterman:

  March pictures the way organizations learn and make decisions as streams of problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities interacting almost randomly to carry the organization toward the future. His observations about large organizations recall President Truman’s wry prophecy about the vexations lying in wait for his successor. “He’ll sit here,” Truman would remark (tapping his desk for emphasis), “and he’ll say, ‘Do this! Do that!’ And nothing will happen. Poor Ike – it won’t be a bit like the army. He’ll find it very frustrating.”

- They can link abstract constructs to concrete things (Ortony, 1979). For example, creative decision-making (the target domain) may be linked to a supermarket of ideas (the source domain).

- They can legitimate actions, set goals, and guide behaviours (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). For example, from the metaphorically organic perspective of a teacher, Ashton-Warner (1980: 197) justified her approach to teaching when she stated:

  By “organic” I mean that way of growth where the strongest thing pushes up ahead of the less strong. I think of trees growing in a clump. The strongest get to the light. In speaking of a child’s mind I mean the strongest impulses push up, irrespective of whether or not they should, at a given time. Making the behaviour of the children anything but an ordered one in the conscious meaning of the term “order”. I call it the abstract order because the pattern it makes is so mixed up, so unpredictable. That’s how I come to relate the terms “abstract” and “organic”. They are associative. “Natural” includes them both.

- They can facilitate the creation and interpretation of social reality (Putnam et al. 1996). For example, organization was (and is) conceived by Australian aborigines as “a maze of one-dimensional lines that were [and are] sung” by members of the group in turn (Chatwin, cited in
Peters, 1992: 373). Also, cultural anthropology can be used as a way of understanding the adoption of new technology (Clarke, cited in Davenport and Prusak, 2003: 46).

- They can shape how we see and make sense of the world. This involves an orientation of our perceptions, conceptualisations, and understanding of one thing in light of another (Putnam et al. 1996). For example, employees use metaphors such as families, zoos, savage tribes, and sporting games to depict their own organizations (Deetz, 1986; Koch and Deetz, 1981).

- They are powerful catalysts for generating new strategies. Eccles and Nohria’s (1992: 111) consideration (described above) of the strategic process in relation to wine making is an example. Another is the perception that “organizational design is more like locating a snow fence to deflect the drifting snow than like building a snowman” (March, cited in Peters and Waterman 1982: 107). Yet others are thinking about networked intelligence as insect colonies (von Glyczy, 2003: 87) and about organizational structure and communication channels as a spider’s web (Quinn et al., 1996).

- Overall, they facilitate theory building by examining images at multiple levels of analysis (Putnam et al., 1996: 377). For example, Stafford Beer developed theory relating to organizational purpose, function and structure in terms of the human mind and body in Brain of the Firm (1972), Heart of the Enterprise (1979), and Diagnosing the System for Organizations (1985).

CONCLUSION

Metaphors are an integral aspect of management communication, education and training. Rhetorically, we use them with little or no thought. Cognitively, we have the option of sending strong or weak messages. One way or the other they direct and restrict our thinking.
In seeking a way forward, it is suggested that we formulate the mess of metaphorical usage in management education. In doing this we should put the focus on cognitive rather than rhetorical metaphors, look for fault lines while mapping target and source domains, and appreciate that a metaphor is not a model. In the interests of effective teaching and learning, we should use binocular vision, apply both individual and group metaphorical perspectives, mix our metaphors, and have models and metaphors complement each other.

We are informed by Gharajedaghi (1999: 118) that:

The obstructions that prevent a system from facing its current reality are self-imposed. Hidden and out of reach, they reside at the core of our perceptions and find expression in mental models, assumptions, and images. These obstructions essentially set us up, shape our world, and chart our future. They are responsible for preserving the system as it is and frustrate its efforts to become what it can be.

Accordingly, in exploring the mindscape of management education, there is a compelling case to be made for formulation of the metaphorical mess, among other factors, as the basis for redesign.
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