

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2020.056.003](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2020.056.003)

DOMAGOJ HRUŠKA

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia

LEADING WITH PURPOSE: FRAMEWORK FOR RECONTEXTUALIZING ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH METAPHORS

Abstract:

This paper is based on the assumption that the concept of organization and explanation of organizational life relies heavily on the foundation of metaphorical description. With the use of metaphors, leaders can simulate theories of action and find solutions for organizational problems. We propose that the sensemaking process is influenced by one element of flow of experience that is used for recognition of existing meaning as well as for construction of novel meaning. That element serves as a governing metaphor. Seen from the contextual perspective, the governing metaphor is the productive character of meaning construction that has a pivotal role in the problem solving process. This theoretical paper proposes four influences of metaphors in leading organizational change: they convey concentrated meaning, they provide incentives for sensemaking, they communicate novel perspective and finally determine level of strategic change. Further on, we argue that the process of extraction of the governing metaphor from flow of experience is conducted through the process of selective attention and propose an integrative model of change management based on leader's ability to recognize, extract and implement the novel governing metaphor.

Keywords:

Leadership, change management, governing metaphor, sensemaking

JEL Classification: M10, D23, M14

1. Introduction

The body of research on leader's influence on change management processes predominantly deals with the ways of making the transition more effective and efficient, through communication, building sense of community or reducing conflict and uncertainty. This paper, however, advocates utility of managerial cognition paradigm in understanding leader's role in organizational change.

We propose a model that answers the question in which way the leader is trying to influence one or more concepts of the organization's mental model. Looking from that perspective the fundamental issue of change management is whether the concepts are of central or peripheral importance to the creation of meaning. The elements of flow of experience that have pivotal role in organizational sense-making are called governing metaphors. The paper discusses crucial roles of these building blocks of understanding in organizational dynamics and proposes theoretical framework for use of metaphors in the process of making sense of the present situation as well as its role in generating novel meaning that lead to organizational change.

Answering this question is important because the ability to integrate new metaphors helps with the conceptualization of the task and is essential for people involved in leadership and organizational change.

2. Governing Metaphors as Organizational Symbols

Many authors have emphasized the use of metaphor, as a cognitive and heuristic device in organization studies (Morgan 1980, Morgan, Frost, and Pondy 1983, Tsoukas and Chia 2002, Cornelissen 2006, 2004, Weick 1989). All these theories of organization are based on implicit images or metaphors that stretch out imagination in an attempt to experiment with potentially helpful solutions.

In the process of mental model construction there are concepts that are central to the understanding and the ones which are of peripheral importance. In the heart of the mental model derived by the process of sensemaking is a single concept most intimately tied to others, crucial to the whole system of understanding and most anxiously guarded. The concept is a metaphor because it conveys seed of meaning that can flourish in numerous ways in the people's minds. It is called the governing metaphor.

There are two basic orientations in organizational research concerning the form of the methodological approach to the study of metaphor (Cornelissen et al. 2008). First one is cognitive or "de-contextual" approach to metaphor – it stresses that metaphors function as organizing principles of thought and experience. Second one tends to "contextualize" metaphors at their locally-specific uses and meanings as well as to their interaction with other elements of discourse. Most researchers use the "de-contextual approach" and deal with metaphors from the perspective of an organization as a consistent sense making arena (Morgan 1980, 2006, Putnam and Boys 2006, Palmer and Dunford 1996). This approach starts from notion how an organization's governing metaphor directs people to a specific kind of behavior and thinking. One can better understand organizations by recognizing that action theories are based on metaphors that prompt an individual to view the organization through a particular lens. For instance Morgan suggested that organizations are built on one of the following metaphors: machine, organism, brain, culture, political system, psychic prison, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination (Morgan, 2006).

3. Function of Metaphors in Leading Strategic Change

Metaphors convey concentrated meaning that gives them central position in the sense making process. In order to find the solution of the problem in hand, the leader can decide to experiment with metaphorical inputs of peripheral importance in the creation of meaning. The problem might be solved, but the meaning of the situation stays the same. On the other hand, the new metaphor can replace the very central notion of the situation's sense making process.

In organizational psychology this approach was explained in most detailed account in Karl Weick's 1989 article on theory construction by the use of what he calls "disciplined imagination" (Weick 1989, 516). Weick argues that people in organizations are both a source of variation and the source of selection in each instance of theory construction, or in other words - in each action they consider. In constructing theory, Weick suggested, people rely upon metaphors to provide them with incentives (mainly vocabularies and images) to make sense of the organizational phenomena. In their attempt to understand the situation in hand, people use their imagination by setting different metaphors in action in their cognitive apparatus. The metaphor is the vehicle through which imagination takes place and as a source for theoretical representations. The various metaphorical inputs are then further selected through the application of specific selection criteria and retained for further use. In an insightful manner Weick notes that such process of theory construction resembles the three processes of evolution: variation, selection and retention.

Metaphors have one more important role in organizational dynamics. Due to the fact that words are the poor medium for the transmission of meaning, metaphors represent the foundation of communication of novel perspectives to the organization members. Each situation is a part of the individual's world. If we acknowledge the constructivist perspective, we need to bear in mind that each "world" has its own language that the leader needs to "talk" to in order to influence the mental construction of the involved people. The leader must send his message in a form that is acceptable to all or at least to the most of the organization members. If this form were largely unambiguous large number of members of the organization would not be able to correspond with it. For this reason, the leader uses a form that each member of the organization can fit into his mental model - a metaphor. Metaphors allow people to focus at the desired direction but also to tolerate a sufficient level of flexibility in the interpretation, which is a prerequisite for the effective implementation of strategic change.

Lastly, by extracting single element from the flow of experience to serve as the governing metaphor, the leader is determining intensity of change that she is trying to convey on the organization. The governing metaphors of the existing conceptual structures are well known to all people that form the organization. They are referred to as "the way how things are done around here". The leader can address the problem solving situation without trying to change the governing metaphor. By influencing peripheral concepts of the organization's mental model, the leader is only adjusting the sense making process while its meaning remains unchanged. On the other hand, the leader can tackle the problem by enacting new governing metaphor, different than the character that formed the status quo mental representation. If that is the case, a new meaning of the situation in hand is generated which causes the creation of radically different mental model of the organization (Hruska, 2015).

4. Framework for Extracting the Governing Metaphor From the Social Context

Extraction of the governing metaphor from flow of experience is done through the process of selective attention. Attention is focused by our current goals and the goals by our overreaching theory of action - our purpose. In discussion of construction of understanding we have to take in consideration the context to which the governing metaphor is to be embedded. Since we deal with organizations, we deal with the most complicated perspective - social context.

The cue extracted as a sense building metaphor primarily depends on the context. The meaning of objects or an event cannot be found without a supplied context or vice-versa - we cannot recognize governing metaphor if we are not familiar with the context; in organizational setting, the social context.

In the lack of contextual background, the expressions bare equivocal or multiple meanings. Only within the specific context the interpretation can claim its meaning. That is especially true in the case of social context where it is the usual source of conflicts. Members of the organization have different interpretations of same events, due to the different contextual embedding they perceive. The perspective even changes in the dimension of time, so that one member of organization at first have one interpretation and then changes it. If the problem situation is such that the interpretation needs to be reconciled across the organization, the difference between interpretations is often the reason for political struggle.

Every action demands a governing metaphor. Decision is a call for action, which emerges in three cases: if an opportunity appears, if there is a threat or if there is a perceived disparity between the desired and the actual state. In each case the quest for a governing metaphor is stimulated by the failure to achieve the goals and continues until an adequate alternative is found. New alternatives are sought in the vicinity of old if a failure happens it only focuses the search. The pressure to find an adequate governing metaphor is often very high because the success would allow organizational sense making capacity move to other areas. March (1994) explains how this classic system of organizational search and decision-making enhances achievement of the objectives in three ways. Firstly, it adjusts performance to the objectives because the decision makers learn about what he should expect. Secondly, it adapts the performance against objectives through increased efforts in the pursuit in the case of failure and through reduction of efforts in the event of success. Finally, the organizational search for solutions adapts the performance against objectives in one more way - through a reduction of leniency towards poor results and through increase of leniency towards good results.

Novel governing metaphor arises from the process of selective attention which is directed to the leader's goal. In respect to the purpose we are trying to achieve we look at the elements of our environment wither as tools that can help us as obstacles that hinder achievement of our goal. There are two ways in which we can look at the genesis of the loadstar – it can be either involuntary or deliberate kind of activity.

Involuntary metaphor extraction is the one where the leader is not actively occupied in trying to breach flow of experience in an attempt to extract the governing metaphor. This kind of process Starbuck and Milliken (1988) call noticing. Noticing comprises activities of filtering, classifying and comparing. It is informal, involuntary process of metaphor extraction. Attention primarily orients us to the situational or personally primed concepts. In order words, we notice things that are novel, unexpected, extreme, as well as stimuli relevant to our current goals.

On the other hand, the allocation of a governing metaphor from the entire flow of experience sometimes is based on a premeditated process, either on the process of search (Cyert and March 1963) or on the process of scanning (Daft and Weick 1984). Search and especially scanning are more deliberate and hence more under control of preconceptions.

These two ways of extracting cues from flow of experience differ from the perspective of intensity but not from the perspective of consciousness. As such, they are less open to invention than genesis of the metaphor trough the process of noticing. It is so because deliberate search for alternatives is an important but challenging part of the thinking skill set. It acts contrary to the natural tendency of the mind. The natural tendency of the mind refers to determination and arrogance. The goal of a mind is to recognize the situation and take steady action. A multitude of alternatives means that the action is inhibited because the mind finds it discouraging to move simultaneously in the several directions.

In respect to the difference between scanning and noticing we should note that the prerequisite for successful scanning is development of specific “climate” which encourages

generation of new solutions. The decision maker can create a context in which it is desirable to actively and systematically search for new solutions. Otherwise, at the organizational level, the search and scanning boils down to noticing.

Finally, after the process of creation of governing metaphor it goes through the process of testing. This process might be called the evolutionary pattern of development of novel mental representations. After the decision maker notices a new governing metaphor through the process of selective attention he can put it in the organizational agenda for confirmation. Members of the top management team then search for clues to confirm the initial loadstar. If the loadstar is confirmed, the entire organization strives for its confirmation by the process of scanning for beneficial cues – the strong identity means that the basic beliefs are often reaffirmed. In other words, search and scanning are processes that we use not only to find new organizational metaphors, but also to confirm metaphor set by the leaders. From that perspective, all organizational activity consists of validating the governing metaphor.

5. Conclusion

The paper offers novel framework of recognizing and extracting metaphors in the change management process. The metaphor is the vehicle through which imagination takes place and as a source for theoretical representations. The various metaphorical inputs are then further selected through the application of specific selection criteria and retained for further use. Metaphors convey concentrated meaning that gives them central position in the sense. Also, they represent the foundation of communication of novel perspectives to the organization members. Metaphors allow people to focus at the desired direction but also to tolerate a sufficient level of flexibility in the interpretation, which is a prerequisite for the effective implementation of strategic change.

The paper proposes that the key to leading successful change management process is in leader's ability to extract, upgrade and implement novel governing metaphor. The governing metaphor has a twofold role in the leadership process - the task of organizing activities towards the single purpose, and the task of enabler for receiving, noticing and sending information. These two aspects are associated because focused activity opens room for noticing (or rather extracting) elements from the flow of experiences that affirm the governing metaphor. In that way the proposed framework gives insight to the both key processes of change - understanding of the status quo and articulating the future.

From the perspective of possible future research problems that we have not tackled in the proposed change management framework we can emphasize a fact that a metaphor in the leadership process is giving meaning to the emotional content they bear. Emotions and contradictions that are necessarily embedded in the metaphors can represent a source of motivation for members of the organization as well as an arena which needs to be put in order (which demands sense making activity) (Nonaka and Yamanouchi 1989). Further discussion on this issues would be a worthwhile attempt since the key leader's roles in change management is to utilize the emotional content of metaphors to instill faith in novel meaning that she strives to enact.

6. References

Cornelissen, Joep P. 2004. "What are we playing at? Theatre, organization, and the use of metaphor."

Organization Studies 25 (5):705-726.

- Cornelissen, Joep P. 2006. "Metaphor and the Dynamics of Knowledge in Organization Theory: A Case Study of the Organizational Identity Metaphor." *Journal of Management Studies* 43 (4):683-709.
- Cornelissen, Joep P., Cliff Oswick, Lars Thøger Christensen, and Nelson Phillips. 2008. "Metaphor in organizational research: Context, modalities and implications for research—introduction." *Organization Studies* 29 (1):7-22.
- Cyert, Richard M., and James G. March. 1963. *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*. Englewood Cliffs: NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Daft, Richard L., and Karl E. Weick. 1984. "Toward a Model of Organizations as Interpretation System." *Academy of Management Review* 9:284-295.
- Hruška, Domagoj. 2015. *Radical Decision Making: Leading Strategic Change in Complex Organizations*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- March, G., James. 1994. *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen*. New York: The Free Press.
- Morgan, Gareth, Peter J. Frost, and Louis R. Pondy. 1983. "Organizational Symbolism " In *Organizational Symbolism*, edited by L. R. Pondy, P. J. Frost, G. Morgan and T. C. Dandridge, 24. Greenwich: CT: JAI.
- Morgan, Gareth. 1980. "Paradigms, Metaphors, and Puzzle Solving in Organization Theory." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 25:605-622.
- Morgan, Gareth. 2006. *Images of Organization*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Nonaka, Ikujiro, and Teruo Yamanouchi. 1989. "Managing Innovation as a Self-renewing Process." *Journal of Business Venturing* 4:299-315.
- Palmer, Ian, and Richard Dunford. 1996. "Conflicting Uses of Metaphors: Reconceptualizing Their Use in the Field of Organizational Change." *The Academy of Management Review* 21 (3):691-717.
- Putnam, Linda L., and Suzanne Boys. 2006. "Revisiting Metaphors of Organizational Communication The SAGE Handbook of Organization Studies." In *The SAGE Handbook of Organization Studies*, edited by S. Clegg, C. Hardy, T. Lawrence and W. Nord, 541-577. London: Sage Publications.

Starbuck, William H., and Frances J. Milliken. 1988. "Executives` Perceptual Filters: What They Notice and How They Make Sense." In *The Executive Effect: Concepts and Methods for Studying Top Managers* edited by D. C. Hambrick, 35-65. Greenwich: CT: JAI.

Tsoukas, Haridimos, and Robert Chia. 2002. "On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change." *Organization Science* 13 (5):567-582.

Weick, Karl E. 1979. *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.