

Turned on or Switched Off by Metaphors?

By Alan Cattell

At this moment in time I'm sitting in my study on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales in the United Kingdom looking out through the window and down the valley, on a world which is silent.

It's a Saturday, a day of relaxation and reflection after the rigours of a busy week at work (aren't they always!) I'm warm and energised. Yet, outside it's raining, cold and windy. Picturesque some might call it. English Spring in all its glory the more cynical would term it. However I have a sense of sanctuary and peace.

Yet the world can still invade my sanctuary despite having locked the door behind me on the outside world. The morning news on television captures a world of foot and mouth disease, train fare increases, volatile world money markets, conflict in Macedonia and more.

In the unpredictable world, we live in, a series of simple metaphors are used to describe what is happening to the shape and structure of the organisations we work for. These include 'flat organisations', 'corporate anorexia', 'downsizing', 'rightsizing', 'occupational silo's' and 'business process re-engineering', to identify but a few.

PRACTICE

About five years ago I was working on a change management program with some managers and academics from higher education in the UK. As a relatively light hearted exercise we were exploring our interpretation of the meaning of some of the words above (and inventing some of our own). Half way through our discussion I asked the group what kind of metaphor might best describe their organisation. After half an hours discussion the group presented a pictorial representation of a boat, funnel belching smoke and going full steam ahead in slightly choppy seas. When asked if the sea was going to get rougher the group replied that the boat had been through rough seas before. Additionally, the crew had never had to bail water out of the boat and were never likely have to abandon ship,

neither had the crew had to radically change.

When asked for my own metaphor of what I was seeing and hearing I replied that I saw a group of lemmings who were unfortunately running away from the cliff rather than towards it. Perhaps a rather challenging metaphor, however, as a contrast it stimulated discussion and exchange of perceptions which were to be built on over the next three years of the change programme. Today the shape of that organisation looks radically different to the way that it did five years ago. It is now regarded as a business organisation rather than solely an academic institution. The metaphor session was only a small part of the change programme, but provided a means of looking at the organisation from a different angle. As one senior academic put it, "maybe we've changed from being a learned organisation to a learning organisation".

THEORY

Grant and Osrick introduce their book 'Metaphor and Organizations' by stating, "metaphors are here, there and everywhere. They run right through our language. They are used to make sense of the situations we find ourselves in. They shape our perceptions and can influence our attitudes and behaviour".

Morgan suggests, "the use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervades how we understand our world generally"

Parkin (1998) defines metaphor as "to transfer meaning" and expands upon this by stating that a metaphor is a comparison, a parallel between two, sometimes seemingly unrelated, terms.

In my introduction I attempted to use metaphor to explain how I was feeling, to make sense of my situation at a moment in time and to express my thinking and how I was seeing things.

At a simplistic level I am attempting to practice what Ortony (1993) describes as

- Compactness and conciseness in the way that I communicate.

- Vividness in the language that I use or the word picture that I paint.
- Expression of what I might find it difficult to describe, by using simple contrasts.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

During a trip to Australia in February last year I presented two sessions on 'learning to learn – how good are you at modelling the practice?' At each session I asked the participants to use metaphor to reflect on how they perceived their organisation and how this impacted on their role and their own learning within their organisation.

Participants at the first session were from a single large organisation which is in transition. Amongst the most notable metaphors were: -

- A galley ship with lots of people cracking whips, but those at the oars have multiple rhythms and are facing in different directions.
- A kaleidoscope with everyone shaking it in different ways and seeing different pictures.
- A balloon tossed by the wind with lots of people trying to control it with ropes but with no co-ordination.
- A galaxy comprising of:
black holes
bright stars
lots of little solar systems

Whilst participants also expressed optimism for the good things which the organisation did, there was an underlying theme of lack of corporate direction and distinct lack of communication across the many parts (occupational silo's), which made up the whole. What I did get a feeling for was corporate dissonance (another metaphor – metaphors breed metaphors?). However, the organisation does have in place a network forum run by the staff development co-ordinator at which the above results can be further discussed, expanded upon and taken forward.

The second session was attended by AITD members from New South Wales at their first event of 2001. Within the session I gave examples of metaphors generated by

features

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development members in the UK to describe how they perceived their roles as trainers and developers, which included:

REACTIVE METAPHORS

- Plumbers called in to mend emergency leaks.
- Paramedics called in to give emergency resuscitation.
- Doctors asked to prescribe medication after the illness had commenced.

PROACTIVE METAPHORS

- Doctors consulted to provide preventative medicine.
- Gardeners employed to sow and nurture plants.
- Architects commissioned to plan and give shape to new buildings.

The session with CIPD members had essentially been run to help participants look at their current roles and to consider their future continuing professional development needs. The metaphors generated assisted in a thought provoking discussion on how to move from operationally driven reactive tasks towards a more future based, proactive and strategic role.

The session with AITD members was primarily aimed at stimulating participants to look at and reflect on their own learning practice and needs. After all if we as trainers and developers don't model good learning practice, how can we expect our population of learners to?

Some interesting themes developed from the metaphor exercise in Sydney. Namely in my interpretation, educators trainers and developers attending, currently saw themselves as covering the areas of care, reaction, growth, mediation, control. Listed below are the 'occupations' which participants saw themselves as being most aligned to.

In the reactive world of the early 2000's many of us have to work as 'occupational schizophrenics' and as such possibly work across the range of areas shown above. Personally I came into the training and development profession because I was interested in growth as an individual responsibility, but also to assist others in the process.

What interested me about the AITD session was the soft or helpful nature of the first four areas shown above as compared to the hard nature of the fifth. More contrasts! Many of us possibly chose the profession because of that 'softness' but are now discovering that influence in today's business world is only gained or earned by having an appropriate balance of both soft and hard skills. Finding that balance possibly presents us with our greatest development challenge as an industry and as individuals and requires us to learn from each other in different ways.

To see the world through different eyes. That was really what the Sydney session was about.... A network of different but shared perceptions with metaphors being a useful method of assisting both the process and post event reflection.

So what might be your metaphor for your organisation and for yourself? How compatible are the two? What changes might be required from each party? What development does each need?

Last word goes to an anonymous AITD participant who described him/herself as an Electrician who provides the sparks to get things going. Enough said!

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