

SPEECH AND COMMUNICATION: USING METAPHOR

Metaphor, which in this case includes any imagery such as simile and analogy, can be seen as the "energy source" of language, like a light which can illuminate meaning. More than figures of speech, they are "figures of thought." Language consultant Susan Bethanis emphasizes that language is a medium of change--there is an inextricable link between language, thought and action. Language can also be a perpetuating medium, because metaphors are embedded in the conversations and relationships that make up an organization. The metaphors that might apply to an organization and the way one uses these images, whether overtly or subconsciously, have everything to do with the way one acts in it. The way a person acts as an isolated, functional part of a *machine* is quite different from the way one acts as a participating member of a *community* or a *family*. Excellent examples of applying metaphorical speech and thinking to organizational life are given in the book *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* by poet and consultant David Whyte.

1. TYPES OF METAPHOR

Bethanis identifies three types of metaphor: root, bridge and generative. Root metaphors are assumptions, bridges are communication for mutual understanding, and generative refers to creating new meanings.

Root Metaphors

Looking at root metaphors reveals existing modes of thinking. Words like *structure*, *troops*, *territory*, *sales pitch* and *machine*, reveal mechanistic assumptions and ways of thinking, while metaphors like *conversation*, *shared vision*, *partner* and *culture* reveal more participative models.

Bridging Metaphors

Bridging metaphors are ways of interpreting meaning for the sake of arriving at common understanding in conversation. Conversation partners, or consultants and clients, can make use of bridging metaphors to help each other recognize shared understanding. ("When you say *to structure* the project, do you mean provide *guidelines* so the project can *grow* at a *good pace*?")

Generative Metaphors

The third type of metaphor is generative, intended to spark new understanding. In contrast to the bridging metaphor, which is somewhat comforting, the generative metaphor has elements of surprise or paradox, and embodies a kind of tension: that which is familiar is made to become strange. After establishing a

relationship of trust with a the other party, one can then introduce generative metaphors *to stir the waters*, *spark* new ideas and bring *fresh air* into a *stagnant* situation.

2. EXPLORING METAPHOR

Find metaphors for these and other familiar experiences. Imagine what metaphors others would use for the same situations.

What is your place of work like?

(Examples: a machine, family, culture, psychic prison, battleground, political arena, game, etc.)

What is your mind like right now?

(Examples: a mountain, grasshopper, clear sky, muddy water, bright, foggy, oatmeal, machine)

Think of an ideal relationship in your experience. What is it like?

Think of a difficult relationship in your experience. What is it like?

What is your usual style of working like?

Think of a favorite, satisfying activity, How do you feel when engaged in it?

3. APPLICATION TO A PROBLEM

Think of a particular problem you are currently facing. Explore the use of the three types of metaphor in clearly defining the problem, projecting alternate solutions, and ways to to bridge those so others could understand your views.

4. GUIDELINES FOR CREATIVE APPLICATION

In working with metaphor it is important to take time to allow habitual practices to shift. These are the key learnings that make up this process:

Listen

Take time to verify what others' words mean, examine their assumptions (root metaphors)

Express

Take time to attend to your own words, meanings and assumptions

Clarify

Take time to ask questions, explore bridging metaphors for clarification

Generate

Take time to offer new and different generative metaphors, so new meanings can emerge

Reflect

Take time to reflect on conversations for learning purposes

References

Bethanis, Susan J. (1995) Language as action: Linking metaphors with organizational transformation. In Chawla, Sarita and Renesch, John (Eds.) *Learning organizations: Developing cultures for tomorrow's workplace*. Portland: Productivity Press.

Whyte, David (1994) *The heart aroused: Poetry and the preservation of the soul in corporate america*. New York: Currency Doubleday.