

Next Practice

from Imagination Lab

Making Sense Through Metaphors

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The staid European bank was going to roll out a new customer relations concept – “My banker knows me” – at the upcoming retreat for its top 47 managers. The concept was bold, but would these managers really understand its impact for their on-the-job behavior? Would it become just another brassy but superficial slogan doomed to die of cynicism, a casualty of BOHICA – bend over, here it comes again? If it was to really affect the fortunes of the bank, these 47 individuals would have to embody the concept in their work – but how to get them to that point?

The Limits of Discussion for Organizational Change

In many strategic initiatives or change programs, there is a vast amount of talking as new concepts or structures are launched within an organization. Those in authority present the new information, discussions with the audience begin, questions are posed and answers offered, and arguments sometimes ensue. On the presenter's side, the desire is to be clear, direct, and visionary; but for the audience, the desire is to understand. Having listened, questioned, or debated, they often retreat to water coolers and coffee breaks to figure out what the new initiative means – and, more importantly, what they will have to do.

In fact, fundamental assumptions about what is being presented or evaluated may not always be included in the discussion, with the result that discussions fail to reach authentic consensus or illuminate the crucial points of disagreement. For all the value that such discussion has, it is limited by the fact that it is usually only verbal in nature. The understanding that is sought consists of more than just speech – it consists of behaviour as well. This is especially important for the managers who are to drive the change throughout their organization, taking front-line responsibility for identifying and

promoting the new behaviours. What is needed is a deep, shared understanding that enables employees to put the new concept into practice in their jobs. Our research suggests that embodied metaphors are remarkably practical for this purpose.

The Practicality of Metaphors

A Harvard researcher once watched how a product team seeking new ideas for a paintbrush was stymied again and again in their work. Their breakthrough came as one member noticed an underlying idea: “A paintbrush is basically a kind of pump”, he said, stimulating his colleagues to look at the dynamics of paint flow in a way that lead ultimately to a successful new brush design. Metaphors, therefore, are potent tools for understanding how the world works, and how to make things work. The usefulness of metaphors extends deep into the way that organizations function, too. Managers and employees alike hold deeply-seated, often unconscious notions of what their organizations are – machines, organisms, or networks – which act as underlying metaphors shaping the way that work gets done.

In the heavy atmosphere of expectation following the DG's opening speech for the day, the 47 assembled top bankers were focused intensely at small tables as they struggled to interpret the new “My banker knows me” concept. They had a variety of small-scale building materials in front of them, and at each table some 6-7 individuals were collaboratively assembling a model that interpreted how they were to use the concept in their jobs. Laughter occasionally rippled around the room, as participants were surprised to discover exciting new angles. Their nervousness began to give way to delight in the insights they were generating. Finally, each table presented a model to their gathered colleagues. The central idea for one table, cleverly illustrated in wavy chains that radiated out from the heads of customers to converge on the head of the banker, was that “we need to get on the same wavelength as our customers.” At another, to whoops of recognition from their colleagues, the individuals presented a model showing how “getting into the Jacuzzi with customers” illustrated the sort of psychological intimacy they were being called to build with their customers.

Embodied metaphors in organizational change are:	Example from the “My banker knows me” case
COLLABORATIVE	All 47 participants join in, everyone plays the roles of constructor, presenter, and audience member during the course of the intervention.
ANALYTICAL	The need to develop an intimate rapport with customers (“wavelength,” “jacuzzi”) is identified as the crucial aspect of the concept.
CONCRETE	Each 3-D model analysing the concept is built, viewed, and discussed “in the round” as a real, tactile object.

As the “My banker knows me” case story illustrates, the nature of the customer-banker relationship really needed to be understood at a deep level to have an impact. The fine features and details of how the bankers were to incorporate this concept in their everyday work were observed and decoded by those present from various angles. Also, this collective process of constructing a physical model triggered a far deeper level of understanding than a purely verbal discussion would have done. In turn, the embodied metaphors the bankers built were exceptionally memorable: photographs of structures (or the structures themselves) were taken back to the workplace as vivid cues for what these key managers would now have to do differently in their jobs.

The Potency of the Embodied Metaphor

At Imagination Lab, we have found that the most potent metaphors for managers arise through basic bodily experiences of movement and manipulation, when we roll up our sleeves and – literally – create something with our own hands. Embodied metaphors can be induced by and result from the construction of concrete physical objects, crafted by people working together. They create and capture meaning in two ways. First, when people set out to intentionally model some aspect of reality the result is an object which represents meaning in material form. That is, the object “embodies” meaning as a material presence in space. Second, these objects merge the mental activity of “making sense” of the world with the physical activity of the builders’ bodies. So the meaning is embodied, in part, by the users’ own physiological behaviour.

These embodied metaphors are so powerful not only because people have invested themselves physically in their construction, but because the result of their activity is a tangible, three-dimensional object. Unlike a PowerPoint presentation, a graph, or a matrix of “earnings before interest, depreciation, and amortization,” an embodied metaphor has a concrete presence. The opportunity to interact dynamically with an embodied metaphor – to shape it, move around

it, adjust it, scrutinize it – gives managers a powerful means of understanding a new or difficult idea. As they are built, therefore, such embodied metaphors can help both to reveal underlying assumptions and to tap into unarticulated knowledge. They often stimulate different, more probing types of questions. And, since they are collective creations, they can make it easier for contentious issues to be placed on the agenda for discussion.

Conclusion

Embodied metaphors provide a unique and different means for orchestrating organizational and strategic change. Because they include more than “language-only” analogies, embodied metaphors tap into the deep knowledge that really impacts an organization. Thus, when managers build embodied metaphors, they set in motion a virtuous circle of imagination for an organization – the builders give the metaphor shape, and it then shapes what they think and what they do. Shakespeare may have it had just right, then, when he said that “imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown.”

The ideas in Next Practice represent the collective interests of the Imagination Lab Foundation research team. Contact Claus Jacobs (claus@imagilab.org) or Peter Bürgi (peter@imagilab.org) if you are interested in the topic of this issue.

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The Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research institute that seeks to produce actionable knowledge about imaginative, reflective, and responsible practices of organizing and strategy, and to distribute this knowledge to people both in organizations and academia.

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