Change your language

change your thinking

Richard Claydon & Stefan Norrvall | July 2016
What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. - Friedrich Nietzsche

Whenever we take ourselves too seriously, we must remember what we are discussing.

Organizational culture.

Organization | The development or coordination of parts (of the body, a body system, cell, etc.) in order to carry out vital functions; the condition of being or process of becoming organized (ORGANIZED adj. 1). Also: the way in which a living thing is organized; the structure of (any part of) an organism.

Culture | Middle English (denoting a cultivated piece of land): the noun from French culture or directly from Latin cultura ‘growing, cultivation’; the verb from obsolete French culturer or medieval Latin culturare, both based on Latin colere ‘tend, cultivate’ (see cultivate). In late Middle English the sense was ‘cultivation of the soil’ and from this (early 16th century), arose ‘cultivation (of the mind, faculties, or manners)’; sense 1 of the noun dates from the early 19th century.

This is a metaphor employed to describe a metaphor. A social construction inspired by nature and gardening. Now seeming real and concrete.

Culture is just the last in a lone line of functional metaphors that have been used to describe organisations. All of which endure.

• **Scientific Management** | Dominant from 1890s – 1930s | organization as a machine

• **Human Relations** | Dominant from 1930s – 1950s | organization as an organism

• **Strategy Movement** | Dominant from 1960s – today (heavily influenced by SM) | organization as an army

• **Strong Culture** | Dominant from 1980s – today (heavily influenced by HR) | organization as a culture

Why do they endure? How can we change things if this language has such power? So much so that early-industrial ideas and theories still underpin the digital workplace?

We suggest employing three tactics and one art form. The tactics of fallibility, meta-fallibility and elaboration. And the art of rhetoric.
Three Tactics and an Art Form

The Tactic of Fallibility

- The “tactic of fallibility” makes the partiality and incompleteness of established language explicit

Metaphor requires certain features to be emphasized and other features to be suppressed in a selective comparison. Different metaphors represent and capture organizational life in distinctive ways. Each generates dominant, distinctive, but fundamentally partial, insights.

These metaphors get deeply established in the fabric of the organization. After a time, their once illuminating perceptions, explanations and inventions become shibboleths, clichés and slogans. This generates and limits the scope of “problem-setting” stories and subsequent patterns of “problem-solving”.

They also generate a one-dimensional way of thinking that channels action and restricts the possibility of creative solutions.

A good change agent (a) uncovers the problem-setting metaphor that is generating the stories, (b) addresses the sense of obviousness attending such stories and (c) examines their appropriateness.

Uncovering | When we talk about organizations as if they were machines, we tend to expect them to operate as machines: in a routinized, efficient, reliable, and predictable way.

Addressing | Is it appropriate for an organization aiming to be creative and innovative employing machine-like language?

Examining | The machine metaphor (a) can cause great difficulty in adapting to changing circumstances; (b) can result in mindless and unquestioning bureaucracy; (c) can make the interests of those working in the organization take precedent over the goals the organization was designed to achieve; and (d) can have dehumanizing effects upon employees.

The Tactic of Meta-Fallibility

- The “tactic of meta-fallibility” illustrates how “no single theory will ever give us a perfect or all-purpose point of view”

Metaphors distort and limit vision. Suggesting that uncritically believing in the insights of a single metaphor would be great folly.

Metaphor is inherently paradoxical. It creates powerful insights that also become distortions. The way of seeing through a metaphor becomes a way of not seeing. There are no right or wrong theories in management in an absolute sense. Every theory illuminates and hides.
A change agent’s strategy involves (a) interrogating a dominant metaphor’s insights; (b) accepting why it has or had worth; (c) detaching those who strongly believe in it from its one-dimensional limitations; and (d) introducing other ways to perceive the organization.

*This way of thinking and persuading is crucial for understanding, managing, and designing organizations in a changing world.*

The Tactic of Elaboration

- The “tactic of elaboration” introduces “radical metaphors” and concretizes them as plausible alternatives to already established language.

This is the creative process involved in developing new organizational metaphors and a new organizational language. We think about how many ways a possible metaphor captures the organization. **In doing so, we move from simile (the organization is like a brain) to metaphor (the organization is a brain). We make it real!**

To do that, we use a wide range of sub-metaphors. By looking at “cause and effect”, “qualities”, “attributes and associations” and “relations”, it is possible to find enough creative connections to elaborate and concretize a metaphor.

At some stage in the elaboration process, the metaphorical concepts stand as literal concepts. The metaphor gets completely lost from view. The focus now is exclusively on the “parts”, which get viewed as literal representations of the phenomena to which they are applied.

Metaphors elaborated through parts conceived in great quantity seem cognitively real. The creative and persuasive process elaborates metaphor in a particular direction, which, once taken to a certain level, is presented as and seems just “obvious”.

The Art of Rhetoric

Rhetoric is often seen as being used for self-interested and manipulative purpose. An argument long employed to discredit it against the purity of science and philosophy. However, scientists and philosophers recognize that they must employ rhetoric to “sell” their insights to the wider social sphere. So, it gets partially accepted.

The common solution to the problem of rhetoric being simultaneously good and bad is termed the “Weak Defence” of rhetoric by Richard Lanham, who states:

*The Weak Defence argues that there are two kinds of rhetoric, good and bad. The good kind is used in good causes, the bad kind in bad causes. Our kind is the good kind; the bad kind is used by our opponents. This was Plato’s solution, and Isocrates’, and it has been enthusiastically embraced by humanists ever since.*
While this tradition recognises the necessity of rhetorical persuasion, it presumes the “philosopher” has captured reality. And just needs artful language to illustrate this to the wretched masses.

We need to move beyond the arrogant presumptions of anti-rhetoric prejudiced philosophers. And turn to a second tradition, which regards social consensus as knowledge and states that a worldview in which truth is agreement must have rhetoric at its heart, for agreement is gained in no other way. This is the Strong Defence. For Richard Lanham,

The Strong Defence assumes that truth is determined by social dramas, some more formal than others but all man-made. Rhetoric in such a world is not ornamental but determinative, essentially creative. Truth once created in this way becomes referential, as in legal precedent. The court decides “what really happened” and we then measure against that. The Strong Defence implies a figure/ground shift between philosophy and rhetoric—in fact, as we shall see, a continued series of shifts. In its world, there is as much truth as we need, maybe more, but argument is open-ended, more like kiting checks than balancing books.

We already know which organizational metaphors Lanham’s court has decided are good metaphors (machine, organism, army, culture). We must make our “equally good” metaphors (brain, flux and transformation, instrument of domination, political system, psychic prison, plus a multitude of others) more widely established. Open up many possible futures. Then try to persuade the court that they are good and should be taken seriously.

The method of using innovative figurative language to solve the problems of embedded figurative language can also be viewed through another of Lanham’s concepts, toggling. He states

Rhetoric as a method of literary education aimed to train its students to toggle back and forth between AT and THROUGH vision, alternately to realize how the illusion is created and then to fool oneself with it again.

This facilitates organizational practitioners stepping back and examining the language they commonly employ in order to creatively solve immediate organisational issues. However, they will fall back into taking metaphoric language literally again at some undetermined time in the future. This fall back can be a return to established metaphor (the court rejects the plea), or accepting the new metaphor as being better (the court accepts the plea).

If the court accepts the plea, you have successfully changed the organization.

But remember. The rhetorical battle is war. You will face obstacles on all sides. Even those who supposedly support you. These tactics are to help you win. As, ultimately, the only aim of rhetoric is to win.

Rhetoric is par excellence the region of the Scramble, of insult and injury, bickering, squabbling, malice and the lie, cloaked malice and the subsidized lie . . . Invective, eristic, polemic, and logomachy are so pronounced an aspect of rhetoric - Kenneth Burke

NB: This document is auxiliary to the Change Your Thinking workshop run by Richard Claydon and Stefan Norrvall. Participation in the workshop might be required for its full value and meanings to emerge.