

The Role of Metaphors in Organizational Change

CHANGE AGENT AND CHANGE TARGET PERSPECTIVES

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The purpose of this article is to build on the work of Cleary and Packard by providing additional support for the use of metaphors (and other forms of symbolism) in organizational diagnosis and change. This will be accomplished by relating metaphors to schemata and describing how metaphors can facilitate the change process as viewed by both change agents and change targets.

CHANGE AGENT PERSPECTIVE

A *schema* is an interpretive framework used by individuals to give meaning to observed objects, events, actions, and behaviors. Through schemata, individuals process information about their surrounding environment. Such processing involves selecting, measuring, and storing information for immediate use or later retrieval (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Individuals employ numerous schemata based on learning accumulated through experience and training. As learning takes place, schemata are developed and either reinforced or modified.

By necessity, change agents use schemata in conducting organizational diagnoses. The various schemata evoked by change agents inevitably influence subsequent problem formulation and interpretation. Early theory as-

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sumed that change agents were rational decision makers who objectively examined all available information prior to making "optional" diagnoses. In contrast, recent research suggests that change agents typically adhere to a limited-capacity information-processing model in making problem diagnoses (Day & Lord, 1990). Information that does not "make sense" or "fit" in a change agent's prevailing schemata will likely be ignored.

As Cleary and Packard noted, Morgan (1986) identified various metaphors that can be used as tools for diagnosing organizational problems. For example, a change agent can think of an organization as a "machine" and categorize it as being over- or undermechanized, efficient or inefficient, goal- or means-oriented, and so forth. To the extent that the metaphors that Morgan identified are used as interpretive frameworks for creating new ways of thinking about organizations, they represent schemata for processing information.

With respect to Cleary and Packard's basic position, it is our belief that metaphors (as schemata) are useful because they allow experienced (or well-trained) change agents to arrive at problem diagnoses and solutions rapidly. At the same time, it should be noted that the use of metaphors for problem diagnosis carries with it certain drawbacks. Research suggests that when confronted with problem diagnoses, change agents draw on an established repertoire of *heuristics* to guide sense making.

As with other cognitive simplification mechanisms (e.g., bounded rationality and satisficing), heuristics involve intuitive or unconscious methods of structuring, understanding, and solving problems. As a consequence, heuristics tend to produce biases in judgment — biases that change agents may not always recognize. Indeed, Armenakis, Mossholder, and Harris (1990) described numerous instances of diagnostic bias in organizational consultation resulting from the misapplication of various heuristics. Three heuristics are especially common in problem diagnoses: representativeness, availability, and anchoring and adjustment (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

The *representativeness* heuristic reflects the tendency for individuals to assess the likelihood of an occurrence by matching it with a preexisting category. The psychological process underlying this heuristic involves examining the essential characteristics of an occurrence and then comparing these characteristics with those of a known category to see if the occurrence is representative of the category. In this respect, representativeness is a form of stereotyping that leads one to ignore useful information. For example, a change agent might easily rely on anecdotal evidence (e.g., myths, stories, sagas) to assess an organization's culture. If the information so deduced, however, does not accurately reflect the organization's true state, any resulting assessment will be biased.

The *availability* heuristic reflects the tendency for individuals to judge the likelihood of an occurrence by the ease with which information concerning the occurrence is recalled. Frequent events are accordingly given a higher probability of occurring because they are easier to recall than infrequent events. Yet the availability heuristic can lead to poor decisions because many other factors can influence recall. Certainly, frequent events are readily available but so are emotional events, highly publicized events, and recent events. Thus a change agent recently involved in a consulting engagement to repair damage resulting from a new product failure may overestimate the likelihood of damage for other products. The important point is to be sure that the occurrence being recalled is the same as the occurrence that is being forecast.

The *anchoring and adjustment* heuristic involves setting an initial value (anchor) and then making adjustments to the value in arriving at a final decision. The anchor takes on psychological importance because it forms a threshold that helps define the limits of a decision. For example, a change agent may be influenced by an early diagnosis in assimilating later client information. If the initial diagnosis is taken as a natural starting point (anchor) from which to make diagnostic adjustments, difficulties may result. Such adjustments typically have been found to be insufficient because they tend to obscure relevant criteria for establishing a "true" starting point based on actual circumstances.

Cleary and Packard summarized an OD project in a fire department in which the change agents involved were apparently using the wrong metaphor (a misapplication of the availability heuristic) in guiding the change project but realized their mistake and made appropriate adjustments (a proper application of the anchoring and adjustment heuristic), thus enhancing the fire fighters' problem-solving skills. This example demonstrates why change agents should examine multiple metaphors, possibly combining metaphors to minimize the possibility of bias (a possible misapplication of any number of heuristics).

CHANGE TARGET PERSPECTIVE

The preceding logic can be applied, albeit somewhat differently, from a change target's perspective. Change targets likewise rely on schemata acquired through experience and training. A change agent using a process consultation approach would typically assess a target's psychological readiness (i.e., schemata) in order to establish a basis for needed change. Such

change can be incremental (i.e., within a metaphor) or fundamental (i.e., from one metaphor to another). Thus, following our earlier example, if the metaphor "organization as machine" was used, the basis for an incremental change might be increasing machine efficiency. In contrast, the basis for fundamental change might be moving from a mechanistic to an organic form of structure in which an organization's design, processes, and culture are radically altered.

In this respect, both "within" and "between" metaphor change are useful in transmitting intended meaning. They are thus suited for conveying the essence of the so-called "three stage" change process: unfreezing, moving, and freezing (Lewin, 1951). For example, Bridges (1991) described the value of using metaphors during the unfreezing stage to announce that a plant is closing. Rather than employing a metaphor such as "the ship is sinking," which connotes "abandon ship," he recommended describing the period preceding the closing as its "last voyage," during which time "crew members" could systematically plan their next "expedition/voyage" following final "disembarkation." Our point in describing this case is to emphasize that metaphors can carry both constructive *and* destructive messages. While the impact of change should never be underestimated, it makes little sense to transmit a *Titanic*-type meaning when a less frantic message will suffice. In the case that Bridges described, output actually rose during the period prior to the plant's closing.

Our emphasis on metaphors carrying both constructive and destructive messages is somewhat different from Cleary and Packard's fifth principle: "Make sure to use metaphors with appropriate literal as well as metaphorical meanings" (p. 238). While we agree with this advice, we caution that their potential constructive *and* destructive meanings of metaphors should also be considered.

We would also note that from a change target perspective, other forms of symbolism are equally useful in the moving and freezing stages of introducing change. For example, Mirvis (1991) described an OD intervention with the managers of Ben & Jerry's that was intended to demonstrate the value of intergroup team building. The managers were taken to a large open area, blindfolded, formed in independent groups connected by ropes, and instructed to locate three inner tubes. In one instance, the first group to find their inner tube coached the other groups in locating the remaining tubes. This exercise was effective in using symbolism to communicate the value of intergroup cooperation. Other forms of wilderness training, such as Outward Bound, are effective because of the ease with which their symbolism can be transmitted to real-life events.

As another illustration involving symbolism, Greiner and Bhambri (1991) described a case in which a newly appointed CEO rewarded his top management team with a gold desk clock for achieving high goals under extreme time pressure. The clock symbolized both the timely manner in which the goals were accomplished and the new CEO's goal-oriented emphasis. Changes implemented with the CEO's appointment were institutionalized through the symbolic meaning (i.e., *tempus fugit*) associated with a timepiece, as well as the symbolic meaning (i.e., first-place winner) associated with gold. Other symbolic actions, such as Mary Kay Cosmetics' annual sales rallies where top performers receive roses and mink coats and Chick-fil-A's awarding of Lincoln Continentals to leading franchise managers, have been well publicized.

THE VALUE OF METAPHORS

The value of metaphors (and other forms of symbolism) in introducing organizational change is closely related to the role of prevailing schemata. That is, introducing change involves modifying a change target's schemata either incrementally or fundamentally. During the unfreezing stage of a change process, targets should ideally be prepared for upcoming modifications. For example, information underscoring the necessity for change should be presented from both a change agent's and a change target's perspective. Efforts to alter a target's existing schemata should incorporate metaphors that are easily understood and related to existing frames of reference. Thus if the availability heuristic is evoked, the more consonant such metaphors are with existing schemata, the greater the likelihood that *new* can be merged with *old*.

As Cleary and Packard contend, metaphors can aid in this regard. Furthermore, when information derived from new schemata is processed, targets (following the representative heuristic) will likely pay more attention to vivid metaphors. Thus, if carefully selected, metaphors are one way to draw attention to specific messages. Being cautious in selecting metaphors, as in the example cited by Bridges (1991), is obviously important. Describing a plant closing as a "last voyage" rather than a "sinking ship" is clearly an attempt to minimize negative inferences as well as hostile behavior. In this respect, the anchoring heuristic can be related to target resistance. Change almost invariably creates a sense of uncertainty until a new steady state is achieved. To minimize uncertainty and restore balance, targets may either resist or accept change efforts by anchoring in either the past or the future.

Metaphors as a means of altering change target schemata are useful in transmitting messages that reduce feelings of uncertainty and underscore the benefits to be derived from accepting upcoming modifications.

CONCLUSION

This article has addressed the use of metaphors in diagnosis and change. Acknowledging the common use of heuristics in problem diagnoses, it has nevertheless been argued that while metaphors can carry both constructive and destructive messages, they can aid in modifying existing change agent and change target schemata. In doing so, however, metaphors should not be seen as a means of sugarcoating bitter pills. Rather, they should be viewed as a device for assisting change targets in understanding the need for change as well as the positive outcomes associated with its acceptance.

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