Practical NLP for Managers

What is your metaphor?

In NLP, metaphors are stories, comparisons, similes and analogies, and they are always revealing. Metaphors are the quick way to find core organisational values. They often give away more about an organisation than any number of policy statements. The very words 'company', 'organisation' and 'firm' began as metaphors.

- The word 'company' is supposed to come from the Latin 'com panis' - the sharing of bread. People came together to share resources and formed a company.
- The word 'firm' has a similar root to the word 'farm' and comes from the Latin 'firmare' to confirm.
- Organisation has the same root as 'organic' and 'organism' - a whole living system. The root of corporation is the Latin 'corporis' - a living body.

What is the metaphor for your organisation?

We ask this question in trainings, here are some of the very interesting answers we received:

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A dinosaur
A brothel
A rottweiler
A headless chicken
An ivory tower
The Spanish inquisition
A warm bath
A private army
A jazz band
A first division football team
An anthill
A tightrope
A circus

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Headless chicken or Jazz combo?

What are some current business metaphors? We have the corporate jungle - full of predators, bulls and bears. Jungle metaphors seem to proliferate in the stock market. Then there are the military metaphors, (jungle warfare?). Business is war - 'screw the opposition before it screws you'. We have corporate raiders, and business casualties. Sales is particularly rife with military talk. You marshal your arguments and take training courses to add ever more sophisticated weapons to your armoury of skills in your never ending battle with the competitors and even the customers. No wonder salespeople can suffer from battle fatigue. Sales organisations also use the metaphor of hunters and farmers - those sales people that go out and take new business, and those that cultivate accounts.

Tom Peters in his book *Liberation Management* makes much of business as fashion. Fashion is fickle, its only consistency is that it must change, and fast. Other similar metaphors are the organisation as a network, a web, or a carnival, a jazz combo or a circus.

Organisations are compared to ladders. There are rungs up the ladder of success, you go higher and higher into the rarefied management air. And there is further to fall. We still live with a lot of assumptions about organisations as a game of snakes and ladders, a step up is a reward, people want to climb the corporate ladder, and the ladder must go upwards. But many people want to stay where they are or take a step sideways. Microsoft is one company that recognises this. An important part of keeping good people happy is a system where they can be promoted without having to go to the next management level if they do not want to. At Microsoft a good software developer can stay as a developer and still rise to the top tier of elite software 'architects'. These architects are company directors, and they report directly to Bill Gates on an informal basis. This gives them recognition, while keeping them in the work at which they excel. Many companies have similar systems where talented people who prove themselves in one area are given explicit recognition without being promoted beyond their level of competence.

The organisation as a pyramid is a well known metaphor. Pyramids have small numbers of people on the top, supported by many at the bottom. (And it is not easy to balance on the top of a pyramid). Thus the phrase, 'higher management'. Many firms are questioning the structure of the pyramid, arguing it should be turned upside down, so the 'higher' management supports the base.

Just when you thought the rat race was over - along come faster rats

Organisational structures reflect and create values. A metaphor creates a mind set, it predisposes people to think within certain limits. For example if you are climbing a ladder, there may come a point where there are few rungs ahead of you, but many more behind you. Progress further up is difficult, and a climber may decide they have had enough. Their attention will then shift from climbing to not falling. This is the point when managers may consolidate, cover themselves, develop empires, make themselves indispensable by keeping hold of information, doing things 'by the book' and channelling their creativity into non work areas. A pyramid or ladder structure will make this more likely. On the other hand a ladder upwards can show a clear upward path that motivates people joining the company. We are not judging metaphors as good and bad, they are useful or not depending on your outcome.

Metaphors have power, they are influential because they are so intangible and create a way of thinking. They are the clearest indication to the prevailing mental models that Peter Senge talks about in The Fifth Discipline - those ideas that and influential in the background of management thinking. Once this way of thinking and therefore acting is established, it is hard to change. We become habituated and no longer notice what is there all the time. We were talking about this with a manager we know told us a story

about his childhood in India. He used to watch the tamed elephants and marvelled that, for such huge powerful animals, they never tried to escape; they were tethered only by a thin rope to a stake in the ground. The secret was revealed when he watched the adults train the young elephants. The trainer would tie one of the elephant's feet to a stake in the ground. The young elephant was not very strong and try as he might, could not uproot the stake or break the rope. So he gave up. As the elephant grew strong he never tried again to break free, and so the result was the fully-grown animals were restricted to a small area by a thin rope and a small stake.

What about the difference between a tight rope and an escalator as a career path? Walking a tight rope is difficult. It can also be dangerous (do you have a safety net?) One slip implies a big fall and it is hard to get back up again. It is likely to be stressful, you might suffer from vertigo and feel unbalanced. However it takes a lot of skill and the rewards can be great. It also has some aspects of a public performance. People are watching and holding their breath. Will you make it, or will you fall?

An escalator on the other hand is much more comfortable. You are moved forward without having to make any effort. You can even watch the world go by, and you will not travel any faster than anyone else on the escalator, unless you start climbing, using the momentum to speed your ascent. Or do you feel caught in a rat race? A rat race is never over until you decide to stop racing.

Sometimes individual departments within an organisation have their own dominating metaphors. A friend of ours was asked to do some team building with an accounting department that was spread over many different sites in a large organisation. The problem was that the accounting department was out of step with the rest of the organisation. When Duane met the team, the reason for the communication breakdown was obvious. The entire organisation, following the lead of almost all the senior management throughout the country, used a military metaphor to describe their business: They spoke of killing the competition, waging war against the market and shooting from the hip. The accounting department however, had no military experience and talked about debits, credits, collections and budgets. Duane spent an entire day translating their key activities and requests into military metaphors. Almost immediately communication was improved. As Duane said, ' We overwhelmed the defences, stormed the fortifications and led them to victory.' This is also a great example of pacing and leading.

The power of metaphors is that they channel our thinking in certain ways. They are more than just a manner of speaking. They have consequences for thought and action, and how you treat people. Change your metaphor and you change the way you think. A circle or a wheel is an organisational metaphor with growing support. A circle suggests 'central' management rather than 'higher management'. Charles Handy coined the phrase 'shamrock organisation' in his book The Age of Unreason to describe a small, central core of people who run the company, with a number of links and networks to outside consultants, suppliers and business partners that are brought in as necessary for the project in hand.

Business as a ball game is a favoured metaphor. Teams engage other teams, there are goals and coaches, strategies that outflank the opposing team. The game metaphor is less brutal than the war metaphor. Other organisations started as a family business, and although they have grown, have kept the idea of an extended family. A family looks after its own, and demands loyalty as well.

 Some managers and organisations favour a musical metaphor. 'Information technology,' says Peter Drucker, 'is shifting the centre of gravity in employment from manual and clerical workers to knowledge workers who resist being told what to do by layers of middle management. These workers are more like musicians.' They are professionals who enjoy working with other professionals. In an orchestra each group of instrumentalists is equal but different. it is their difference that gives the richness and variety to the final piece. The role of the conductor is not to teach the musicians to be better players, but to get them to play together. The score is the mission statement, the interpretation is the vision. The CEO is the conductor of a symphony orchestra, and every player contributes to the complete effect.

Story time

We hope you are starting to be curious about the metaphors that are active in your own organisation. Here is a metaphorical quiz for you to explore your organisation. Fill in the blanks. (There are no right or wrong answers).

1. My organisation is like...

2. Working in my organisation is like...

3. Being promoted in my organisation is like...

4. Our area of business is like...

5. Given these metaphors, what has to be true....

6. What are the implications of these metaphors?