Metaphors in Leadership and Leadership as Metaphor

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Metaphors have been described as the icing on the cake for strategic communicators and leaders in organizations. While metaphors are colloquially thought of as a simple language trope, scholars have begun to view metaphors as the cake (i.e., the substance of organizational life) rather than just the icing (Hogler, Gross, Hartman, & Cunliffe, 2008). A *metaphor* is a specific type of analogy that associates one thing to another (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Metaphors, or implied analogies, help organizational actors to think differently about concepts, processes, people, and objects within organizations. For example, leaders have been compared to master chefs, suggesting that leadership communication requires aesthetic instinct and taste rather than a formulaic recipe. This comparison of the abstract concept of leadership to a more concrete—and ubiquitous—mental model of a chef helps to manage the meaning of leadership.

Moreover, metaphors can be used to reify, personify, and depersonify concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For instance, a leader could *reify* an abstract concept through a concrete metaphor like the following: "ideas are water to an innovation-thirsty organization." In general, the conception of "ideas" is abstract, but through the discursive association to a concrete concept (i.e., water), "ideas" becomes more concrete. Thus, reified metaphors allow leaders to manage the meaning of concepts through juxtaposition. Likewise, metaphors allow leaders to *personify* inanimate objects by relating those concepts to other concepts with animate qualities. In the previous example, the metaphor of water also helps to personify the organization's "thirst" for innovation. Last, *depersonification* allows leaders to change the animate to the inanimate. For instance, the term "collateral damage" is meant to dehumanize casualties of war. This tactic may also obscure moral paucities in a leader's or organization's position or course of action.

Some theorists argue that metaphors link the abstract to the concrete, while others argue they link the familiar to the unknown (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). In either case, metaphors display directionality by linking two dissimilar domains which now take on a new complexity of meaning. This directed attribution of meaning and discourse orients a receiver's perceptions of one thing in the light of another. As a result, metaphors are constitutive in that they enable the construction and interpretation of social reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). This perspective of metaphors reflects a body of scholarship influenced by the "linguistic turn" as well as the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective in strategic communication and organizational studies. The following sections detail the use of metaphor by strategic leaders, then highlight important metaphors of leadership.

Metaphor as leadership practice

One branch of the literature on metaphors and leaders relates to how leaders make use of metaphors in strategic leadership practice. Strategic leadership is a series of communicative behaviors and decisions that develop and focus organizational resources to reaffirm and reify an organization's values and vision (Boal & Schultz, 2007). From this discursive perspective of leadership, metaphors allow strategic leaders to manage meaning for others and can be used as a language tool to persuade followers and influence follower action (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). Strategic leaders must figure out what particular strategic messaging constitutes leadership in the context in which they reside, and convince their followers that they are performing leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). One of the ways leaders accomplish the ambiguous task of influencing followers is through the use of metaphor. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) explained that, when leaders employ a framing tool such as a metaphor, they reduce the chaos of a given situation for followers by relating the unknown (i.e., the present situation) to the known (i.e., a past mental model). A simple metaphor can clarify complex meanings for followers. As a result, metaphors provide leaders with a means to provide powerful "truths" to followers with great economy, and an economical message is often a memorable message (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). As an example, imagine a leader framed sales work to his or her follower by the statement, "sales is a battlefield and we must win the war." This war metaphor quickly categorizes and organizes the intended meaning by drawing upon followers' mental models of war.

Strategic leadership and metaphor

Several applied studies of strategic leadership have found that successful leaders often master the use of framing and language tools such as metaphors. For example, Mio, Riggio, Levin, and Resse (2005) found that presidents who were rated as charismatic leaders used about twice the number of metaphors in their speeches as those who were not rated as charismatic leaders. Similarly, Cornelissen, Holt, and Zundel (2011) argued that specific types of metaphors such as relational analogies are more effective in building support for strategic change initiatives. Boal and Schultz (2007) also argued that strategic leaders use storytelling, discourse, and metaphor as aids in organizational learning and adaptation. These studies, and other strategic management scholarship, recommend the use of metaphor in leadership practice for the purpose of goal attainment and to reinforce follower perceptions of leadership behavior. In essence, these studies assert that an increase in metaphor use by leaders will result in increased leader effectiveness.

Conversely, Alvesson and Spicer (2011) warned against oversimplifying the complexity of metaphor use in leadership, given that metaphor use by leaders may also have unintended consequences. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) explained that when something is seen in terms of something else, it limits an individual's experience with the first thing because it obscures other potentially meaningful aspects of the original concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For example, Tourish and Hargie (2012) found that metaphor use

in the contemporary banking industry failed to promote organization learning. The authors argued that metaphors should be considered by "the exclusion principle" in that they create understanding by comparing two adjacent domains, but metaphors, by design, also exclude or obscure other categories of meaning from consideration.

Moreover, poor or inaccurate metaphors can have real and damaging implications for organizations. Given that metaphors ground organizational members' experiences, they also influence action, choice, and decisions made in the organization. If a member's action is based on a poor metaphor, this language use could have negative material consequences for the organization. Clichés and dead metaphors can have similar negative consequences, given that a metaphor's overuse can result in a lack of meaning, or a lack of metaphorical intent because the metaphor's meaning has been accepted as standard reality (Putnam et al., 1996).

Metaphors of leadership

In contrast to an applied perspective of strategic leadership and metaphors, another body of literature on metaphors and leadership views metaphors as a method for understanding the ontology of leadership. This literature is in response to the ambiguity and contextual nature of leadership as an empirical construct. Moreover, leadership metaphors help scholars to construct a theoretical reality of what leaders are, how they function, and how metaphors frame and constrain what leadership is in a given context (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). A number of studies have focused on general leadership metaphors present within the literature. For example, after reviewing several seminal leadership research studies, Western (2008) found that there are three common leadership metaphors used by researchers: (i) the controller, (ii) the therapist, and (iii) the messiah. Other studies found similar thematic metaphors within the leadership literature. These findings indicate threads of commonality as to how scholars and practitioners think of and define leadership.

Alvesson and Spicer (2011) critiqued the decontextualization and oversimplification common in leadership-as-metaphor studies. Given that the majority of data were drawn from theory texts, these studies lack empirical metaphors of leadership in daily organizational discourse. Empirical evidence of metaphors may help scholars understand how the concept is coconstructed in the moment among organizational actors. In their book, *Metaphors We Lead by: Understanding Leadership in the Real World*, Alvesson, Spicer, and the contributing authors (2011) focused on an inductive metaphorical analysis to demonstrate how the creative interrogation of metaphors of leadership might allow a deeper understanding of the complexity and ambiguity associated with the topic. This method allowed the researchers not only to consider how leaders and followers both use metaphors of leadership to coconstruct what leadership is in the moment, but also to consider how their use of leadership metaphors might obscure or highlight certain nuanced aspects of leadership. Following a CCO perspective, Alvesson and Spicer (2011) explained that metaphors fundamentally shape how scholars and practitioners ascribe meaning to leadership. In their iterative analysis, they found common leadership

metaphors which help to shape "folk knowledge" of the meaning of leadership. For example, like the common organization-as-machine metaphor, one of their coauthors explores the related leaders-as-cyborgs metaphor (Muhr, 2011). Alvesson and Spicer (2011) also contend that a metaphorical analysis can demonstrate the "dark-side" aspect of leadership, often missed or assumed in other types of leadership studies.

In sum, metaphors have been championed as a strategic leadership language tool, as a means to highlight certain social realities, and as a method for understanding what leadership is and how it functions through discourse. Studies of leadership metaphors have also been critiqued for their oversimplification and problematic assumptions, such as the prosocial function of metaphor and leadership in general. Future research should consider the value of metaphorical analysis in uncovering muted scripts and discourse surrounding the coconstruction of leadership, as well as how the meaning of leadership might change over time.

SEE ALSO: Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO); Leadership Communication; Metaphors in Communication; Metaphors in Organization

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