Images of Organisation

James Lawley

"All theories of organisation and management are based on implicit images or metaphors that persuade us to see, understand, and imagine situations in partial ways. Metaphors create insight. But they also distort. They have strengths. But they also have limitations. In creating ways of seeing, they create ways of not seeing. Hence there can be no single theory or metaphor that gives an all-purpose point of view. There can be no 'correct theory' for structuring everything we do."

Gareth Morgan [1]

If you are a consultant, facilitator or manager interested in organisations and how they do and don't work, then Gareth Morgan's books, *Images of Organization* and *Imaginization* are a 'must read'.

Images of Organization

The central thesis of this book is that *all* theories of organisation and management are based on implicit metaphor, and that metaphors play a paradoxical role: they are vital to understanding and highlighting certain aspects of organisations, while at the same time they restrict understanding by backgrounding or ignoring others.

Morgan's theoretical stance is clearly aligned with that of linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson who have done so much to raise awareness of the pervasiveness and fundamental nature of metaphor. They say,

In all aspects of life ... we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how

we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor. [2]

Take for example the very common metaphor that an organisation is like a machine. We think in terms of 'inputs and outputs', maximising 'production' and making 'efficiency the driving force'. When things are going well we say the organisation is 'running like clockwork', a 'well-oiled engine' or an 'assembly line'. When they are not, then communication has 'broken down' and 'things need fixing' because there is 'a spanner in the works'. In response we want to get to the 'nuts and bolts' of the operation and intervene at the point of maximum 'leverage'. We conduct 'time and motion' studies, regard people as 'cogs in a wheel', and attempt to quantify and measure everything. We establish human 'resources' departments, allocate 'manpower' and recruit to 'fill a slot'. And all because the organisation loves 're-engineering'. Gareth Morgan says, "One of the most basic problems of modern management is that the mechanical way of thinking is so ingrained in our everyday conception of organisations that it is often difficult to organise in any other way". [3] To open up our thinking he seeks to do three things:

(1) To show that many conventional ideas about organisation and management are based on a small number of taken-for-granted images and metaphors.

(2) To explore a number of alternative metaphors to create new ways of thinking about organisation.

(3) To show how metaphor can be used to analyse and diagnose problems and to improve the management and design of organisations.

Morgan illustrates his ideas by exploring eight archetypical metaphors of organisation: Machines, Organisms, Brains, Cultures, Political Systems,

Psychic Prisons, Flux and Transformation, Instruments of Domination (see box).

Archetypical Metaphors for Organisations

(and associated concepts)

Machines

Efficiency, waste, maintenance, order, clockwork, cogs in a wheel, programmes, inputs and outputs, standardisation, production, measurement and control, design

Organisms

Living systems, environmental conditions, adaptation, life cycles, recycling, needs, homeostasis, evolution, survival of the fittest, health, illness

Brains

Learning, parallel information processing, distributed control, mindsets, intelligence, feedback, requisite variety, knowledge, networks

Cultures

Society, values, beliefs, laws, ideology, rituals, diversity, traditions, history, service, shared vision and mission, understanding, qualities, families

Political Systems

Interests and rights, power, hidden agendas and back room deals, authority, alliances, party-line, censorship, gatekeepers, leaders, conflict management

Psychic Prisons

Conscious & unconscious processes, repression & regression, ego, denial, projection, coping & defence mechanisms, pain & pleasure principle, dysfunction, workaholics

Flux and Transformation

Constant change, dynamic equilibrium, flow, self-organisation, systemic wisdom, attractors, chaos, complexity, butterfly effect, emergent properties, dialectics, paradox

Instruments of Domination

Alienation, repression, imposing values, compliance, charisma, maintenance of power, force, exploitation, divide and rule, discrimination, corporate interest

In describing how each metaphor has been used by different organisational experts, *Images of Organisation* contains a wonderful summary of almost every management theory ever expounded. If you want an overview of Taylorism and time and motion studies; organisational needs analysis, open systems and contingency theory; organisational ecology; cybernetic and holographic thinking; corporate culture; organisations as a collection of interests, conflicts and power;

psychoanalytic theory; self-organising systems; Marxian dialectics; or framing and reframing, they are all in this book.

The final chapter presents an example of Gareth Morgan's organisational analysis applied to a small firm employing 150 people. He splits the process into two stages. First he uses each of the eight metaphors described above as a "frame" through which to view the organisation and to produce multiple" diagnostic readings". Then he engages in a "critical evaluation" of each reading to produce a "storyline" that brings them together in a meaningful way and implies a course of action.

Imaginization

While *Images of Organisation* is highly theoretical, *Imaginization* is devoted to the practical art of using metaphor for organisational analysis and creative management. *Imaginization,* with its cartoons and large print, has a completely different style. Throughout, the principle is: "It is impossible to develop new styles of organisation and management while continuing to think in old ways". [4] It shows how metaphors can be applied to organisational change, resolving conflicting ideas, identifying core problems, reading and reshaping teams, creativity, and rethinking products and services.

Although Morgan is at pains to avoid asserting the supremacy of any given metaphor or theoretical perspective, it is clear that he prefers a relativistic, self-organising approach to management. To manage multiple decentralised teams and projects, for example, he offers the metaphor of a spider plant.

You can use the metaphor of a spider plant (or any other metaphor for that matter) in the following exercise: [5]

1. Select an organisational unit for the exercise (team, department, project, company, etc.).

2. List as many of the characteristics of the spider plant as you can. (eg. Spider plants begin to grow new shoots when they outgrow their pots. As the plant reaches out to search for new ground it receives nourishment from the mother plant. When the new plant has established roots and is able to sustain itself, the linking shoot is no longer necessary.)

3. For each characteristic, identify where there are, and where there are not, parallels in your organisational unit.

4. Consider how well the metaphor fits your organisation, and the new insights this creates.

5. Letting your imagination run wild, 'stretch' the metaphor of the spider plant to think about how your organisation *could* be. In other words, use the metaphor as the basis for a new organisational design.

6. What are the differences between the newly designed and the existing organisation? What new insights for shaping management processes emerge?

For example, say your reading of your current company (step 3) is that "Unlike a real spider plant, the only thing growing in this organisation is what's in the pot. The central plant is being fed by the offshoots. Their life is being drained away". You might realise (step 4), "If this carries on the offshoots will die, and the central plant will suffer. In fact it has already started to wither". The metaphor can now be used to create a new design (step 5), "If the stems of the offshoots represent the flow of resources and values, they need to be strong and healthy so that resources can flow both ways. That would encourage more offshoots rather than stifle new initiatives". You might conclude (step 6), "We've been so focussed on the

competition between the pot and the offshoots we've never thought of developing the stems. We could even use them to integrate the whole organisation".

Conclusion

Images of Organisation was written entirely from the consultant's viewpoint. In *Imaginization,* however, Morgan recognises that people within organisations can describe *their own* metaphors and create new ones. He concludes, "The challenge facing the modern manager is to become accomplished in the art of using metaphor: To find appropriate ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations with which they have to deal". [6] This is not some 'nice to have' tool, but an indispensable skill. Whether you realise it or not, you, and everyone around you, are using metaphors all the time, and are taking decisions based on those metaphors.

© 2001 James Lawley

References

Morgan, Gareth, *Images of Organisation,* Sage, 1986/1997.

Morgan, Gareth, *Imaginization,* Sage, 1997.

Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors we Live By,* University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Lawley, James & Tompkins, Penny, Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling, 2000