

Keep Your Metaphor . . . Please!

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Vaudeville comedian Henny Youngman delivered his classic one-liner over and over again: "Take my wife . . . please!" OK, so it doesn't sound so funny in print. Trust me, Youngman's facial expression, intonation, and timing made it funny. The purpose of this article is to update Youngman's classic one-liner for the HRD profession. Here it is: "Keep your metaphor . . . please!"

I have said it before, and I say it again: metaphors are lousy inquiry tools and great communication tools. If the choice is between learning about analysis of variance or metaphors, choose analysis of variance. Once any serious inquiry is complete, feel free to carefully use metaphors to communicate the results. If you are about to engage in inquiry, don't consider using metaphors for anything truly important within the journey . . . please. Metaphors may be a nice kick-off for a step in an inquiry or analysis process, but get off them as soon as possible.

Not only are metaphors lousy inquiry tools; they can be down right anti-intellectual. I did not start off thinking this way. I was initially enthralled with the idea of metaphors. More than a decade ago, Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organizations* (1986) was required reading in an HRD strategic planning class I taught. It was soon found to be extremely limited in helping to gain a mature understanding of organizations and the milieu in which they function.

Back in the same time period, I also engaged in a genuine effort at exploring the power and utility of metaphors, gathering together a group of intelligent and motivated graduate students to go on the journey. Before we came to any conclusions about metaphors, we conducted two exercise sessions exploring their use. One of our members had read a few articles on metaphors to gain understanding; he guided us through the two sessions. In both instances, the discussions were engaging, and the results were dismal.

One of the sessions had the group using metaphors to understand and explain the HRD Research Center at the University of Minnesota. A number of rival metaphors were proposed. The one that stuck was "a castle without walls." There was some initial face validity in light of the popular image of the center, but the metaphor quickly got out of hand. The group focused on the metaphor and not the center. The metaphor picture had to be filled in with a king, a queen, a moat, knights with armor, and a drawbridge. Until

somebody stopped us, no one realized how silly and anti-intellectual the exchange had become.

As for gaining understanding of the HRD Research Center, the vision and mission of the center never even surfaced using the metaphor approach. I contend that using any number of available rigorous organizational analysis methods would have never come up with a castle-without-walls perspective (let alone the moat and the other stuff). Although our group was still optimistic about using metaphors, we engaged in another exercise the following week. We came up with the same poor results.

The HRD profession traditionally overvalues perception data (see Swanson and Holton, 1999) and undervalues the hard work of system analysis (Rummler and Brache, 1995). Playing around with metaphors as a substitute for rigorous analysis and inquiry moves the profession backward. Still, we should become more skilled at developing word and visual metaphors as a means of *communicating* the results of our analysis and inquiry efforts.

In summary, I advocate using strong and well-defined analysis and inquiry methods, while using simple and direct language to communicate the results. Metaphors lack the precision and rigor required for analysis and inquiry work of HRD.

References

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