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Using the Power of Resonant Metaphor to Increase Leadership Effectiveness

Dennis N.T. Perkins, Paul R. Kessler, and Jillian B. Murphy

Leaders and their coaches often use stories and images to communicate important messages. While many are aware that metaphors can be powerful, the precise reasons for their effectiveness may be less obvious. This article offers a framework for understanding the nature of metaphors; the reasons why metaphors have such a significant impact on human behavior; and the special characteristics of metaphors we characterize as “resonant.” The authors demonstrate how resonant metaphors – vivid, emotionally charged images and stories – act as powerful lenses that influence the way people see the world, themselves and others. Using case studies drawn from their experience as coaches, Perkins, Kessler, and Murphy outline approaches to finding and using resonant metaphors, and we list some important caveats for their application. By drawing on the power of resonant metaphors, coaches and the leaders they advise can increase their effectiveness and produce consequential change.

Shaun¹ had a big problem. The formidable, well-respected CEO of a powerful financial services company in Manhattan, Shaun had just made the case for a major strategic initiative. It was a move that he believed could change the future of the firm for years to come. But staring into the faces of his senior team members, he felt his energy drained by their frowns and hesitant expressions.

Shaun knows it’s irrational: He recognizes that some people are slow to warm up to new ideas that they eventually embrace. He knows he’s fallible and in principle, he welcomes a well-founded critique. In practice however, any perceived negativity becomes a distracting source of anxiety that saps his energy and enthusiasm.

Over lunch with his coach, David, Shaun shared this latest setback. David pondered the situation: He was sitting across from an exceptional executive—a dynamic leader with intellectual breadth and a unique ability to move from strategic clouds to tactical weeds. He was a commanding presence in the boardroom with a booming voice, yet authentically interested in the personal details of others’ lives. “A remarkable individual,” David thought. “Like Superman. Yes, almost exactly like Superman!”

Shaun’s abilities were so exceptional that the word “super” was by no means a hyperbole. Yet, when faced with criticism, Shaun felt the energy drain from his body. Criticism had the same effect on Shaun that Kryptonite had on Superman. In the comic book

¹We have changed all the names of individuals and organizations to protect our clients’ identities

series, this fictional green substance – originating from the planet Krypton – robbed Superman of his strength. It was an apt metaphor.

David thought for a minute, then remarked: “Shaun, your team’s negativity is your kryptonite. You’ve got to figure out how you’re going to get it into a lead box before it depletes your super-powers.” Shaun hesitated for a moment and then laughed. The image of Superman sinking to his knees in the face of green kryptonite was comic, but the metaphor worked. Shaun realized that unless he could compartmentalize his feelings, he would lose his effectiveness as a leader.

The kryptonite metaphor became an ongoing point of conversation, and an important tool that enabled Shaun to manage the vulnerability triggered by scowls and criticism. He shared the story with his chief of staff, who found a box containing a green kryptonite-like marble. To this day, Shaun keeps the box on his piano at home, with the lid closed to prevent the escape of the toxic rays. And David created a plastic wallet card with the words, “Say No to Kryptonite” that Shaun has in his home office as a reminder.

This one image did not, by itself, magically solve all of Shaun’s problems. But it did make it possible for him to take a significant step forward in increasing his effectiveness as a leader.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A METAPHOR?

Metaphors are everywhere. One article (Sherman & Freas, 2004) describes the world of executive coaching as “the Wild West;” another (Olalla, 2008) portrays “the dance of coaching.” An association (Human Resource Planning Society, 2008) declares that “the CEO is the rock star of business.” One newspaper (McCracken, Lucchetti, & Kelly, 2008) tells us about “The Weekend That Wall Street Died,” and another (McKay, 2008) asks, “Can New CEO Put Fizz Back in Coke?” and informs us that he “Takes Helm This Week with Plans to Recharge U.S. Carbonated Drink Sales.” As if this weren’t enough, a book called *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson, 1998) has become an international bestseller. Metaphors are everywhere, but what exactly are they?

The word metaphor comes to us from the Greek word *metaphora*, and the translation means, literally, “to carry over, to transfer.” In their seminal book, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) offer a helpful way of conceptualizing metaphors: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”

As such, a metaphor connects two different objects or concepts, telling us that one thing is, in fact, another. Metaphorically, the

Clearly, we rely on metaphors not only to transmit ideas, but also to communicate them in a memorable and engaging form.

unregulated world of executive coaching has become the chaotic, untamed western frontier. A search for qualified coaches triggers a “stampede” of applicants “kicking up dust.” The CEO, with celebrity status, becomes a rock star surrounded by screaming fans. And financial institutions don’t just go bankrupt; they flame out, tank, go under -- or die a painful, metaphorical death.

Metaphors have been studied extensively in linguistics, philosophy, psychology, science and education, and much has been written about the use of metaphors as a literary device (Andreas & Faulkner, 1994; Leary, 1990; Margolis, 1957; Morgan, 1986; Ortony, 1993). As a result, scholars sometimes make distinctions that are lost on the layperson, and – as in other academic realms – experts can disagree. Building on Lakoff and Johnson’s definition, however, we use the term metaphor for *any symbol, phrase, or story in which we understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another.*

Our intent in this article is to illustrate the value of metaphors as a means of increasing leadership effectiveness, not to present a comprehensive description of the many aspects of metaphor usage. This being said, it may be useful to provide some context to explain our perspective on the use of figurative language.

Common forms of figurative language

- **Allegory:** A story that is symbolically representative of a larger abstract concept. A fable or parable is a short allegory with a clear moral (e.g., Aesop’s fable, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, teaches young children about the danger of lying)
- **Analogy:** A comparison that relies on logical inference to show that part of one thing resembles another (e.g., the working human brain is similar to a computer)
- **Metonymy:** The substitution of one word for another word with which it is associated (e.g., the press for the news media, or the oval office for the presidency)
- **Simile:** A comparison between two things using the words “like” or “as” (her eyes were like diamonds)
- **Synecdoche:** A figure of speech in which part of something is used to refer to the whole (e.g., “all hands on deck.”), or in which a whole is used to refer to part something (e.g., “Canada won the hockey game.”)

Figurative language comes in many forms, but metaphor, analogy, and simile are perhaps the most familiar. An open simile states an explicit comparison using the words “like” or “as.” For example, saying “A coaching client is like a dance partner” creates a simile. If we say that a coaching relationship in some ways resembles a dance, we have drawn an analogy. An analogy often highlights similarities between two things but also recognizes their differences.

But if we were to say, “A coaching client is a dance partner and a coaching process is a dance,” we've constructed a metaphor. We're not saying that one thing is like another or the one thing resembles another. We are saying one thing really *is* another, and have transferred the meaning from dancing to coaching. The metaphor makes a more powerful statement than its figurative cousins.

WHY DO WE CARE SO MUCH ABOUT METAPHORS?

Metaphors are colorful and they make good newspaper headlines. But metaphors are more than words. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have argued, metaphors are “containers for meaning” that change the fundamental way in which we experience the world.

Though we may not realize it, we all use metaphors to make sense of our often frenzied lives. We build mental maps to organize the intricate details of our daily realities - to simplify the complexities. One person wakes up early to prep for a big meeting thinking, “How can I win this race?” Another envisions a contentious compensation debate as a wrestling match with a loudmouthed opponent. Though unconscious, these images and metaphors change the way we perceive the world.

Many metaphors incorporate imagery or sensory qualities that give them power lacking in ordinary, literal language. When we hear that boxer Rubin Carter was nicknamed Hurricane Carter, we visualize the speed and ferocity of his fighting style. Consciously or subconsciously, we may connect the word “Hurricane” with our real or imagined experience of hurricanes as powerful noisy, fast, frightening and destructive. Metaphor yokes rationality with imagination.

Table 1. Life without metaphors

<u>Violent Phrase</u>	<u>Alternative</u>
Kill two birds with one stone	Get two for the price of one
There's more than one way to skin a cat	There are different ways to solve a problem
Take a stab at it	Go for it!
Get away with murder	Avoid consequences
It's an uphill battle	It's next to impossible
You're dead meat	You're in serious trouble
Kick it around	Consider the options
That's a low blow	That's outside the rules
Hit them where it hurts	Find their vulnerability
Crash the party	Show up anyway
Shoot yourself in the foot	Undermine your own position
Hit the computer key	Press the computer key
Blow out of the water	Reduced to nothing

In some ways, it is easiest to understand why metaphors are so important by trying to imagine life without them (see Table 1). This list of “violent” or “militaristic” phrases was published by a teacher’s association intent on replacing violent images with “catchy nonviolent alternatives” (*Harper’s Magazine*, 1995).

While the goal of the teachers’ association is certainly admirable, a brief look at the list reveals the problem: the language may be peaceful, but the alternatives are overwhelmingly weak, and anything but catchy. Clearly, we rely on metaphors not only to transmit ideas, but also to communicate them in a memorable and engaging form.

It is hard to overstate the power of metaphor, and it is difficult to find a better illustration of its effectiveness than in the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. In his analysis of Lincoln’s legacy, historian James McPherson (1991) argues that Lincoln “won the war with metaphors.”

McPherson contends that Jefferson Davis, who had benefited from the best American schools, was drawn toward abstractions and platitudes. A graduate of West Point, Davis was trained in rhetoric, logic, literature, and science. He was well-read, could write logically, and he could quote leading authorities. What he could not do well was elicit energy and enthusiasm on the part of his followers.

Lincoln, by contrast, had only a year of formal schooling. Essentially self-taught, Lincoln worked on farms, split rails, and spent time in rural communities. His favorite books were rich in figurative language: the Bible, *Aesop’s Fables*, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and Shakespearean plays.

Lincoln’s speeches and writing were filled with images, and he was famous for telling stories. Some disapproved of his lively tales – considering it undignified or, perhaps, un-presidential – yet, Lincoln was undeterred. His goal was to reach and influence common people, not to impress his peers.

Lincoln’s metaphorical prowess was used to good effect in communicating with his commanding generals during the Civil War. In one instance, Lincoln (2008) telegraphed General Hooker to say, “If the head of Lee’s army is at Martinsburg, and the tail of it is on the Plank road between Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the animal must be very slim somewhere.” There was no mistaking his message: ‘Find the vulnerable spot of the animal and attack.’

Lincoln’s ability with language is exemplified by his now famous speech at the Springfield, Illinois statehouse. Speaking before a thousand delegates for the Republican State Convention in 1858, Lincoln declared, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

While there were certainly other leadership qualities that enabled Lincoln to be an effective president, his ability to state complex ideas clearly, and connect with people through the use of stories and metaphors was a significant advantage over Davis.

He believed, as we know, that the country could not endure half slave and half free. His speech was impassioned and persuasive, often eloquent. But the image that captured his stand against slavery is the one that prevails in our memory: the vivid metaphor of a house divided.

While there were certainly other leadership qualities that enabled Lincoln to be an effective president, his ability to state complex ideas clearly, and connect with people through the use of stories and metaphors was a significant advantage over Davis. Perhaps historian David Potter's suggestion (1960) that "if the Union and the Confederacy had exchanged presidents, the South might have won the war," does not seem so farfetched after all.

We care about metaphors, then, because they are fundamental to the way we construct the world. They serve as a bridge to those around us – they enhance our ability to understand, communicate and influence.

THE MOST POWERFUL METAPHORS "RESONATE"

In our work, we use the term *resonant metaphors* to characterize metaphors that make the deepest, most powerful connections. They are the metaphors that make a difference.

Perhaps the concept of a resonant metaphor is best explained by exploring the meaning of the term resonance. In physics, mechanical and electrical systems oscillate at maximum amplitudes at certain frequencies – their resonant frequencies (Merriam-Webster, 1983; Daintith, 2009). At these frequencies, even small periodic forces can produce increasingly larger amplitude vibrations, because the system stores vibrational energy. Resonance occurs with all types of vibrations or waves, but perhaps the clearest example is that of acoustic resonance. An object, say, a guitar string, has inherent natural frequencies of vibration. It easily vibrates at those frequencies and less strongly at others.

We have found the concept of resonance to be extremely useful in thinking about the metaphors that are most effective for executive coaching and leadership development. From this perspective, a resonant metaphor is one that produces the greatest "natural" impact for an individual. We believe that resonant metaphors are characterized by the following key features:

- ***They are vivid.*** Though metaphors are clearly part of our everyday language, resonant metaphors stand out from the pack; they are "fresh." Consequently, they rise above the noise, get people's attention and affect the way they see the world.

Native metaphors resonate because they are already part of the person's psyche. But a novel metaphor with the right characteristics can be imported or "adopted," and ultimately incorporated into an individual's personal mosaic of resonant images.

- ***They make a deep, personal connection.*** This connection often occurs because the metaphor is associated with a memorable experience in the life of the individual.
- ***They are often shaped by physical experience and embodied in who we are.*** Because resonant metaphors are embedded in our neural structures, they are inextricably linked to our emotions and feelings. Though we may not be aware of their power, these metaphors strongly influence the way we see, feel, and behave (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).
- ***They provide a useful set of “lenses” for looking at a situation or challenge.*** Resonant metaphors don't exist in a vacuum. We can use metaphors as tools to help people and organizations see things in a new and meaningful way.
- ***They have staying power.*** We are most interested in finding metaphors that not only resonate in the moment, but are valued and sustained in memory over time.

Resonant metaphors can be “native,” or they can be “novel.” Native metaphors are resident within an individual's personal or cultural experience; they are preexisting and waiting to be discovered. Novel metaphors are fresh, beyond the realm of a person's experience or typical way of construing the world.

Native metaphors resonate because they are already part of the person's psyche. But a novel metaphor with the right characteristics can be imported or “adopted,” and ultimately incorporated into an individual's personal mosaic of resonant images.

A final point about resonant metaphors: while we think of resonant metaphors as having these key features, the concept isn't binary. We believe that metaphors can have degrees of resonance. The most powerful images are ones that possess each of the characteristics we have outlined, but resonant metaphors can strike softer chords and still be highly valuable for coaches and leaders.

HOW RESONANT METAPHORS CAN BE USED

Establish rapport

There are many ways to open channels of communication with others. At a surface level, clothing makes an obvious statement. In the executive suite of a big financial services company, a fashionable suit, smart tie, and cuff links are all common. Wearing a similar outfit that fits in this environment makes it easier to communicate, because people are less likely to be distracted by an aberrant fashion statement. These superficial

things may contribute to rapport; but resonant metaphors go deeper, and can establish a real connection.

Isabel (an executive coach) had just scheduled her first meeting with Max, a senior executive at a leading computer technology company. She knew how critical it would be to connect with him right from the start and had spent a considerable amount of time researching his background on the Internet. In the process, Isabel found an interview from a leading business magazine in which Max expressed frustration at people who tried to “perfume the pig,” or gloss over unpleasant facts in the hope of looking good.

Max could have used another metaphor and said “Don't sweep anything under the rug.” But he didn't, and the vivid picture of a pig sprinkled with perfume is an image that resonates for Max. It's one that also packs a lot of meaning for this staff, who have learned to give him the facts, no matter how unpleasant.

After the usual meeting pleasantries, Isabel smiled and said, “Max, I understand you don't think much of perfumed pigs.” Max looked at her and laughed, wondering how Isabel knew of his favorite expression. When Isabel cited the somewhat obscure article that she had found, Max was impressed. He appreciated the fact that Isabel had taken the time to find the interview, and he now shared an element of porcine humor with the coach. They had connected.

The perfumed pig image was effective in communicating with Max, but it is not the strongest form of a resonant metaphor. Deeper levels of rapport can be established with metaphors rooted in significant life experiences.

Understand the lenses through which others see the world

Mike, the leader of an international accounting firm, began life as a professional hockey player. His early career was typical of a young hockey player, with excitement both on and off the rink.

Mike was a hockey player, but he wasn't just any kind of hockey player. Mike was the player given the assignment of going head-to-head with tough guys from opposing teams. Mike was an “enforcer,” also known in hockey circles as a “goon.”

Not surprisingly, in his current leadership role, Mike can be tough. Knowing Mike's early experience as an athlete makes it easier to understand why he is so direct and fearless in dealing with organizational quarrels. It also helps explain why Mike is puzzled by others' inability to confront organizational problems head on.

Devyn, a gifted executive, was once captain of a renowned college football team with a legendary history. People marvel at his ability

Those two images — a presidential debate with a pacing McCain and a placid Obama, along with the metaphor of Bill's daily firefight — helped Bill direct his passion, even with the extraordinary stressors he encounters every day.

to stay calm in the most stressful business situations. In fact, his boss was heard to remark, “His feathers are never ruffled.” But Devyn remembers what it was like to be an offensive lineman in a high-pressure bowl game with thousands of screaming fans. When the going gets tough, Devyn knows he's been there before. He recalls the acronym given to him by his coach – WIN – and focuses his energy on “What’s Important Now.”

Xiu Li is a dynamic and thoughtful young woman with a Ph.D. in engineering. Born in China and educated in the United States, Xiu Li has been identified as a high potential future leader in a well-known technology firm.

Xiu Li’s grandmother could neither read nor write, but she instilled a strong desire to succeed in the family. This family heritage was reinforced by a cultural change engendered by Chairman Mao. As a child, Xiu Li frequently heard his expression quoted, “Women hold up half the sky.”

Mao could have said, “Women are equal.” He could have said men and women should both succeed. But instead he chose the more powerful image of women and men together, figuratively holding up the sky. It was an image that Xiu Li never forgot; it empowered her to believe that she could triumph in any endeavor.

Mao’s metaphor contributed to Xiu Li’s success, but other cultural expressions did not. One such saying, “The well and the river should never meet,” created problems as Xiu Li encountered organizational boundary issues in the American firm where she worked. Though she often saw problems that needed fixing, Xiu Li was reluctant to intervene. For her, it felt like the river would be touching the well, and this belief inhibited her from taking action.

In an effort to help, Xiu Li’s coach attempted to extend the imagery. He suggested that the well and the river might, in fact, meet underground. But for Xiu Li, the expanded metaphor fell flat: As she put it, “The scientific fact is that the water in the river comes from a totally different source from the water in a well; and they are at different levels too!”

Though the coach’s metaphorical annex collapsed, the dialogue helped gain greater clarity about Xiu Li’s lenses for viewing the world. And he learned that, while the well and the river may never meet or become close friends, they can still be at peace with and respect one another.

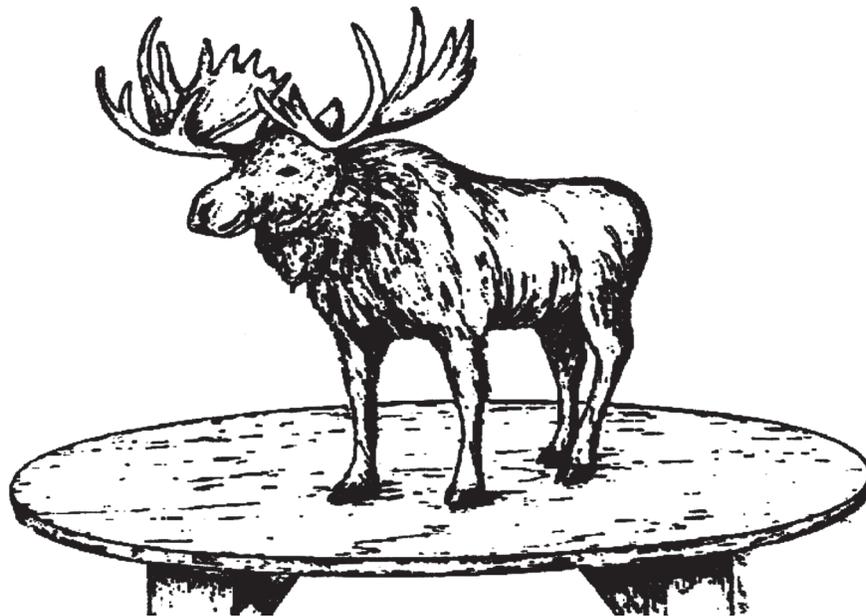
Not every leader has played hockey or football, or has grown up in a far different culture. But every leader has had powerful life experiences that shape the way they see the world. In one way or another, these experiences become the metaphors they live by. And an understanding of these metaphors creates an avenue for deep connection.

Jonathan, who had no interest in drinking poison hemlock, was struck by the possibility. He became much more direct and forthcoming in stating his views. And because he was so genuinely creative and well intentioned, he became far more effective in arguing his position.

Raise difficult issues in a nonthreatening way

Ironically, the emphasis on teamwork in today's corporate culture can serve to drive conflicts underground. In this subterranean state, unresolved issues become latent sources of tension. In spite of the importance of dealing with conflict, being direct can be difficult for many leaders (and team members). In a sincere but misguided desire to promote harmony, otherwise skillful executives avoid the tough issues, or fail to create a climate in which conflict is freely expressed.

In our work with executive teams, we have enlisted an unlikely metaphor to help: "the moose on the table." It seemed to us that the image of a large, hairy, ungainly moose – sitting in the middle of a table and blocking communication – would vividly symbolize the issues being avoided by the group. And, while imposing, we felt that the moose would be a strange enough image that it would add an element of humor to otherwise tense situations.



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Figure 1. The moose on the table

We have been amazed at the ability of *The Moose* to surface issues long ignored. In one leading technology organization, for example, the CEO and his team were struggling with their inability to create and manage new businesses successfully. They knew that this was a fundamental problem, but they were unsure of why it persisted. As part of a study organized to unravel the mystery, we conducted a "moose round-up." The results were astonishing. The "Moose List," included in the final report, identified the following issues:

- We approach every new product as if it must be a home run, achieving the same level of success as our earliest successes.
- We are, in fact, becoming a technology-averse company.
- The revenue plan drives our resource allocation and decision-making process.
- We have developed a tolerance for mediocrity.
- We are looking for a “magic product” to save the company.
- We have no real competitive marketing competence.
- The operating plan cycle is not flexible enough to allow timely response to business initiatives.

"A man is always a teller of tales. He lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story."

- Jean-Paul Sartre (1964)

The report, along with a stuffed moose, was presented to the CEO, who accepted it with a smile. The conclusions were not ones he was delighted to hear, but he knew that – once identified – the issues were ones that could be systematically attacked.

Why is *The Moose* so effective? We believe that this ungainly animal does a number of things very well. First, it legitimizes and rewards people for being open, and it provides a shared vocabulary for doing so. “In the spirit of the moose, I’d like to say...” became a common phrase. Second, the comic image takes the edge off issues that can create tension and divisiveness. Third, identifying an issue as a *Moose* provides psychological distance. It changes the frame from an internal conflict to an external problem to be solved. Once the conflict becomes a shared problem, team members can work together to find solutions.

Help people stop doing things that limit their effectiveness

People frequently do things that they know are dysfunctional, but have difficulty extinguishing the behavior. A metaphorical “wrang-wrang” can help. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1963) first introduced the concept of a “wrang-wrang” in the science fiction novel, *Cat’s Cradle*. In the story, a wrang-wrang is described as a person who steers others away from a direction that, on closer scrutiny, is clearly absurd. A wrang-wrang, by being who they are, shows you who you surely *don’t* want to be.

Bill is the passionate leader of a thriving professional services firm. His honesty, directness, and genuine caring have earned him the respect of the entire organization. At the same time, his passion and drive sometimes gets him into trouble. Bill begins his day at 4 a.m., joining a group of Marines for his early-morning workout. After intensive physical exercise, he drives an hour to work and puts in long hours at the office. After driving home and spending time with his family, he then works long hours into the

night. Bill is enormously positive and energetic, but he also carries a huge burden and a sense of responsibility for his firm's success.

During stressful times, and especially at the end of a long day or late at night, Bill could become infuriated by others' mistakes or poor judgment. On many occasions, Bill would send "flaming" emails, berating an offending member of his staff. At other times, Bill would get carried away in meetings, and say things he later regretted. Bill always apologized and people always understood, but the behavior created unnecessary distractions and impeded his effectiveness.

When Bill came to his coach for help, the 2008 political campaign was at a frenzy. McCain and Obama were locked in a heated battle for the presidency and the outcome was far from certain. For many people, the presidential debates became an important arena that would influence how they cast their vote.

While Obama's lack of experience had been a significant concern, his performance during the debates made a difference. His calm responses contrasted starkly with McCain's pacing and argumentative jabs. Even many who supported McCain felt that the "No Drama Obama" looked more presidential.

Bill's coach pointed out the contrast, and it made a big impression. The image of an impassioned McCain pacing back and forth in front of the camera became Bill's wrang-wrang: a metaphor that stopped him from hitting the send button on flaming e-mails. He still wrote them, but they went to his recycle bin rather than to their inbox.

The wrang-wrang illustrates what *not* to do, but it is not a metaphor that provides a positive alternative. The opportunity to provide a more constructive approach to stressful situations presented itself when Bill approached his coach – a former Marine with experience in combat. How, Bill wondered, was the coach able to maintain a sense of composure and such calm demeanor? The coach chose a metaphor from his past: "Bill, you're in a firefight every day. You need to exercise fire discipline and calm the troops down; that's the way to get through a firefight."

Those two images – a presidential debate with a pacing McCain and a placid Obama, along with the metaphor of Bill's daily firefight – helped Bill direct his passion, even with the extraordinary stressors he encounters every day.

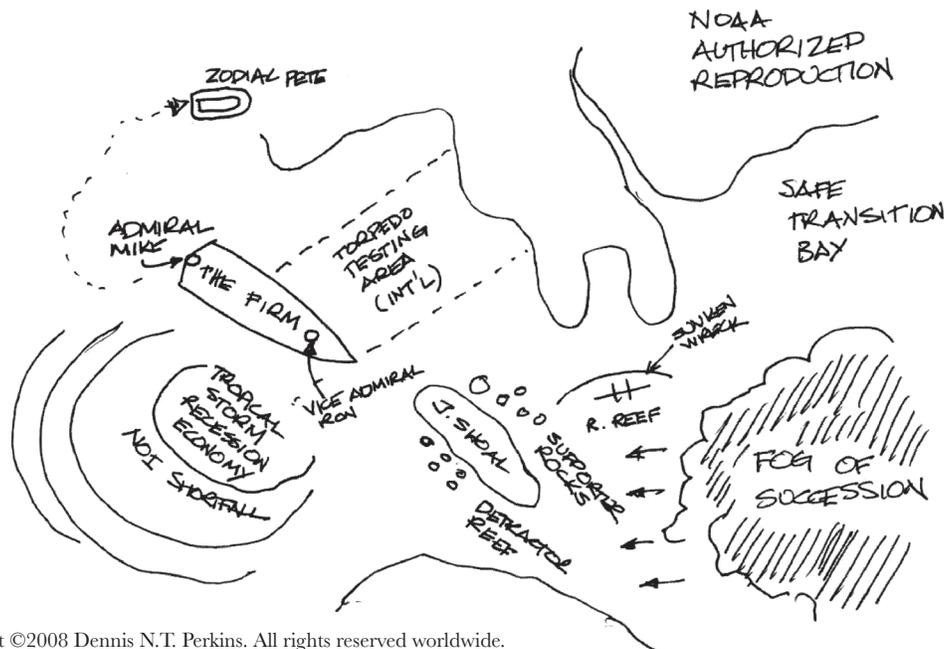
Helping people solve problems and envision the future

Metaphors help people step back, look at challenges in new ways, and see possibilities that were previously obscured. Mike, for example, was stymied by the prospect of a career transition. Like many of the other executives we have described, Mike

The story, when people are immersed in the experience, becomes a generative metaphor that leads to new perceptions, explanations and interventions.

was a resourceful individual with an exceptional ability to solve problems. He had built a successful professional service firm, and was sometimes described as a polymath: a “Renaissance Man” who excelled with a broad range of abilities. Nonetheless, his own career dilemma seemed insurmountable.

Mike sat down with his coach at a restaurant to discuss his situation. Knowing that Mike was an avid sailor, the coach asked him to describe the situation in detail. As each facet of the problem was identified, the coach drew an image on the paper tablecloth as if creating a nautical chart.



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Figure 2. Metaphorical map

As “Admiral Mike” began to examine the chart, his natural problem-solving skills kicked in. The voyage from his current position to “Safe Transition Bay” would not be an easy one, but the chart helped clarify the obstacles that were creating anxiety. It also enabled him to envision the course he would have to steer to get there as he navigated his way through economic storms, torpedoes, shoals, sunken wrecks, rocks, and fog.

Mike was a good sailor and a resourceful executive, and it did take more than a chart to bring about his career change. But the metaphorical map provided a tangible picture of the current challenges he was facing, and crystallized the things he would need to do to reach his destination. And the story has a happy ending: he made it to Safe Transition Bay!

Symbolize people's intention to change

Jonathan was a brilliant, creative engineer in a highly technical manufacturing organization. He was, without question, the most

inventive leader in the firm. Jonathan could solve problems, and his novel solutions went far beyond anything his colleagues had the capacity to envision. But, as innovative as Jonathan was, two barriers limited his effectiveness.

First, in an effort to persuade others that his solutions were the best, Jonathan was fond of using his own variation of the Socratic Method. In meetings he would pose a series of rhetorical questions, all intended to lead his peers through a step-by-step process to the conclusion that he had reached long before.

Jonathan believed that this indirect approach would be effective. Rather than telling people what to do, he thought that this clever technique would eventually lead to a group epiphany, and that everyone would ultimately embrace his perspective. Unfortunately for Jonathan, people caught on to his process and they felt manipulated. Once they realized what he was doing, his approach seemed patronizing and it created resentment. The Socratic Method backfired, and had just the opposite effect that he intended.

Jonathan's second problem was that he was perceived as disorganized in an engineering culture that valued precision. Colleagues valued his creativity, but were annoyed by his apparent lack of organizational skill. Especially vexing was his tendency to show up in meetings without a calendar or a pencil in his pocket. His colleagues – many of whom were equipped with a full array of writing equipment neatly organized in pocket protectors – were aghast.

Jonathan's coach used metaphors to address both problems. Focusing first on his Socratic style, the coach added a humorous twist to the death of Socrates. Socrates was reportedly forced to drink poison hemlock as a punishment for refusing to recognize the gods of the state, or alternatively for attempting to expose the ignorance of Athenian wise men.

Tongue-in-cheek, the coach suggested to Jonathan that Socrates' death may not have been caused by the formal charges against him, but rather by his use of the Socratic Method. Just as Jonathan's questioning style in meetings created frustration among his colleagues, perhaps it may have been the same case among the philosophers' fellow Athenians.

Jonathan, who had no interest in drinking poison hemlock, was struck by the possibility. He became much more direct and forthcoming in stating his views. And because he was so genuinely creative and well intentioned, he became far more effective in arguing his position.

Jonathan's problem with his reputation for disorganization was easily solved. While Jonathan was not quite as structured as some of his colleagues, he was actually quite organized. The problem

was largely one of perception. Jonathan's coach offered a simple prescription: "Every time you leave your office, pick up a pen and a calendar, and make sure a pencil is visible in your pocket." The pencil soon became a visible icon that signaled Jonathan's commitment to change, and his colleagues were impressed by his dramatic transformation. With his symbolic pencil and Socrates as his wrang-wrang, Jonathan's natural leadership ability took hold. With the support of his peers, he was eventually selected to lead the firm.

Especially in uncertain times, it is energizing to know that others have triumphed over insurmountable odds.

RICH GENERATIVE METAPHORS: THE STORY AS A SWISS ARMY KNIFE

Many of the previous examples use a single image or incident – a pencil, a pig, or a debate – to capture and convey an idea. But complex stories can become even more powerful metaphors that serve multiple ends. A captivating story, rich in images, is capable of transporting people to a dramatically different psychological space. The story, when people are immersed in the experience, becomes a generative metaphor that leads to new perceptions, explanations and interventions (Schön, 1983).

A number of colleagues have had success in using stories as platforms for improving leadership and teamwork. Patrick Lencioni's (2002) book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, offers a fable about a fictional organization to outline the steps needed to build a cohesive team. In *The Leadership Moment*, Michael Useem (1998) presents nine stories of triumph and disaster to show how leaders can make a difference. And Thomas Kolditz (2007) recounts gripping stories of SWAT teams, sky diving events, and an armored cavalry commander in *In Extremis Leadership: Leading as if Your Life Depends on It*.

Our approach to finding such a story sprang from our experience with harried executives facing the equivalent of Bill's firefight. We understood that the most resonant metaphors would be ones that bore some resemblance to their tumultuous daily lives. But we were also looking for a story with broad appeal, one that would resonate for a diverse range of people. The image of tracers and automatic weapons worked well for Bill, who had sought out a group of Marines as kindred spirits. But for others, combat images came with too much distracting baggage.

This led us to highlight stories of adventure and survival that did not involve combat or physical violence. These are the kinds of stories that we believed would contain many of the essential qualities of leadership and teamwork, but which were less likely to produce negative side effects. Then we set out to create a metaphor from an adventure story – to construct, if you will, a "*Metaventure*."²

² Metaventure® is a registered trademark of The Syncretics Group.

We studied hundreds of stories of individuals and groups that were pressed to the limits of survival—a place we came to call “*The Edge*.” We looked at epic adventures of polar exploration, such as the Amundsen-Scott race to the South Pole. We studied contemporary stories, including the Apollo XIII lunar mission and the 1996 Everest expedition chronicled in Jon Krakauer's (1997) bestseller, *Into Thin Air*.

While we found many superb adventure stories, one stood out. The saga of the legendary explorer, Ernest Shackleton and his 1914 Antarctic expedition was particularly appealing.

On December 5, 1914, Shackleton and 27 men sailed from South Georgia Island in the Southern Ocean aboard a wooden vessel named the *Endurance*. Their burning goal was to be the first to cross the Antarctic continent.

Forty-five days after their departure, disaster struck. *Endurance* was beset by solid pack ice, and the expedition was trapped. For nearly two years, Shackleton and his crew were stranded on the icy sea. They endured unimaginable hardships: brutal cold, total darkness, aching thirst, gnawing hunger, constant danger, and utter desolation. Facing these challenges with astonishing good cheer, Shackleton and his crew returned, without loss of life, after 634 days in the frozen South.



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Figure 3. The *Endurance*

As we began to share this story, both through writing and presentations, we saw the power of such a vivid “*Metaventure*.” People began to explore core questions essential to their own leadership and teamwork. How did Shackleton inspire his crew to such extraordinary levels of courage, unity, and commitment? What was their modern-day Antarctica? And most importantly, what were the ideas and principles that could be extracted from this resonant metaphor and applied to their leadership challenges?

Stories such as the *Endurance* expedition go beyond problem-solving; as resonant metaphors, their ability to inspire and encourage is extraordinary. Especially in uncertain times, it is energizing to know that others have triumphed over insurmountable odds. In addition, stories such as these provide hope as well as useful insights into how to succeed in demanding situations. They vividly illustrate the ten core leadership and teamwork strategies we believe are essential to triumph in the face of adversity.

Inspirational stories did not, of course, end with the heroic age of Antarctic exploration. Recently, we were all inspired by watching Captain “Sully” Sullenberger safely land the damaged US Airways Flight 1549 on New York’s Hudson River. In a staggering economy, this miraculous event lifted our spirits and reminded us how strong leadership and teamwork can truly make a difference in the face of adversity.

In our continuing search for stories that emphasize the power of teamwork in difficult conditions, we came across the remarkable story of the *AFR Midnight Rambler*, winners of the treacherous 1998 Sydney to Hobart race. This annual 723-mile, deep water challenge – often called the “Everest” of offshore ocean racing – is considered one of the toughest in the world. Unpredictable weather and seas make each race challenging, but the 1998 race proved to be the most perilous in the race’s 61-year history.

As the starting fleet of 115 boats sailed south down the coast of Australia, the fleet was hit by an unexpected “weather bomb” – a massive storm that created 80-foot waves and near 100 mph winds. Six sailors perished in the maelstrom, and another 42 were saved in what became the largest search and rescue operation in Australia’s history.



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Figure 4. The *AFR Midnight Rambler*

While many tried to maneuver around the storm, the crew of the *AFR Midnight Rambler* believed their best chance of survival lay in heading directly into its path. This courageous action, which allowed them to sail quickly through the storm, would not have been possible without a fully aligned team.

The decision to head into the eye of the storm, along with their extraordinary tenacity, optimism, courage, and teamwork, enabled this group of “amateurs” to out-perform professionals on larger boats. After 88 hours, the crew of the *AFR Midnight Rambler* arrived safely in Hobart, Tasmania, and was proclaimed the overall winner and awarded the coveted Tattersalls Trophy. They were the smallest boat in 10 years to win the iconic race.

These two *Metaventures*, the stories of the *Endurance* Expedition and the *AFR Midnight Rambler*, have had a tremendous impact as generative metaphors with executives. In at least one instance, they helped bring an organization back from the brink of disaster. See the following exhibit The story of the *Asian Times Ltd.*

FINDING AND USING RESONANT METAPHORS

To help Shaun, we searched for a metaphor that he would connect with—one that naturally evoked a deep response. Finding the right metaphor for an individual may take some work. It demands a deep understanding of an individual’s upbringing, life experiences, deeply held beliefs, hobbies, and even aesthetic sensibilities.

In the moment, *scanning for the use of figurative language* is an obvious way to identify images and stories that have particular importance for a person. But there are other approaches that will accelerate the process of identifying sources of resonance.

Do your homework

Gather any available biographical information about individuals, and search for stories about the organization in which he or she resides. In many cases, this important context will be available through public documents. Scouring the Internet will frequently produce little known facts, interviews, and other background information that can provide important clues for further exploration.

Ask questions

Our coaching assignments typically begin with a process in which we probe in an effort to understand the lenses through which an individual views the world. Here are some key questions we ask:

(continued on page 38)

The story of the *Asian Times Ltd.*

In October of 2004, Asian Times Ltd. was truly at “*The Edge*.” This family-owned newspaper had been struggling for years, and with capital reserves dwindling, would cease to exist in a mere six months. Realizing they were running out of options, the family turned to professional management. They hired a new CEO and issued a clear mandate: Do whatever is necessary to save the company.

Taking stock of the situation, CEO Sandeep Vivek knew that they faced enormous challenges, and that the path to recovery would be filled with obstacles. Relying on his professional relationships, Vivek spent the next 60 days handpicking a senior team and assessing the current state of the organization. One of his first priorities was to find a way to clearly convey to the team what they needed to turn the company around.

In January 2005, Vivek asked us to facilitate a two-day leadership session to define the key strategies that would move the business forward, and to identify the core leadership behaviors that would be essential to their success. We decided to use the *Endurance* story as a foundational metaphor for the work, and it accomplished a number of critical objectives.

First, the metaphor of being on an expedition helped the team to reframe their situation and see their dire situation in a fresh light. As they thought about their “expedition,” they became comfortable with the realization that challenges would occur, and in fact, should be expected. They’d have limited resources – rations would be in short supply – and there would be days when they would feel like giving up. As symbolic leadership would be critical, senior leaders would have to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the crew. They realized that this transformation was going to take years, perhaps even longer than Shackleton’s 634 day ordeal. The story put their own challenges into perspective, and at the same time helped the team converge on the key business priorities that would enable them to succeed on their journey.

Second, the *Endurance* story provided a framework for sharing our *Ten Strategies for Leadership Effectiveness*. By connecting these concepts to the resonant metaphor, the team saw how the leadership behaviors that made a difference on the *Endurance* expedition could help them on their own expedition. They were able to identify which strategies would be most critical, and once aligned on the key behaviors, they agreed how these strategies would be implemented on the leadership team and throughout the organization.

Third, the story provided a vivid example of what becomes possible when teams are completely aligned, focused, and committed. It is a truly inspirational story, and after hearing it, the senior team became markedly more optimistic about their chances for success. If Shackleton’s crew could survive the frozen south, why couldn’t they overcome their own Antarctica?

Over the next two years, the *Endurance* story became a central theme for the organizational transformation. They continued to call on the metaphor as they developed their organizational vision and core values. The story became a method of cascading key leadership strategies throughout the organization. Within two years they returned to profitability, and have become a key player in the media market, expanding into additional newspapers, as well as radio, internet and other media businesses.

The *Metaventure* became part of their DNA. The story surfaces in marketing meetings, strategic planning sessions, and during the on-boarding process for each new employee. A large framed image of the *Endurance* stuck in the ice hangs at the end of the hallway by the executive offices. Emblazoned on the image are the signatures of all the executives – a symbol that they have signed up for the expedition.

(continued from page 36)

- How would you describe your family? Please do so in as much depth as you can recall – parents and grandparents, siblings, your “family role.”
- What were the key values held by your family, including any messages about success, leadership, or teamwork?
- If your family had a “motto,” what would it be?
- What were your most significant career decisions, and why did you make the choices you elected?
- What comes to mind when you reflect on your most memorable, important life experiences and events?
- What were your most significant setbacks or disappointments?
- What did you learn from them?

There are times, of course, when a structured assessment interview is neither feasible nor appropriate. But we still look to uncover the images and stories that underlie an individual’s organizational role and title.

Search for your own most effective metaphors

What are the native metaphors that you relate to, and that resonate with others? What are the stories from your life experience, or that you have lived vicariously, that others can relate to? Are there instances in which an image or metaphor could be used in place of an abstraction? Take full advantage of opportunities to experiment, especially in low risk settings, and become comfortable using figurative language. Develop your metaphorical muscle!

CAVEATS ABOUT METAPHORS: WHAT CAN GO SOUTH?

In his classic book on the philosophy of social science, Abraham Kaplan (1998) cited the Law of the Instrument: “Give a small boy a hammer and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding.” This danger is real in social science research, and The Law of the Instrument extends to the use of metaphor.

Capitalizing on the power of resonant metaphors requires that the practitioner be sensitive to interpersonal and organizational dynamics. This is an art as well as a science, and it is hardly a mechanistic process. Here are some guidelines about pitfalls in using metaphorical language:

- ***Let the metaphors evolve with the relationship.***
Use them sparingly in the beginning and more freely if the other person is receptive and comfortable.

- ***Don't invade another person's space.*** A formal assessment interview provides a forum for asking personal questions. The client doesn't have to answer the questions, of course, but there is an explicit contractual understanding that questions are allowed. Other situations may permit authentic questions, but probing inquiries require an invitation, or some form of permission.
- ***Don't force a metaphor, even if it fits the situation perfectly.*** When an image or metaphor seems tailor-made, it is at times tempting to persuade others of its relevance. This is a mistake. A metaphor resonates or it doesn't. If it doesn't, move on.
- ***Don't be a one trick pony.*** A metaphor that resonates in the beginning may become tiresome and repetitive over time. This is not always the case, especially with rich metaphors such as the Shackleton saga. But to be effective, stories and images need to connect with a receptive audience. Be alert to the possibility that a metaphor has worn out its welcome, and a fresher image is required.
- ***Don't step on someone else's metaphor.*** Native metaphors are extremely personal and deeply emotional. What may seem like a logical extension of another's resonant metaphor may simply not work. Be cautious.
- ***Don't presume to be a member of the club.*** Many resonant metaphors are forged in seminal, sometimes difficult, life circumstances. While an authentic understanding of those personal metaphors is extremely useful, there are dangers in taking liberties with that understanding. One person's baptism of fire might be in armed combat; another may have been hit by lightning; another may have escaped a hurricane. All three experiences have similarities, but each club is different. Members only.
- ***Don't go over the top.*** Metaphors should be used in moderation. When writing or conversation becomes flooded with metaphors, they lose their power and become amateurish. Some metaphors are so common that they go without notice – so called, “dead metaphors,” such as having “too many irons in the fire.” But “live metaphors” get attention. One colleague (B. Schlosser, personal communication, January 28, 2009) suggested setting a limit on the use of figurative language: the maximum allowable “metaphors per conversation” (“MPC”). This limit would be hard to enforce, but the idea behind it is sound. Use metaphors sparingly and thoughtfully, and they will resonate.

Finding the right metaphor for an individual may take some work. It demands a deep understanding of an individual's upbringing, life experiences, deeply held beliefs, hobbies, and even aesthetic sensibilities.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In his provocative book on leadership, Howard Gardner (1995) argues that leaders achieve their effectiveness largely through the stories they communicate to others. These stories may be “told” using language, or conveyed metaphorically in other ways. Perhaps the most powerful way leaders relate to stories is by example – the way they lead their own lives.

The most innovative leaders, Gardner contends, are able to take traditional stories and infuse them with new energy and appeal. Beyond that, truly visionary leaders move beyond culturally native stories to create novel, innovative metaphors that can influence an entire society.

We believe that coaches can help leaders become aware of their personal stories, capitalize on native cultural and organizational images, and even fashion new metaphors. Together, coaches and the leaders they advise can draw on the power of resonant metaphors to increase their effectiveness and produce consequential change.

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■ ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dennis N.T. Perkins, Ph.D.

Phone: 203-481-6118

Email: Dennis.Perkins@SyncreticsGroup.com

Dennis Perkins is the Chief Executive Officer of *The Syncretics Group*, a consulting firm devoted to effective leadership in demanding environments — especially those characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, and rapid change. Dennis has worked for over 25 years as an advisor to senior leaders. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, he served as a Marine infantry officer in Vietnam, and subsequently received his M.B.A. from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in psychology at The University of Michigan. While a faculty member at the Yale University School of Management, Dennis developed a breakthrough leadership approach based on the study of groups facing “The Edge” — the outer limits of human endurance. He has written extensively on leadership and organizational effectiveness. He is the author of *Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton’s Antarctic Expedition*; *Leadership Lessons from the Race to the South Pole*; and *Managing Creation: The Challenge of Building a New Organization*.

Paul R. Kessler, M.A.

Phone: 203-481-6118

Email: Paul.Kessler@SyncreticsGroup.com

Paul Kessler is the Managing Director of *The Syncretics Group*. For over 15 years, he has worked as an advisor, consultant and coach to executives in organizations ranging from Fortune 50 corporations to nonprofit associations. Paul has helped many leading organizations to define and execute their strategic direction, vision, values and goals. He has expertise in organizational effectiveness, executive leadership development, team effectiveness, and group process and facilitation. After serving in the United States Navy, Paul received his B.A. in psychology from Franciscan University of Steubenville. He completed his M.A. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the University of New Haven. He is co-author of *Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton’s Antarctic Expedition*, and a featured keynote speaker at conferences around the world.

Jillian B. Murphy, M.A.

Phone: 203-481-6118

Email: Jillian.Murphy@SyncreticsGroup.com

Jillian Murphy is a Senior Associate at *The Syncretics Group*. She graduated *Magna Cum Laude* from the University of Connecticut with a B.A. in psychology and completed her M.A. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the University of New Haven. In her role at *The Syncretics Group*, Jillian has analyzed interview data for coaching feedback, and has conducted extensive research on leadership, teamwork, and the use of metaphor. She has also worked with the Networking AIDS Community of South Africa, the African National Congress Women's League and the Department of Epidemiology and Health at Yale University. She has studied, worked and volunteered extensively in Cape Town, South Africa. While studying ecology and evolutionary biology, she observed lions, elephants, and zebras in their natural environment. An avid explorer, Jillian has tracked white rhinos in an ultra-light aircraft.

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