

FIGURE 3. COHERENCE, FOLLOWING DEBATE

# MEETING METAPHORS: LEADERS DISCERN THE BALEFUL AND BENIGN INFLUENCES OF THEIR METAPHORS

by Usman A. Ghani

for the revelations. Even *more* revealing is the impact of senior management metaphors on other levels and their companies' performance.

## Onwards to Your Success with Metaphors

When you are at an informal setting, apply these basic concepts and flows and you will be surprised. When you read the *Wall Street Journal* (or other paper of your choice), or the speeches of senior executives, and the visions, missions, and goals of various organizations, note the substantial use of metaphors and examine their importance. Some leaders really do an exceptional job at this. They are the ones I learn from.

Most leaders like to be effective and motivating. They also like to initiate change and build cultures. And, they mean presence and significance. When they apply the metaphors appropriately to the people and situation, they truly have impact and leave a legacy. When not, they are lost in history. But not you!



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Consider this:

*"We have played par-6; we have walked the doglegs; we avoided the hazards; we putt everywhere on the greens. We even knew the GURs. I mean we had black tee boxes. We didn't pitch and putt. Then what caught us unawares?"*

This vignette may easily lead us to think a golfer is talking to a coach. Well, this is a chairman at the board meeting. Not discussing golf, he is crediting the detailed efforts the management put into strategic planning and is inquiring about the missing causes the board is now collaring. He could have just asked in direct, simple language: *We believed we had all the details, so how did we miss all this?*

Consider a dialog:

CEO: *"We should architect. Words sound good but I want to see sketches, even if broad-brushes. A picture is worth a thousand words. I will believe when we carve the same sculpture from our meetings."*

Replies the COO: *"We have tried many pictures in our supply chain. Our real need is discipline for everything to fit well and execution reports available like clockworks."*

Here we see two senior executives differing. Not only is the object of their discussion seemingly different, they also see things from different angles. They could have simply

said: *Let us draw diagrams and identify where the issues are.* The CEO is actually an art lover; but our COO relates to mechanisms. This discussion continued for 20 minutes before a consultant interceded.

Now consider an event:

*A company’s orientation day for young professionals was ongoing. The CEO’s speech received lukewarm response, even inattention. During the break, at consultant’s suggestion, the CEO agreed to postpone part of his presentation towards the conclusion of the day. Next, the company’s CHRO spoke and things changed! All new recruits were raptly attentive to her.*

This episode reveals that despite same gist, place, and time the metaphors that leaders use should resonate with their audience. Our CEO, a brilliant person, kept relating to *milestones, roadmaps, terrains*—all connoting a journey or voyage. The CHRO (Chief Human Resources Officer), a mother of two in the same posse as the audience, often related to *challenges, coaching, scorecards, teams, winning*—implying games or sports.

Going Beyond Words?

In challenging and complex times such as ours, the efficacy of words seemingly dwindles. We wonder why a word does not mean the same thing to two different leaders, however positive and well intended they may be. Example: “negotiation” means something different to different leaders! Some set up for it as a debate, some as a dialogue, some as discussion, and some even as win-lose competition—as many airlines realize today. Simple words certainly have power; only when communicated plainly, with everyone grasping the same meanings—and actions—we intend to associate with them. Application of direct language and simple words is helpful to leaders *if* they manage a couple of issues.

Leaders face two issues with words. First, our vocabulary seems to have changed from direct and simple words to acronyms, fuzzy phrases, and texting abbreviations. (Ironically, we call these “TLAs” for three-letter acronyms.) The usual reason given for

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this is the time pressure we are in. Some also suggest the convenient use of alternatives offered by chat, emoticons, messaging, and texting. (Beware though: BTW means “by the way”; it also means “bring the wheelchair”; in countries that play cricket matches: “batting the wicket.” BFF means “best friends forever”; also “business friend’s funeral”; when describing pets: “big, fat, and fluffy.”)

Second, unless our vocabularies are practically identical, words may have different meanings. Just consider “leadership” and you will uncover many notions and nuances. In mathematics, physical sciences, and engineering this is less an issue as we have universal terminologies in these fields. Not so in governance and leadership. Not yet.

Leaders Communicate with Metaphors

Successful leaders use a powerful alternative: metaphors. This is because a metaphor provides a more concrete image than a word alone does in social situations. Further, metaphors provide two additional features to leaders’ calls for action: the affective and the symbolic.

Although it is helpful to use metaphors in meetings and in other leadership processes like culture-building and visioning, it is important to discern the appropriateness of and guide the application of various types of metaphors we use as leaders. A metaphor is effective when applied aptly to the people and situation at the time. The same metaphor might not be the right one for other groups or different situations. *We leaders must become masters of our metaphors.*

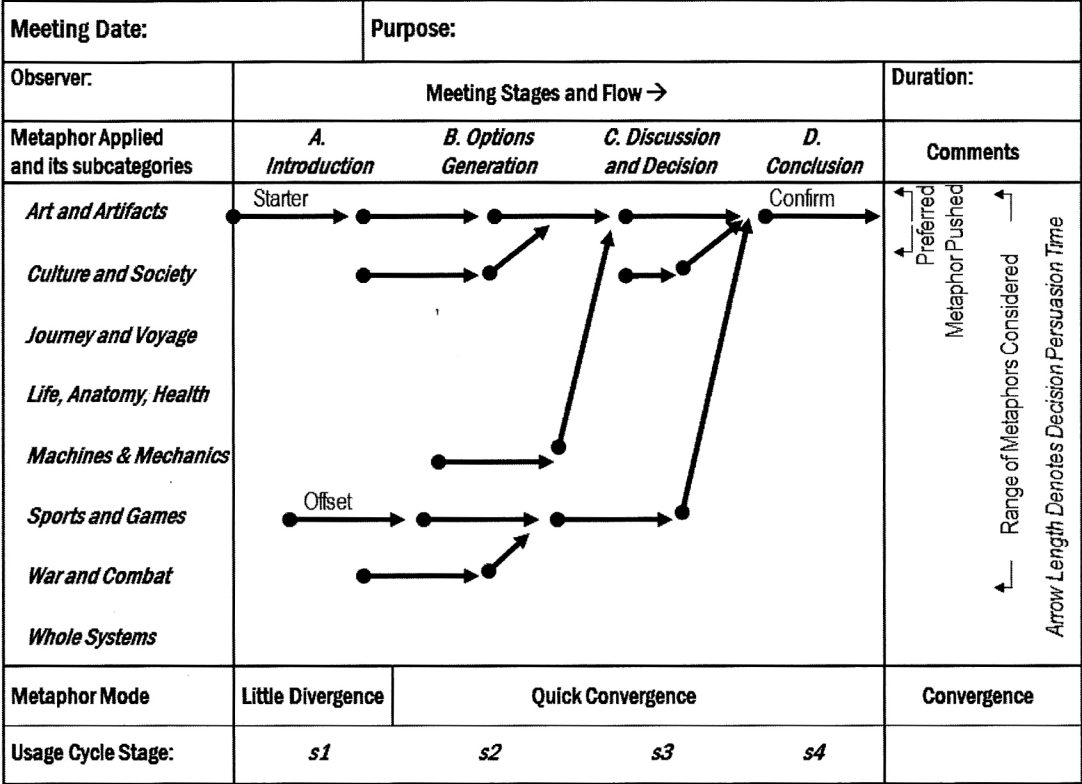


FIGURE 2. CONFORMANCE, WITH AUTHORITY

familiarized with Meeting Metaphors and so balks under pressure and enters decision making in Art and Artifact mode. Note how quickly executives move to accepting Art and Artifacts. There is less debate or dialog for deeper resolution, but more conformance, going along to get along. The meeting was declared a success and very harmonious: “*We are a true team and can read each other’s minds.*”

The consultant (as an observer) had his reservations of course.

Figure 3: Coherence, Following Debate

A third example shows apparent chaos with lots of metaphors and debates. Actually, this is an initial meeting of a more metaphor-sensitive and metaphor-selective executive team. It has set up the options-generation phase to evoke several metaphors and then arrive at an interesting, “open decision”: to use Journey and Voyage metaphor for their mission, and Whole Systems metaphor for their customer service processes and supply

chain alliances—separating the two notions that were being conflated. The latter metaphor is shown in lighter arrows in the following diagram. Usually there should be one purpose for each meeting; here the executive team started with that in mind but realized that they had taken on two different agendas! They admitted that it was an intense day and decided to have two separate days in the following week on each of these two points.

Practice in making these flows will enrich you in your assessment of the deeper and finer goings on in meetings and how you can influence these for the intended purposes. You will also be able to share with your colleagues and community how to become aware of metaphors and their baleful or benign influences on our leadership capacity.

We do not only look for words and phrases. Silences also speak. When there is a realization of metaphors, there may be silence. Internalization may also be going on with reflection. So, the flow diagrams do not have to be dense with every word spoken, but also ferreting

Visualizing Metaphors in Progress

There are five different frameworks and instruments that help specify and change the use of metaphors in boards and executive suites. These include familiarization, flow, habituation, imprints, and usage cycle. Having limited space here, we will see a few samples of flow.

We can trace when metaphors get invoked and provoked in social settings. Without naming individuals, we can plot various metaphors implied (for example, see the catchwords mentioned previously). Then, we can plot these along as the meeting stages progress, using arrows that indicate the starts of specific points made in the meeting. Arrow size would indicate the style and time in the advocacy or inquiry applied by the board member or executive.

Figure 1: Convergence, with Dialog

A starter may have used War and Combat metaphor; even stayed on it. Others may offset the discussion through other metaphors implicit in their expressions. The diagram indicates three offsets. Along the stages, we see more divergence (but not suppressed due to the group having been familiarized), then confluence of dialogs, and finally team convergence to the Life and Health metaphor, different from the starter’s introduction. (In this case, the starter was a CEO but the starter may or may not be the conventional leader.)

Figure 2: Conformance, with Authority

This time, they have used a different range of metaphors. It seems like a very “streamlined” flow. Appearances are deceptive. This is a strong CEO fixed on Art and Artifacts metaphor. His team is not

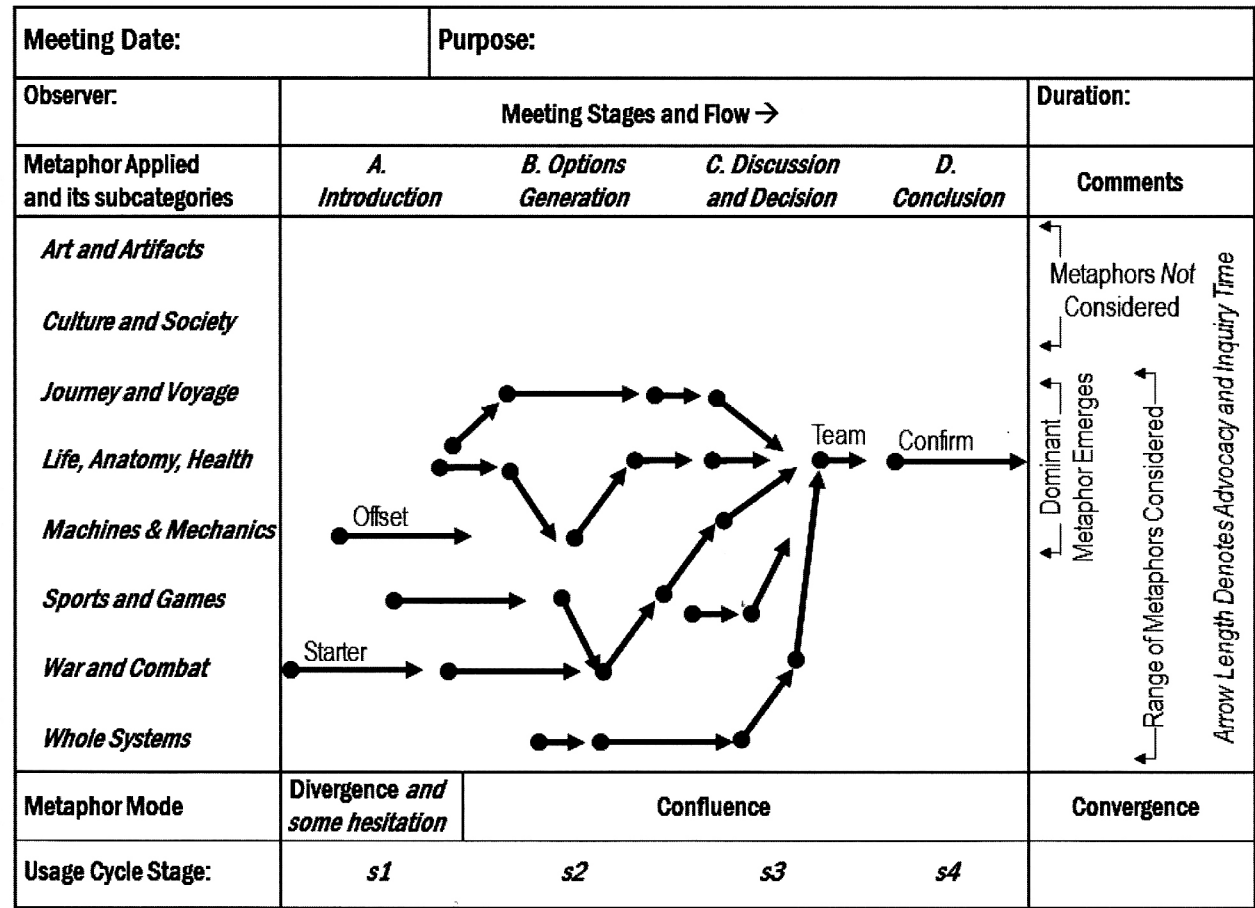


FIGURE 1. CONVERGENCE, WITH DIALOG

How Effective Leaders Use Metaphors

I have observed boards and executive suites over many years, the last seven in also noting the helpful (and hurtful) use of metaphors. The three examples cited at the beginning illustrate mismatched metaphors in reality. We will see some good examples also. My presence at these boards and c-suites was not coincidental; I was observing a strategy session during my consulting engagements with the organizations or was facilitating their leadership programs. The organizations included Fortune-500 and small and medium-sized enterprises on six continents. In some instances, I also charted the impact of the executive metaphors on middle managements and the forefronts of their respective organizations. These were sublime but startling discoveries and the rich disclosures led to writing a book on *Meeting Metaphors*, which I am coauthoring with Frances Hesselbein.

Powerful Use by Leaders

Here is another board chairman:  
“So this is the dark cloud; now what’s our silver lining?”  
He is not a climatologist but used the whole system metaphor to lead the board and executives out of its gloom-and-doom predicament into learning key lessons and leveraging these lessons through their promising skills to move on.  
In this particular case, board and executives simply moved to a different stance, subliminally influenced by a different metaphor. Here, candor was fostered and

*We leaders must become masters of our metaphors.*

the company executives explored many possibilities in the markets. No fingers pointed. No heads rolled. This is in contrast to blame games that some meetings get embroiled in, due to the oblivious baleful influence of inappropriate or contradicting metaphors. Metaphors like war and combat can easily arrogate board and executive energy (and time).

Meet the Metaphors

The effective metaphors we use as leaders can be categorized. Broadly, there are eight types: art and artifacts, culture and society, journey and voyage, life and anatomy/health, machines and mechanics, sports and games, war and combat, and whole systems. These types offer significantly different images, impel separate actions, and evoke distinct emotions. Beyond words, metaphors also herald the active, affective, and emotive aspects whether leaders introduce the metaphors covertly or overtly.

Typically, the purpose of a meeting and the values of the organization promote the use of a metaphor. Although these are not absolutely mutually exclusive—our thought processes are never completely isolated either—there may be a little similarity across them. With practice, and for more advanced needs, we can combine two metaphors; but this is not a suggested practice for starters. With prudence and by discretion, boards and executives may combine two metaphors for a composite portrayal.

Art and Artifacts

*“I am a pictures person; don’t send me long memos; a picture is worth a thousand words.”* These executives are two or three dimensional (recall the CEO who mentioned sculptures).

This metaphor is best when visualizing innovations or positioning products and services in the market. Think when prototypes are developed or focus groups are facilitated. Overusing it can be reckless. An executive vice president almost let the company down by using artifact as a metaphor for the company. Only a handful of executives contributed to it and, as changes occurred, the artifact looked fixed and became obsolete.



## Culture and Society

With growing sensitivity to the environment, this metaphor has found its way again into boardrooms. “*We are citizens of a global society,*” or “*Become good stewards of culture and environment.*” Any relationship to the cumulative assembly of people or in respect of the richness of norms and practices is highlighted using this metaphor. It can become instrumental in bringing people together, a notion of cohesiveness. Alert CEOs know how and when to weave in this metaphor when they want to connect everyone or share a vision for integrated business approaches.

This is fine. But using this metaphor for all forms of globalization can insinuate monolithic approaches. We have heard: “*All our offices observe the same timings and holidays worldwide.*” So much for culture. Unfortunately, as I have studied many mergers and acquisitions (M&A), I have found that the chairmen of combined companies rarely allude to this metaphor; they go for the numbers (that of course is a different metaphor; later).

## Journey and Voyage

Typically, visionary CEOs who think futuristically or long term use this metaphor. “*Sure, we will plug the hole but I want us to see how our boat will get to that shore safely.*” This CEO was smart not to expend energies of her top team fixated on the short term but to see a longer timeline. A Korean CEO said: *Let them [competitors] be there. I won’t push numbers but I surely want to get our brand in every home in the U.S.*” A different CEO casually remarked: “*I want to stress the here-and-now; fix it. If we fail we will try something else.*”

Highlighting story telling generates the use of the Journey and Voyage metaphor. It is helpful when used wisely. When remarks like those of our short-term CEO are detected, it is mandatory for the company to expand the view by applying this metaphor more broadly.

## Life and Anatomy/Health

Catalyzed by the holistic health movements, human body and health have become standing metaphors in corporations. A COO said: “*You will be my ears and eyes in this visit; I want your diagnosis of the plant.*” A

chairman remarked: “*We have received a clean bill of health from the auditors, so we must be good.*” These short examples demonstrate the delegation to a consultant and the assumption entertained via the Life and Health metaphor.

It can also be abused or misapplied. Think about this board member, responding to a chairman: “*Yes, we have undergone a successful operation; the wound will obviously take time to heal.*” A professional services partner said: “*You have used enough Band-Aids and Roloids; major surgery is required now; and only our (large) firm can operate now.*” Such claims work because the reference is being made to the very life and survival of the organization. Unless sensitive to the implied or operating metaphor, boards and executives can yield to the message.

## Machines and Mechanics

Perhaps the oldest of metaphors in management, Machines and Mechanics is the result of efforts toward making organizations more precise and predictable. The blitz of benchmarking, push for horizontal thinking, and use of process mapping has provided renewed impetus to this metaphor all the way into the boardrooms, where it has stayed. “*Our products flow with just-in-time inventories and friction-free deliveries.*” It is very helpful in knowing all activities, interactions, and their order inside and across an organization; the impact of these on numbers, benchmarks, and time can become a huge success factor. This metaphor can help as a medium to restore discipline as long as it is applied rationally.

Many, yes many, executives use this frequently. We claim to be becoming 21st-century corporations but many of our metaphors and consequent implementations are anchored in 19th-century

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*Is competition really a  
battlefield?*

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concepts. Think about this CMO: “*Our Marketing is on right track with well-oiled parts; our sales force is not aligned, tinkering the limits but staying below the radar screens. We need to talk.*”

## Sports and Games

If we put together the pastimes of executives and their children at home, we get a majority who are into sports and games. As these are fun and a medium to connect with others, we carry this metaphor into our thinking, as evident in our vernacular. Examples cited earlier in this article substantiate this. It has been found though that overuse of this has led companies to consider work as game or sport and winning/losing is what organizations are all about. This is a delusion. Leadership is about much more than just sports or games.

Scorecards of sorts and rankings propounded by many rating agencies the world over—as long as there is a transparent logic behind them—share how various organizations stand relative to one another. The Balanced Scorecard is one such positive movement, even if behind it is a static and not a dynamic model. Although there are some relevant applications of these, numbers can confuse at times. For example, “1” on a scale of 1 to 9 may mean highest in some cultures (top ranking training or ideal as in golf), but lowest in others (lowest rung of the ladder). Behavioral scientists use scales differently than economists, the latter different than marketers and strategists. Numbers are a significant manifestation of the sports and games metaphor. Unless we are aware of the “game” and the “number,” the context can be distorted across cultures, especially in globalization and M&As.

## War and Combat

“*Let’s use all our ammo, do this four-pronged attack, and conquer the battlefield.*” Familiar? Strategy sessions proceed this way at times. Forgetting that fair competition promotes innovation and healthier customer value, we get carried away by the thought of destroying others. Is competition really a battlefield? Maybe for some. But not always or for everyone.

Popularized by books like *The Art of War*, many CEOs entertain this metaphor. This metaphor may be useful

in leading through crises and shocks and do fairly well then: “*The ship is on fire; we must follow the captain.*” But habitual crises and overuse of it eventually produces severe effects, usually left to the next CEO or the following generation of management to tackle, besides chronic pain for the current CEO. A senior vice president of sales said, “*You are my top guns; it’s all up for grabs; go and claim victory.*” Imagine the message they got (and how they will be rewarded)!

## Whole Systems

“*We see the big picture. There is a system at work here. Let’s redesign it.*” Fresh proponents of systems thinking like this CFO apply the whole system metaphor. After rotating across three functions in the organization, this CFO tried to converge them systematically. This is very helpful when there are many independently operating fiefdoms in a corporation, each doing well but collectively doing average at best. This CFO did wrestle the giant problem (and the associated egos) and was able to realize synergies organically.

At times though, deriving inspirations from books on systems thinking, leaders think they can do this singlehandedly. Because it is a systems metaphor, there are two important challenges that must be managed. If done so, results can be excellent. First, basic skills of system dynamics are needed for meaningful results to be extracted. Second, by definition, this must be an inclusive engagement for all disparate functions, divisions, processes, and teams. Short of this, it will be a “soft” version of whole systems, enlightening of the causal links and feedback loops, but not deeply dependable in its quantitative results. I provide this caution having established many misapplications in corporations that attributed this to consequent disappointments. You can gain the power of whole systems metaphor by meeting these challenges.

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*Silences also speak.*

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