

AGILITY.X

How Organizations Thrive
in Unpredictable Times



EDITED BY

CHRISTIANE PRANGE and
LOIZOS HERACLEOUS

PRANGE and HERACLEOUS

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Robert J. Marshak and Loizos Heracleous

This interview is about language and organizational agility, from an applied perspective. In particular it is about how leaders, organization development practitioners, change managers, and others can use language to implement particular organizational agility programs, or to enhance the agility of their organizations more generally as a long-term capability. The answer to this question in turn depends on an understanding of the nature and role of language in organizations.

We have invited Robert J. “Bob” Marshak to be interviewed on this topic given his 40-year career in the field of organization change and development, much of it spent facilitating and advising on organizational change from an interpretive perspective, paying particular attention to language use and group dynamics.

Marshak has made significant contributions to both the theory as well as practice of organizational change and development, and to our understanding of language use in organizations in this context.¹ In this interview, Marshak draws on his conceptual understanding and practical involvement in organizations to share his insights on the topic of language and organizational agility. In the text below, we also insert some references to fundamental research for those wishing to explore these issues further.

HERACLEOUS: Bob, please tell us a bit about how you got interested in the issue of language in the context of organizations.

MARSHAK: I am not sure why, but I have always been interested in what lay behind the specific words and phrases someone wrote or spoke. This proclivity became a more studied orientation and skill of mine when I began my initial public service career as a management analyst in the US Agricultural Research Service in the 1970s. When people told me something they had heard or what someone had written or said they would usually give me what I considered to be their interpretation or conclusion about what was said. In those instances I would immediately ask, “What were the exact words?” Usually people could not recall what the exact words were, just what they considered to be the message. I found this frustrating because I would routinely note the exact words, who was saying them, what was the context of the situation being talked about, the choice of words and phrases, what wasn’t said, and so on. I had not been taught to do this, but did so as a matter

of course. When this mode of attention to language in use proved helpful in my assessing a situation I began to intentionally develop my attention to what might be behind the words and phrases people uttered in different situations. In other words, what might be in someone's (unspoken) mindset to lead them to say and ultimately carry out what their choice of words and phrases might signify. So, for example, I recall being involved with planning a meeting between our agency and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), an external Executive Branch agency that was at that time attempting to apply massive cuts to our research budget. I was told that when asked to participate in a meeting with OMB our agency's top scientist refused because he did not want to waste his time. I inquired further to try to learn exactly what he said and my sources simply said: "He said he didn't want to waste his time, or something like that, so it was a dead-end and we dropped it." Given the importance of the meeting and believing the top scientist must have said, or at least thought about, more than what was being reported I arranged a short meeting to see what I could learn. When I met with the top scientist I said I was planning the meeting and had heard he didn't want to attend. I then asked if he could tell me his thinking on the matter. His reply was: "As I told your colleagues last week, OMB shouldn't be making scientific decisions through their budget cuts. They don't understand science. They are wrong so we shouldn't try to negotiate or even meet with them. And besides, they'll be sorry when we have a famine." Yes, he had said he didn't want to waste his time attending a meeting, but now I had much greater insight into his mindset (and probably the mindsets of other senior officials) and how I would need to reframe the meeting to try and secure his attendance. My background was in management and public administration not agricultural science or even agriculture per se so his mindset and logic were at that time new to me, but very revealing of the agency's scientific culture and its science leaders' mindsets. With a window into a way of thinking that my training and background had not encountered before, I now knew I needed to re-think how I approached him and other leaders when trying to address political, organizational, management, and budgetary matters. Of course, at this point very early into my career this was part of my process for learning the culture and mindsets in the organization. Yes, he didn't want to attend because it was a waste of time. And, for my administrative colleagues that was the main message. For me that seemed too abrupt and I wanted to know the exact words and phrases used as a doorway into his mindset. I walked away with important insights that served me well in future years. Others just heard someone declining a meeting in a busy work day while I heard insights into the mindset behind the words. Later when the purpose of the meeting was reframed from discussing what programs to cut to helping OMB better understand the science and scientific priorities of the agency, the top scientist agreed to participate.

HERACLEOUS: This is a fascinating story. And are there any central insights or themes that struck you about language use in organizations all these years that you have been practicing and pondering in this area?

MARSHAK: Well, I think the main insight at the core of my practice has been how explicit and implicit metaphors frequently reveal unspoken or even unconscious mindsets that shape or invoke how people think about things and what they then do in response (Marshak, 2004, 2013). We are all familiar with metaphorical

comparisons people use to make a point. For example, “this place is like a prison,” or “we’re on a sinking ship.” There are also implicit metaphors or what cognitive linguists have called “conceptual metaphors” that reveal what is happening in the “cognitive unconscious”.² My first experience with this occurred in my early years as an internal management analyst when I kept hearing managers say in response to any change initiative: “If it’s not broke don’t fix it.” I got the main message to leave things well enough alone, but the specific imagery stuck with me until maybe 10 years later when I realized that different conceptual metaphors seemed to be invoked for different types of change. Maintenance types of changes were often described using “fix and maintain” words and images, developmental changes intended to make things better used “build and develop” words and images, transitional changes that required leaving one way of doing things and adopting another often used “move and relocate” words and images, and finally transformational changes intended to completely change virtually all dimensions of an organization often used “liberate and recreate” words and images (Marshak, 1993). Furthermore I noticed that often leaders talked about a change using language inconsistent with the required change, which on a subconscious level was misleading to what was needed. For example, one leader was seeking to achieve transformational change of the organization (new strategy, structure, culture, and so on), but in meetings and change workshops kept using fix and maintain language implicitly suggesting that what was needed was to repair and keep in good order the existing organization. For example: “We need to identify what’s broke and quickly get things up and running smoothly”.³

HERACLEOUS: Let’s move to the issue of organizational agility. How would you define this term, or what is your own understanding of it (to distinguish it from organization change for example)?

MARSHAK: What comes up for me with the term organizational agility is seeking more flexibility and quicker responses in the organization. In that regard it is like some other terms that have been used to suggest the need to transform twenty-first-century organizations from lumbering bureaucratic behemoths to enterprises that are more nimble, faster, and responsive to their environments. For example, agility can be added to “adaptive”⁴ and “ambidextrous”⁵ as recent terms intended to invoke what kinds of actions and responses are needed. In that regard, I consider it a type of “slogan” used to invoke the need for and direction of some kind of transformational change, sending the message that: “we need to liberate ourselves from our bureaucratic tendencies and recreate ourselves as a more flexible, nimbler, quicker and more responsive enterprise.”

HERACLEOUS: Do you think language use in organizations is relevant to accomplishing organizational agility, and if so, how?

MARSHAK: Yes, I consider intentional language use whether in the form of metaphors, slogans, or storylines essential for accomplishing organizational agility. Let me elaborate and give some examples. Organizational agility is a term intended to capture how organizations need to be led and organized to face the contemporary VUCA world of volatility, complexity, and uncertainty that many or most contemporary organizations are now facing. This of course is a quite different image/metaphor from the “well oiled machine” imagery for organizations in the industrial age. In that regard, I consider organizational agility to be a slogan, a loosely

defined desired state, and a generative image⁶ to stimulate people to think about what is needed without having to give them specific instructions. An example is a leader who started explaining the organization was too “silo’ed” and needed more coordination and flow of ideas and processes laterally across the organization’s pillars. This message did not resonate with the organization’s managers until the metaphor of the organization needing to be more like a life-giving aqueduct with both pillars and linked lateral pathways was suggested to them.⁷ The important point here is not that a specific metaphor made a difference. The real point is that conveying what is desired, especially if it is different from the past or current mindsets, requires the artful and intentional use of language that invokes in the minds of the intended organizational audiences the desired behavioral responses.

HERACLEOUS: From the perspective of a leader trying to enhance the agility of their organization, what are the key things to keep in mind with respect to how they employ language, and what kind of conversations or metaphors to promote?

MARSHAK: I think there are several key things to keep in mind and a few things to try to avoid when trying to use language to enhance agility or any other change in an organization. First, is to accept the idea that the words and phrases a leader uses are not just instrumental words intended to provide directions, but also generative and symbolic ways to invoke new ways of thinking and reacting. Second, to be mindful that words and metaphors understood one way by a leader could evoke quite different thoughts and reactions from different organizational audiences. Finally, to sometimes trust that metaphors and word images that just “pop into” your mind might be more revealing and insightful than first thought. In other words that sometimes our unconscious suggests metaphors and language about important considerations that our more conscious and analytic minds ignore or even censor (Marshak, 2006). Let me try to give some illustrations of each of these.

Language is Generative and Symbolic

As I mentioned earlier the term organizational agility to me means becoming more flexible, nimbler, quicker, and responsive. A leader could announce that the organization needs to become these adjectives, give examples, and hope people understand what to do. The leader could also tell people the organization needs to be more “agile” and trust people will create for themselves what needs to be done to become more agile as an organization. The one approach provides more specificity but requires the leader to be able to clearly specify what everyone should do. The other is more generative and trusts that people will create appropriate ideas and actions, including ones the leader did not think of, to achieve greater agility. For example, I once consulted to an organization that did a lot of work for US Department of Defense organizations. The leader of the organization wanted a strategic shift in the focus of their work from taking any kinds of jobs to taking only “very important” ones. Unfortunately “very important” had many meanings to different managers and mainly meant, in practice, getting work to sustain or preferably expand that manager’s work unit. After several attempts to get the message of “very important” across, the leader struck on the idea to explain

that managers should seek to only pursue “mission critical” work. That term in a military context evokes more specific and embedded meanings than the more sterile term “very important.” While exactly what was to be considered “mission critical” still needed to be negotiated and defined, the managers got the main message and almost immediately organizational communications and day-to-day conversations adopted the “mission critical” language and mindset that the leader was hoping for. On balance, I would suggest that relying on either instrumental instructions or evocative slogans and metaphors is not a good strategy. Both are needed as well as some specific examples of what is meant by flexibility, when, where, why, and by who. And, all communicated repeatedly using all forms of communication.

Need to Be Sensitive to Contextual Meanings

Another important consideration is being sensitive to how different audiences may respond to a message, metaphor, or slogan. Sometimes what a leader might think is understood by everyone, or what is intended to generate one way of thinking, will lead to quite different responses. This is true in all contexts and perhaps especially true in multinational organizations where metaphors and jargon slogans from the parent company’s culture may be confusing or misleading to native audiences. This includes how the metaphor of “organizational agility” itself will be interpreted through the lens of the local culture and context.

Let me provide some examples and more elaboration to these points. I once consulted to a Dove Bars, an ice cream products company which at that time had just been acquired by the Mars Corporation as a way to enter the ice cream confectionary business. This was back in the 1980s when drives to make US companies “leaner” was being advanced everywhere. One of the newer ways of thinking being advocated by corporate gurus and headquarters staff experts was learning “how to do more with less.” This was a slogan intended to stimulate people to invent new ways of doing required work in a more streamlined and productive manner. Thus it was a call for creativity in the minds of its advocates. However, that was not always the meaning it invoked in rank and file workers. So, I painfully watched at a workshop for all employees a headquarters official explain that from now on people would have to learn how to do more with less. This was followed by putting people into small groups to come up with some creative suggestions. Unfortunately the context of the situation was apparently not considered. To the rank and file workers who were hearing this message from the corporation that had just acquired them they heard something like: “We will be cutting the workforce and you all will have to work harder at your jobs.” Needless to say, the small groups had quite different discussions and reactions than intended and the report outs were both angry and defensive. Worse, the headquarters person seemed so sure everyone would understand what “do more with less” would mean that she was unprepared to explain it with specific examples. A similar effect happened around the same time with the initial use of the term “downsizing” which was interpreted as (and in many cases was) firing people. The switch to the term “rightsizing” helped some but not much, since that term was still linked to the original “downsizing” term.

Maybe the best simple cross-cultural example of not assuming commonly used metaphors or jargon terms will be uniformly understood in all contexts and cultures comes from a time I was leading a three-day course at Korea University on “Change Management.” Although I speak some Korean the course was delivered in English using a translator. The Korean culture in that kind of setting is for students to take notes and not ask questions of the teacher. So I was surprised and had some trepidation when on the morning of the third day one of the students raised his hand and asked through the translator: “When are we going to discuss change management?” Since to me we had been discussing the topic of change management for two days, I knew something was askew. Fortunately instead of trying to reply immediately I asked in return: “What do you mean by change management?” If nothing else I figured that would give me some time to collect my thoughts. The reply that came back was revealing and forever after a reminder to me that what we think is commonly understood may not be in other contexts and cultures. The reply was: “You know, change the management.”

Being sensitive to what a term might mean in various contexts also applies to the term “agility” and what it might evoke. As intended the term suggests, for example, the need for greater flexibility. In today’s fast-moving world greater flexibility is considered to be a good thing that will make an organization more competitive. However, there are also other possible contextual meanings that might elicit reactions quite different from those intended. Let’s consider flexibility again. Here in North America, flexibility is usually intended to connote advantageous adaptive abilities. In some contexts, however, “too much flexibility” could also evoke images of being spineless or without backbone; not being firm or steadfast about anything; bending with the wind; being unprincipled or saying anything to anyone to get what you want; or even violating corporate rules and/or principles in global contexts in order to be “more flexible” in securing a business deal. In this regard it is a reminder that leaders need to provide images and terms that capture what they want, but also to be ready to provide specific examples of what is desired and what is not. This is especially true in other cultures where terms like “agility” and “flexibility” may have connotations in some situations different from those in Anglo-American contexts.

Images from the Unconscious can Provide Insights to Necessary Organizational Changes

Finally, in terms of sometimes trusting a metaphor or word image that “pops into mind” as more insightful than we might at first imagine, let me briefly recount a situation that I think illustrates much of what I have been saying and which might be directly applicable to implementing “agility” in an organization. Back in the early 1990s I occasionally did shadow consulting with some former students who worked at the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in HR and internal OD roles. At that specific time, there was much discussion in Washington, DC about what the future role of the CIA should be given the recent collapse of the Soviet Union. Some argued that the CIA had been created to deal with the Cold War Soviet threat and was no longer needed because the Soviet Union no longer

existed. Others suggested the CIA could perform other intelligence functions. One day when I was on-site, one of my former students who knew I had an ear for metaphors asked me what I thought about what James Woolsey the incoming Director of the CIA had said during his recent confirmation hearings before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on February 3, 1993. When questioned about the future role and even existence of the CIA, his reply was: “Yes, we have slain a large dragon, but we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes.”

I smiled and said that I thought that quote exactly described the challenge the Agency and new Director faced and that I wondered if his unconscious mind “knew” what would be needed and helped shape that specific metaphorical image he verbalized. When asked to explain more what I meant, I said that I thought the challenge to be faced in the days ahead was how to transform an organization and culture created to fight dragons complete with fiefdoms, barons, castles, heavily armored knights on horseback, a code of chivalry devoted to a noble cause, and so forth into a “snake killing organization” that would likely need to be more agile and quick moving, capable of pursuing multiple smaller targets and not one large one, and where the snake catchers would need to dress with less protection, and ultimately develop a snake catcher ethos and culture. In essence, I was suggesting that if you took the metaphors as literally true they described the nature of the required Agency transformation. I also wondered how well that would go over with the organization’s barons and knights who would be asked to move away from their fiefdoms and exalted status of knights to become a collection of mobile snake catchers and killers living in or near jungles.

I closed off my comments with a suggestion that the Director or even my colleague might consider organizing a workshop intervention where key people in the Agency would be asked to do three things. First, fully describe and detail everything about a Dragon Slaying organization. Second, fully describe and detail everything about a Snake Killing organization. Third to think through and describe everything they thought would need to happen to transform the Dragon Slaying organization and its people into a highly successful, more agile Snake Killing organization. I got a laugh in response to this suggestion, but said I was serious as it was exactly what I thought the challenge was and that working more metaphorically might allow for less blocking of ideas and more creativity. I never heard any more about my insights. I certainly was never asked to facilitate such a workshop intervention, and as near as I could discern from a distance the approach to change in the ensuing years tended to be more of the “fix and maintain” and “build and develop” variety (Marshak, 1993) although a lot of the rhetoric was about transformation.

In terms of organizational agility, I wonder if a similar workshop intervention might be helpful in some contexts as a way to articulate what would be needed and the challenge of transformation.

Conclusion

In this interview Bob Marshak draws from a lifetime of reflective engagement with organizations, paying particular attention to how individuals frame their

communications and insights, to describe the roles that language can play in helping organizations become more agile, and outline how leaders can enhance their linguistic capability to foster such transformations. The ideas that language is generative and symbolic, that we need to be sensitive to contextual meanings, and that unconscious images can provide insights to necessary organization changes are central to a nuanced understanding of the role of language not just in the context of agility but more broadly in organizational functioning. Agility emerges as a generative theme that may gain particular meanings in different organizations, necessitating a leadership approach that can recognize and build on this generative potential to deliver tailored agility interventions.

NOTES

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