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Managing the Metaphors of Change

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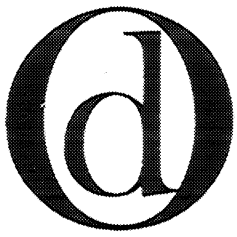

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Few managers realize that figures of speech have subtle—sometimes insidious—influences on listeners.

Managing the Metaphors of Change

ROBERT J. MARSHAK

For most leaders and change agents, one seven-word expression has become synonymous with resistance to change: *"If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"* On the surface, it's a straightforward, rather blunt statement of fact and advice: "Don't mess with what's already working." As usually interpreted, however, it's a slogan of resistance, defiantly asserting: "No change is wanted or needed here; go tinker somewhere else!" Considered symbolically, it may also reveal an unarticulated set of assumptions about change and the organization in question. Every individual, and for that matter, cultural system, views and interprets empirical events through a set of beliefs and assumptions. Often these beliefs and assumptions are subconscious and rarely examined or questioned. They just are. Yet they exert a profound influence over how a person sees a situation, and what actions will or will not be taken. If, for example, someone implicitly assumes that interpersonal communication is like calling another person on the telephone, then any miscommunication might be attributed to a "bad connection" or "static on the line." Viewed as a computer-to-computer interface, the difficulties might be alternatively defined as "incompatible software or hardware." Depending on the implicit view, different remedies are likely to be suggested: "Let's hang up and try again," or "Let's make sure we are both using the same (computer) language."

This discussion advances the proposition that these underlying, usually unarticulated understandings about a situation are often shaped and revealed metaphorically. Furthermore, because these understandings are critical to how people assess the need for change—and indeed, their conception of change itself—paying attention to managing the metaphors of change becomes a critical competency for leaders and change agents.

METAPHORS AND METAPHORIC ANALYSIS

A metaphor is a form of symbolic, rather than literal, expression. The Webster New World Dictionary defines a metaphor as: "A figure of speech containing an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase ordinarily and primarily used for one thing is applied to another, e.g., the curtain of night." Beyond their usefulness to poets and politicians, some psychologists assert that metaphors serve as the essential bridge between the literal and the symbolic, between cognition and affect, and

between the conscious and the unconscious. As such, metaphors are often the medium for understanding and presenting ideas, insights, and intuitions not always available to analytic reasoning and discourse. Others, including linguists and philosophers, go further to suggest that metaphors serve as a primary method for understanding and expressing abstract, affective, and/or intuitive experience.

From these points of view, the statement *"If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"* is more than a phrase signifying resistance to change. It is the manifest expression of a deeper, sometimes preconscious, symbolic construct that informs and maintains "reality" for the speaker. It is, therefore, a key to what a person may really be thinking, even when the person "hasn't really thought about it." Consequently, for diagnostic purposes, the way to approach and listen to metaphorical expressions is "as if" they were literally true. A closer look at our example slogan will reveal the potential power of this form of analysis.

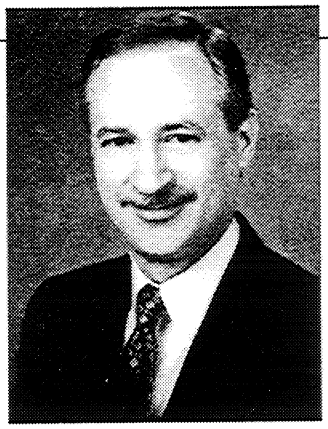
First, consider what "it" in the slogan stands for. Clearly, "it" refers to the organization, system, policy, etc., in question. Thus the phrase is really saying: "If the **organization** ain't broke, don't fix it!" Now let's consider the rest of the phrase. Things that literally break and require fixing in the "real world" are typically machines—toasters, washing machines, lawn mowers, automobiles, etc. The phrase is essentially equating the organization to a machine that requires fixing only when there is a breakdown or malfunction. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to assume that at the moment of invoking the slogan the speaker conceives of the organization, at a conscious or preconscious level, as if it were a machine and is inviting others to do the same. This is not a trivial association when we consider the implications of the extended metaphor of an organization as a machine. If it is a machine, then things should be smooth-running, well-oiled, predictable, efficient, and designed such that all the parts fit together to fulfill a single, unambiguous function or purpose. This bears more than a passing similarity to the Scientific Management theory of organizations and reminds one that the Father of Scientific Management, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915), was a trained mechanical engineer and machinist.

This leads to another important aspect of the extended metaphor. If an organization is a machine, then who are the managers and leaders of the organization/machine? Typically, machines are run by **operators** and **engineers** who determine output standards, maintain the equipment, and set commands and controls that dictate what the machine will do. Furthermore, when a machine breaks down or needs servicing, a **repair person**, **maintenance worker**, or **mechanic** is called in, asked to bring a tool kit, and told to "fix it."

The concept of change itself is also part of this extended metaphor system. Thinking in terms of a machine metaphor invites thinking about organizational change in terms of something "breaking down" and therefore "needing repairs." Ideally, this should be done with "minimal downtime," doing just enough to "get things up and running again." Consequently, in the machine metaphor system of thought, change is often equated to something being poorly maintained or broken. Accordingly, from this mind set, the arrival of a change agent (repair person) at your place of work implies psychologically that you've done something wrong, or worse, broken something. This helps explain the sometimes emotionally-charged reaction: "There's nothing wrong... nothing's broken!" Thus, one way people understand the abstract phenomena of organizational change is as if a broken-down machine is being returned to smooth-running performance through the assistance of a repair person who was called in and who works under the direction of the machine's operator or engineer.

AN EXAMPLE OF BEING STUCK IN MACHINE METAPHOR THINKING

A large high-tech company was faced in the 1990s with a host of dilemmas: Its traditional market base was eroding, new competitors had entered the field, costs and overhead had to be drastically cut to increase competitive-



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ness, structural re-alignment was needed to promote greater synergy and quicker response, long-time customers were demanding more responsiveness and less arrogance, and the "everyone can do their own thing as long as you are successful" culture was getting in the way of the teamwork and collective focus needed to respond to the new challenges.

Unfortunately, the top executives of this corporation were caught in an implicit machine metaphor model of change. The CEO called meetings of all the VPs, and ordered them to "fix things quickly in order to maintain our market position." The VPs dutifully went looking for "what was broken" so they could "fix it," but came back perplexed. Everything was working the way it always had been—"nothing was broken"—so they couldn't find anything to "fix." Because they had always been successful, they rationalized that there was nothing wrong with them; it was just a temporary thing and soon everything would be back to normal. Conditions, however, continued to get worse.

Next, they decided to hold a series of retreats to find the problems in how they were producing their traditional products and services. They identified a number of problems that surely had to be "what was broken." These were "fixed" with great fanfare and everyone was convinced that "things would soon be up and running again" the way they always had been. Instead, conditions continued to worsen. Employees began to get worried and angry at the top leaders because they were failing to "fix the problem." Leaders and managers, in turn, were blaming supervisors and employees for not working harder to "fine-tune operations and/or operate at full throttle." This led to a series of all-employee meetings where the top leadership assured everyone that the situation would soon be "under control and smooth-running again." Employees were further assured that a series of task forces were going to "take apart the operation from top to bottom to find out what was wrong." Everyone just needed to have some patience. When conditions didn't get better, the CEO held a week-long special retreat with all the key managers of the corporation. In concurrent sessions, different

aspects of the corporation were "broken down and put back together again." The reports all came back with minimal or marginal ideas for improvements. Everyone kept saying: "Things are working correctly—the way they were designed to work." Furthermore, the existing "set-up" was the most effective and efficient way to "run the organization."

As conditions continued to decline, and in desperation, the CEO called in a group of management consultants. Their backgrounds varied, but their advice was the same: "You have to re-think your whole business; up until now you have only been tinkering." Somewhat taken aback, the CEO assured each of the consultants that every conceivable way to "fix or improve operations" had been tried, and that perhaps the consultants didn't really understand how the business worked. All of the consultants were steadfast and assured the CEO that nothing less than a "new conception" of the business and how it operated would save the corporation. At this point the CEO, somewhat defensively, challenged the consultants: "You are the experts, find something in your tool kits to fix the problem." The consultants all replied it was not a question of "fixing" anything, rather a need to "re-invent" the corporation. This just further annoyed the CEO, who couldn't figure out how business results could be so poor, if "nothing needed fixing."

Recently, the CEO was replaced by the board of directors. In taking this action, the board explained that they needed "a new leader who was not a captive of the past, had some vision, and was capable of giving birth to a new era."

The story of this corporation is a familiar one in the 1990s. CEOs who try to "fix" or "repair" their organizations are being replaced in favor of new leaders who promise "a new way of thinking." One need only look at GM, IBM, American Express, and even the U.S. presidential election of 1992, to see leaders who thought they knew how to "keep the machine running" being replaced by new leaders with "the vision thing." The following discussion may shed some new light on this phenomenon and raise questions about whether or not a change in implicit metaphor could make a difference.

METAPHORS OF CHANGE

The "Fix and Maintain" imagery described above, while frequently encountered, is hardly the only metaphor of organizational change. We can consider three additional types of organizational change processes: Developmental, Transitional, and Transformational. Each has its own characteristics and associated change technologies:

- **Developmental** change builds on the past and leads to better performance over time, e.g., better teamwork.
- **Transitional** change involves a move from one state or condition to another, e.g., from manual to automated operations.
- **Transformational** change implies the transfiguration from one state of being to a fundamentally different state of being, e.g., from a regulated monopoly to a market-driven competitive business.

Clearly what is happening is different in each case. Significantly, the metaphors and imagery used to understand and describe each type of change are also different.

In **developmental** change, one builds on a foundation to achieve higher levels of performance. The metaphors and imagery are analogous to construction and/or developmental growth. The organization is described as if it were a building under construction or a developing person. This kind of change is often perceived as positive (getting bigger, getting better, etc.), especially when the developmental plan and/or goals are agreed upon in advance. Developmental change agents are often referred to as **trainers, coaches**, and/or **developers**. They may be asked to do organization "development" or team "building" to help "lay a better foundation" in order to "improve" performance, "increase" capabilities, "build" additional competencies, and/or "stimulate" and "nurture" growth.

An example of a developmental change effort was a series of strategy sessions conducted by the editors of a national travel magazine. They saw their task as figuring out ways to "build and develop" the magazine. Consequently, they focused on strategies to "build circulation," "develop" new features,

and "increase" advertising based on the "strong foundation" of their traditional audience "base." The possibility that changing trends and demographics might call for more radical changes was consistently ignored because "our job is to develop what we've got."

In **transitional** change, an organization goes from one state to another state, such as moving from a centralized to a decentralized operational system. The metaphors and imagery are analogous to relocating and/or moving from one place to another place. Expressions such as "moving forward," "knowing the right path," "taking the best route," "keeping to the timetable," "avoiding obstacles and dead ends," "leaving the old behind," and so forth, are common. The lack of "a clear destination," disagreement over the need or desirability of "the move," conflict over "the best route to take," debates over who has "to move," "how fast to go," and whether or not this is the best time "to pack up and leave" are all ways to describe common difficulties encountered in transitional change efforts. Transitional change agents are called upon to be **planners**, **guides**, and/or **explorers** because they are supposedly more familiar with "the journey" and with what to expect "along the way." Consequently, they are usually asked to help make plans for the "duration of the journey," or at least to make sure everyone is "headed in the right direction." They are also supposed to help facilitate "movement," insure things "stay on track," and that no one is "left behind." Once the organization "arrives" at its desired "destination," it is assumed their guidance will no longer be needed.

An example of a transitional change was the planning process carried out by a leading daily newspaper to introduce a new printing technology in its publishing plant. The process included specifications of the "desired end state" and the exact time the plant would "get there." Meetings were held with the union to insure that everyone was "on board," that "things stayed on track," and that "the road ahead stayed clear." A major sticking point in the discussions with the union was "how fast to make the changeover." After following a very detailed "schedule and timetable," everyone in the plant celebrated "the arrival" of the new equipment and had a moment of silence for the old presses that were being "abandoned and left behind." Indeed, many of the workers talked about how hard it would be to get used to the sounds and rhythms of the "new place." Despite all the detailed planning and work with the union, no one ever considered working on other changes such as re-designing jobs or the pay system because "our job was to move to a new way of printing, not create a whole new plant."

In **transformational** change, there is also language about change from one state to another state. However, the metaphors and imagery are not about geographic movement so much as they are about an alteration in the state of being, as in becoming a fundamentally different kind of organization. The imagery of "becoming" in transformational change is also more radical and extreme than in developmental change, where the organization becomes better at something, but doesn't abandon its foundation, roots, or essential being. In transformational change, the metaphors and imagery are about a fundamental alteration in who or what the organization is—its very identity and way of being, e.g., "abandoning the past in order to become a completely different kind of company."

A range of metaphors are often used to describe organizational transformation. These include images and metaphors associated with awakening, uncovering, escaping, purifying/purging, enlightening, becoming whole, returning to the core, unfolding, and dying and being reborn. Thus, in organizational transformation, we might hear expressions of a need "to wake up," "remove the blinders," "get out of the box," "get rid of excess baggage," "see the light," "become more holistic," "return to the basics," and "recreate ourselves anew." Organizations experiencing transformational change may ask change agents to help them "remove their blinders" in order to develop new visions and values, assist in "breaking out of the box," help people "to see" or "to get it," and/or help the organization "re-invent" itself or "give birth" to a whole new way of doing things. At such times, the change agent is likened to a lib-

EXHIBIT 1
METAPHORS OF CHANGE AND CHANGE AGENTS

IMAGE OF CHANGE	IMAGE OF CHANGE AGENT
Fix & Maintain	Repair Person, Maintenance Worker, Mechanic
Build & Develop	Trainer, Coach, Developer
Move & Relocate	Planner, Guide, Explorer
Liberate and Recreate	Liberator, Visionary, Creator

erator, visionary, or **creator** who possesses the ability to help "unlock the situation," "see new possibilities," and "give birth" to the new organization. One of the clearest examples of (forced) transformational change was the break-up of the Bell system into the new AT&T and the regional "Baby Bells." In addressing this change, the leadership and employees of the new organizations were initially stymied in their efforts to "build and develop" their businesses based on past practices. It was only after they struggled with "letting go" of time-honored values, traditions, and ways of thinking in order to create new structures and systems, all in the context of new visions and missions, that they began to experience success.

MIXING AND MATCHING METAPHORS

The four dominant types of metaphors about organizational change and change agents are summarized in Exhibit 1.

Knowing how to understand, use, and align these metaphors can be a powerful tool in any change effort. Consider Exhibit 2, where an organizational situation is presented and then described through each of the four different change metaphor systems.

These metaphors help to first define and then address the situation. Consequently, knowing which metaphor(s) a person is using, whether they are aware of it or not, helps enormously in understanding how they see the situation. Paying attention to how someone talks or writes about the change is a key to the underlying metaphor. For example, if someone says in response to the situation described in Exhibit 2, "We have a strong **foundation** to **build** on, we just need to **improve** our performance," it would be a good guess to assume they are operating from some form of an underlying "Build and Develop" metaphor system. With this understanding, one can then choose to get "in sync" with the person by communicating using the same metaphor or image system, or invite an alternative way of conceiving things by purposefully using a different metaphor or image system. This is illustrated in Exhibit 3.

In fact, because of the relationship between the underlying metaphor and how someone conceives of and then acts in a situation, it is possible to:

- **Diagnose** unarticulated assumptions and beliefs by paying attention to the metaphors and images used to describe any particular change.
- **Prepare** and **align** people with the true nature and requirements of the change by using congruent and appropriate metaphors and images.
- **Confuse** or **mislead** people by using inappropriate or incongruent metaphors and images.

With the examples in Exhibits 2 and 3 in mind, let's look at these assertions in more detail. First, it's important to remember that the same situation can be viewed and assessed in many different ways. Everyone sizes up a situation based on their own set of assumptions, beliefs, and metaphors for dealing with and describing reality. It is possible to view and inter-

EXHIBIT 2

THE IMPACT OF METAPHORS ON ASSESSMENT AND ACTION

Objective Situation: Processing of customer orders is being delayed as paperwork moves back and forth among four different departments. Invoices are late and sometimes inaccurate. Inventory control is described as "out of control."

METAPHOR	INTERNAL ASSESSMENT	EXTERNAL ACTION
Fix & Maintain	*The "processing machine" is broken somewhere. We may need to fix the machine and/or fix (re-train) the operators.*	"Things just aren't in sync. A lot of things are fouled up. I don't know if anything's broken or not, but we've got to fix things fast. We can't afford a lot of downtime. Find someone with a good set of tools fast!"
Build & Develop	*The basic set-up is fine. We need to learn how to work faster with better hand-offs and teamwork between the departments.*	"We can do better than we have been doing. We have a strong foundation to build on, we just need to improve our performance. I'd like to set some stretch goals to shoot for, construct a winning team, and then really develop the business. Find someone who can help build us into a better team!"
Move & Relocate	*We need to move from our old, familiar manual processing system to a new, automated one. It will be hard to leave the old ways behind, but we need to move on.*	"We've got to keep moving. We've stayed with our old system too long. It's time to leave that behind and go on to a more modern operation. We've a long way to go, so we better start out now. Find someone who's been down this road before to help us plan how to get there!"
Liberate & Recreate	*We need to open our eyes and rethink the business. Our hierarchical, sequential operation must end. We need to become a whole new kind of organization.*	"It's time we woke up to reality. We need to get rid of a lot of things and get down to the essence. We need to break away from our habitual ways of thinking. We need a new beginning and an end to our past practices. Find someone who can help us create a new vision of the future, re-invent the organization, and get us out of the box we're in!"

EXHIBIT 3

ALIGNING THE METAPHORS OF CHANGE

EXAMPLE 1: Out of Sync

Leader A:	So what do you think about the task force's recommendation?
Manager B:	It's going to be quite a haul to get from where we are now to where they want us to go. (Move & Relocate)
Leader A:	You're not kidding. It will be quite a job to wake up this organization. How about you? Have you seen the light? What do you think we need to do to make sure we successfully break free from past practices and create the new organization? (Liberate & Recreate)
Manager B:	Well, as long as everyone is perfectly clear where we're headed, why we're going there, and the milestones along the way, it shouldn't impact on current operations too badly. When will we get our marching orders? (Move & Relocate)

EXAMPLE 2: In Sync

Manager X:	So what do you think about the task force's recommendation?
Manager Y:	It's going to be quite a haul to get from where we are now to where they want us to go. (Move & Relocate)
Manager X:	Are you up for the trip? What do you think we need to do to make sure we get to where we are headed? (Move & Relocate)
Manager Y:	Yes, I'm on board. Let's be clear where we're going and then map out the best way to get there. (Move & Relocate)

EXAMPLE 3: Re-sync

Leader Q:	So what do you think about the task force's recommendation?
Executive P:	It's going to be quite a haul to get from where we are now to where they want us to go. (Move & Relocate)
Leader Q:	I think we need to first realize the box we're stuck in before we can go anywhere. (Move→Liberate)
Executive P:	Yeah, I know what you mean. It's hard to get anyone to think about going anywhere—you know, change—around here. We're all stuck. (Move→Liberate)
Leader Q:	What do you think might help us get unstuck—get out of the box we're in—so we can see some new possibilities? (Liberate & Recreate)
Executive P:	It's funny. I never thought of it that way. I guess you can't go anywhere as long as you are trapped in a box. Maybe we need an escape hatch! (Liberate & Recreate)
Leader Q:	That's a great idea! Do you have any ideas where the escape hatch is located or how we could create one? (Liberate & Recreate)
Executive P:	Well, now that you mention it, we could try...

pret the same situation as if one were dealing with a machine, a construction project, a cross-country move, and/or breaking free from some limitation. Test this yourself. Think of a recent change in your organization. Was this done because "something was broken," because "it would make things bigger, better, faster," because "it made sense to move from one place (or way of doing things) to another place," and/or because "it was time to let go of the past and (re)create a new way of working"?

Second, how a situation is assessed—the metaphor(s) one uses to help define what is happening—will lead to differing courses of action. Depending on the metaphorical perspective, a wide variety of change initiatives could be recommended, from "tinkering" to "re-creating" the business. If a "well-oiled machine" metaphor is used explicitly or implicitly to assess the problem, it is likely the remedy will be some form of "repair and maintenance," perhaps a "tune-up." It is unlikely, however, that a machine metaphor assessment would lead to a values or inspirational vision driven intervention. It just wouldn't make sense to say: "We need a tune-up, so let's break free of the past and envision the future in order to breathe new life into the business." Nor would it make sense to say: "We need to move from where we are now to a new state, so let's keep what we've got, build on it, and strengthen it." Our actions tend to follow our assessments.

The previous example of the Bell system is a case in point. During the first few months (some would say years) after the break-up of the Bell system, managers and employees had a hard time adjusting to the changes. In a series of workshops convened to help people talk about what was happening and what they needed to do, the same sentiments came up over and over again: "Nothing was broken to begin with; we don't know what to fix." "They've taken away everything we were based on. How can they expect us to improve our performance now?" "We've been reorganized before, but this isn't like other moves; we've abandoned everything we stood for and we don't know where we're going." It was only after the concept and imagery of transformational change was introduced that people found the words to express what they had been feeling: "Yes, that's it. It's like we died and are waiting to be reborn." "No wonder I felt so lost. Now I understand that we have to create a whole new organization." "No wonder I felt so confused trying to build on what I had done in the past."

Third, the metaphors and images used by people in publicly describing a situation are usually a strong indicator of the private, underlying assessments and premises from which they are operating. For example, hearing someone say: "We've got to **move from** a hierarchical organization **to** a flatter structure" is a reasonable signal to assume that they are looking at the situation through a "Move and Relocate" metaphor system. When different people in the organization share the same underlying metaphor(s) there is usually agreement and focus on what to do. A common metaphor provides a shared understanding for everyone. When the underlying metaphors are different, conflict over what to do and how to do it is common. Thus one person may be trying to "fix the machine," while another wants to "move the organization," and still another doesn't want to "tear down what we've spent so much time building up." In such situations, people may fight over the causes and cures to the problem without ever realizing that their differing, unexpressed, metaphorical reasoning may be preventing them from really understanding one another.

This is illustrated by a planning session involving managers of a major government agency addressing what to do about workforce diversity. During the session, there was strongly divided opinion about how much needed to be done. Some felt a major effort involving retraining managers and redesigning the organization would be needed. Others were equally adamant that not much more than a few directives would handle the situation. It was when they were asked to complete the sentence: "Dealing with workforce diversity issues is like doing _____ to an automobile," that they realized what their conflicts really were. About half of the managers responded: a "tune-up," a "new paint job," or a "good cleaning and washing." Meanwhile, the other half said: "a com-

plete overhaul," "installing a new engine and frame," or "a complete re-design and re-engineering." It was only after the implicit imagery that had been guiding their thinking was revealed that they were able to have a substantive discussion about what needed to be done.

Fourth, people will be confused and misled when a manager or leader uses metaphors and imagery in public discussions about a change effort that do not match the actual intended change. For example, if the leader privately believes there is a need to "rethink the business," "break free from the past," "wake up to the new realities," and "create anew," then some form of transformational change is probably intended. Such changes can be traumatic, lengthy, and require a fundamental alteration in thinking and doing by organizational members. If, however, in public presentations the leader tells the organization that: "We've entered a new phase where we need to build on our past successes, strengthen ourselves further, and insure a smooth running operation," then it is likely that "Fix and Maintain" and/or "Build and Develop" metaphors and images will be evoked in the minds of the audience. Thus, they will be ill-prepared, psychologically and emotionally, if they are then sent to workshops to learn how to "think outside of the box." If they then act confused or slow to get it, they may be labeled as resisters, rather than people who have been confused and/or misled by inappropriate imagery. Sometimes such mixed messages are unintended or derive from some confusion or lack of clarity by the leader. In other cases, they may be intended, but in the hopes of helping versus hurting the situation.

For example, in a large corporation heavily dependent on Defense Department spending, its president realized that world events, shifting priorities, and declining governmental budgets would seriously impact the company's future unless the organization fundamentally repositioned itself, changed its product/service mix, and altered its traditional culture. Nonetheless, when addressing middle managers about the need for these changes, the president kept (inappropriately) describing the changes called for as "based on our long history and traditional values" and "building on our past successes." The president ended the session by exhorting the mangers to go out and "develop their operations for the future." Unfortunately, the president became increasingly dismayed as manager after manager began developing plans to expand on what they were already doing, rather than rethinking the business. When later asked why imagery related to "building on the past" was used, the president responded: "I thought it would help reduce resistance if they thought the changes weren't really that drastic. I just couldn't imagine telling them the 'past was dead' and that we had to 'wake up' to the new realities and 'invent' a new organization."

Finally, one way to help people align themselves with an intended change effort is to insure first that everyone is operating from the same metaphor/image system, and then that the metaphors and images are congruent with the intended change. If people seem confused about what to do, changing or altering the implicit and explicit metaphors may either free up their thinking, or cast the situation in a new light. When Total Quality Management (TQM) is talked about as a way to "provide more tools to fix more problems," it is unlikely that people will understand the aspects of TQM that call for a new management philosophy because a "Fix and Maintain" image is being evoked. Alternatively, if TQM is described using a "Liberate and Recreate" metaphor system as "a whole new way of being that breaks from past practices and calls for new ways of working together," then it is more likely that it will be understood as intended to change existing management practices. People may still resist, but at least they and you know what they are resisting.

A good example of this was a large accounting firm where the introduction of TQM was met with fierce resistance from all levels of employees and managers. They objected to the idea that something might be wrong with the professional quality of their work and "needed fixing." The change strategy that emphasized training managers in TQM problem-solving tools and techniques ("because it was more hands-on") had been a serious miscalculation. Everyone was angry that top management

EXHIBIT 4

SOME KEYS FOR MANAGING THE METAPHORS OF CHANGE

1. Listen to the word images you and others use to describe the change effort in order to assess clarity, consistency, and comprehension.
2. Make sure what you tell yourself and others metaphorically is what you mean literally.
3. Describe the change situation using all four (or more) change metaphor systems as an exercise to gain new insights and guard against blind spots.
4. Work to align the symbolic language system to help get people fixing, building, moving, or recreating in unison.
5. Seek to intentionally shape how people conceive and think about the change through the creative and constructive use of metaphors, images, and symbols.
6. When stuck, deliberately change the prevailing metaphor(s) and image(s) as a way to get out of the box and induce new ways of thinking.

thought something "was broken" in the quality of their work and therefore they were being given "tool kits to fix things." When the change strategy was shifted to also explain the underlying logic, rationale, and factors and forces driving the change, tempers finally abated.

MANAGING THE METAPHORS OF CHANGE

Based on the above discussion, the following ideas (summarized in Exhibit 4) offer some specifics to consider when dealing with organizational change:

1. Pay careful attention to how you and others describe, verbally and in writing, the change in question. Are you describing the change as if what is needed is to:

- **Fix & Maintain**: repair, tinker, adjust, fine-tune, deal with what's broken, get the right tools, etc.?
- **Build & Develop**: add to, grow, lay a good foundation, nurture, train, get bigger, get smarter, get faster, etc.?
- **Move & Relocate**: move forward, go from _____ to _____, leave something behind, watch for obstacles, timetables, clear steps, milestones, etc.?
- **Liberate & Recreate**: wake up, think out of the box, create a new paradigm, see the light, break free from the past, end _____ and give birth to _____, reinvent, recreate, etc.?

Listen to yourself and others as an act of diagnosis to test clarity, intent, and understanding regarding the change.

2. Make sure what you say is what you mean. Insure that how you think about and describe the change metaphorically is consistent with the intended change. Otherwise, you may be confusing others and/or yourself. Don't talk about "building on the past" if what you really want to do is "escape the past and create a new future." Note that any recurring inconsistencies in how you and others describe the change could be a possible indicator of continuing doubt, confusion, or lack of clarity as to what is really intended and why.

3. Describe the intended change using all four, or more, metaphor systems as a planning exercise. Pay attention to the ways in which you see the situation the same or differently through each metaphor. Note the implications for intervention and action. For example, imagine a meeting of Kremlin leaders in 1990 going through such an exercise:

- We need to **fix** and **maintain** communism because_____.
  In order to do that, we need to_____.
- We need to **build** and **develop** communism because_____.
  In order to do that, we need to_____.

• We need to **move from** the old form of communism **to** a new and different communism because_____.
In order to do that, we need to_____.

• We need **to end** communism and **begin anew** because_____.
In order to do that, we need to_____.

While there is no guarantee how such an exercise will turn out, it does assure that multiple views will be examined. It might also turn up some blind spots created by unspoken beliefs associated with unexpressed metaphorical reasoning.

4. Work to align the symbolic language system of everyone involved to match the desired change. It does no good for the CEO to be talking about "moving and relocating" if lower-level managers are talking exclusively in terms of "fixing and/or building." It's hard to imagine a successful organizational change effort where the CEO sends a message about a "faster, more responsive, more effective organization" to middle managers who tell supervisors to "go fix your operation," but are greeted by angry workers who say: "What's the problem? Nothing's broken!" This also means that a change agent should not unintentionally reinforce inappropriate metaphors, and, in turn, the underlying ways of conceiving the situation. If a manager worries that a change effort may "require too much downtime" and that "a good set of tools is needed," then the response "Don't worry, I'll get my tool kit and keep downtime limited" is reinforcing. That's appropriate if the intended change is a "Fix and Maintain" type of change. If it isn't, then a more appropriate response might be: "I'm not sure we're fixing anything, so much as we are moving from an old system to a new system. The move may take some time, so we need to plan it carefully. The first step will be to map out the direction we're headed in and where we want to be by next year."

5. Lead by helping to shape how people conceive and think about things. The creative and constructive use of symbolic language systems is a critical leadership competency, especially during organizational change. Leaders simply cannot afford to let their change initiatives be recast and/or misunderstood as a result of implicit or unexamined metaphors. Leaders must be clear in what they want and help shape and inform change through congruent use of literal and symbolic reasoning. They must also be sensitive to their own blind spots created by unthinking use of favored metaphors or images that may be limiting their own reasoning processes.

6. Intentionally change prevailing metaphors and images as a way to induce new ways of conceiving of a situation. "In the box" thinking is created by habitual use of thought patterns that inevitably lead to the same conclusion. New patterns are needed to "get out of the box." Because most people naturally use metaphors for abstract reasoning, one way to "get out of the box" is to deliberately change the underlying metaphors and images being applied to the situation. Any organizational change that requires people to reconceive the situation they face will require a change in the underlying and usually unexamined metaphors. To ignore this aspect of managing change is to jeopardize the whole change effort.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sum, how one conceives of something is often based on the implicit or explicit metaphorical system(s) used to comprehend and engage reality. Therefore, how an organizational change is described metaphorically is both:

• an indicator of the speaker's internal understanding and assessment of the situation, and

• a way to cue and influence how listeners should understand and respond.

Change may be change, but the symbolic languages associated with Maintenance, Development, Transition, and Transformation are all quite different. The next time someone in your organization says: "But if it ain't broke, why fix it?," recall this discussion and seize the opportunity to paint a word picture of what you really want to communicate.

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