



Tips and techniques:

Metaphorically speaking

By Amy E. Kahn, MA

Like music, metaphors can either enhance the score of a workforce diversity initiative or dampen the composition of well-intended efforts. While some may agree that communication is dependent upon clear and precise selection of vocabulary, seldom is there consideration given to the importance of the metaphors we draw upon everyday.

Accord-
ing to Bill
Veltrop,
founder of the
International
Center for Organizational Design,

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"We are moving from the world of traditional organizing forms into a new and uncharted world. Metaphors can help practitioners and leaders multiply their ability to see, understand and redesign organizations to fit today's extraordinary challenges." (Morgan, 1998) Metaphors can help us define complex hypotheses, concepts, visions, and missions; we need to be careful, however about the metaphors we choose.

Metaphors seem to have become so commonplace that individuals at times forget the distortions and limitations as well as the contribution to communication that these metaphors imply. What is a metaphor? To use a metaphor to describe what it is, it is a frame from within which we hang ideas, develop visions and missions, and through which we can view organizations.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book, *Metaphors We Live By*,

explore the complexity of metaphors employed in our daily lives. They state, "Metaphors are conceptual in nature. They are among our principal vehicles for understanding. And they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality. Yet they are typically viewed within philosophy as matters of mere language."

can help us to refine our field. In her book, *Implementing Diversity*, Marilyn Loden states, "Like trees in a vast forest, humans come in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors." (Loden, 1995) Ann Morrison popularized the image of a glass ceiling in her book, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling" (Morrison, White, Velsor, & Leadership, 1992) and Roosevelt Thomas, author of *Beyond Race and Gender*, is noted for his concept of people as jellybeans in a glass jar and organizational culture as the roots of a large tree. (Thomas, 1991) These authors, like many others, use metaphors as descriptors so the reader has a clearer and more precise understanding of diversity.

Workforce diversity specialists are often called upon to define diversity and offer proactive strategies for implementing diversity programs. I surveyed several diversity professionals and asked them to define diversity. The results included an explosion of metaphors. Some

participants began by stating that human diversity is about differences, like jellybeans, melting pots and tossed salads while others understood it to be about prejudice reduction, like "old school" mechanistic systems and psychic prisons, still others asserted that it is another term for affirmative action, yet another metaphor.

Just as metaphors can help us refine concepts by offering insights and clarification, they can also misrepresent and lead decision makers toward ineffectual resolutions. Vigilant and intentional designers and strategists should be acutely aware of their terminology.

Gareth Morgan, a noted authority on metaphors, wrote the book *Images of Organizations* (Morgan, 1998), to emphasize how metaphors are utilized in the organizational system. He cautions, "The insights generated by different metaphors are not just theoretical. They are incredibly practical ... in creating ways of seeing and acting, metaphors tend to create ways of not seeing and not acting." (Morgan, 1998)

The following example expresses how metaphors can influence a strategic analysis.

A large manufacturing company had recently been charged with a discrimination suit from members of a team making comments that were interpreted as inappropriate. Here's what happened. While discussing hiring procedures and the company's new recruitment initiative, a few members of the strategy team became quite comfortable with each other. They began making jokes and comments among

continued



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themselves. In a neighboring conference room, there was another meeting taking place. During an episode of silence, the employees at that meeting overheard laughter and remarks from the strategic team's meeting. The listeners felt that the remarks were inappropriate and filed suit against the company. What follows is an illustration of how metaphors can be applied to help diversity practitioners as they develop work place strategies.

The three words, "garden," "bridge" and "tornado" are commonly used metaphors (by whom and to explain what?). What follows is an illustration of how these metaphors can be applied to the team's behavior in the company example above.

Metaphor A: The Garden

The garden, in this metaphor, represents the organization. Diversity specialists each have different "gardening" techniques. When the organization is seen as a garden, diversity becomes the flora and the team (in this scenario) might be viewed as the fauna or squirrels that have entered the garden. With the metaphor of a "threat" entering the garden, the focus can be directed toward either growing the garden or focusing on the squirrels and their destruction of the plants.

For the strategist, several choices arise

A fence could be placed around the garden to prevent the squirrels from coming in again.

The squirrels could be taught

proper behavior.

The incident could be viewed as a sign that the organizational system isn't being properly cared for, so the soil should be examined to determine if the watering cycles are effective and if it receives the best sun exposure.

If a diversity strategist were to utilize the garden metaphor, it is important to consider the owner of the garden and the issue of control. If the squirrels hold the power in the organization, for instance, it might be difficult to fence them out. Additionally, calling the team fauna implies that they are unable to learn. The beauty, ironically, of the garden metaphor is that there are so many different opportunities and options for growth and development.

Metaphor B: Building bridges

In this metaphor, the bridge can represent mediation or connection between the team and the victim. Consider how and why a bridge is built and the purpose of the bridge. First, both sides must decide if the bridge is necessary. If, the two entities decide to reach common ground, there are short-term and long-term goals that need to be considered. The short-term goal may be to provide a mechanism or an infrastructure solution so both sides can interact more successfully. The long-term goal may be for the bridge to impact the entire organization in a positive and synergistic way.

Diversity programs that construct bridges might therefore need to have

short and long-term goals. Achieving these goals would require consensus from both sides. If we turn to our case study, the strategist may have a short-term goal of productivity and a long-term goal of harmony. He or she would need to construct programs with ideas from the accused as well as the victims to determine a common ground. Without the common consent of both sides, the bridge would collapse.

Metaphor C: Preparing for a tornado

In this scenario, the team that made the inappropriate comments would represent the force that caused the tornado. The tornado might be viewed as the lawsuit or the limitless repercussions of the incident itself. Consider the impact that the tornado metaphor would have on the organization. What can we do with a tornado? We cannot prevent a tornado. We cannot manage a tornado. We can only set up an environment that is prepared for a tornado.

The key to Metaphor C is located in defining the secondary metaphor for the diversity of people. If humans are viewed as trees and the organization is a forest, then an impetus (like the team scenario) that causes a tornado could seriously damage the organization. If, instead, human diversity were viewed as jellybeans in a jar, would the storm break the glass? Should the glass be thicker?

In these examples, it is clear to see how metaphors serve to illuminate and clarify a challenge. The

continued



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metaphor can be used as a diagnostic tool to help frame an organizational dilemma. In his book, "Managing a Diverse Workforce: Regaining the Competitive Edge", John P. Fernandez, a leading diversity specialist, uses yet another metaphor, "...we explore how neurotic human beings, which we all are to some extent, develop racist, sexist and ethnocentric attitudes and behaviors. These mental illnesses are a main impediment to any society that wants to be competitive in the new global village." (Fernandez, 1991) Simply put, there are strengths to metaphors, but there are also limitations.

Consequently, it is important to hone one's own skills in working with and around metaphors. To positively invoke change, a strategist can:

Use a positive metaphor to describe the situation like growing a garden, managing or redirecting the wind, re-paving a highway or building a sports team.

Choose metaphors carefully. Brainstorm with colleagues before selecting the metaphor to determine what type of impact the metaphor might have on the organization.

Ensure that others have a similar metaphor. Many conflicts arise because two individuals have conflicting metaphors and don't share the same vision.

Be cautious of taking the metaphor to the extreme. While a "human" may be likened to an animal, it is understood that the human doesn't have four legs and a tail.

Once defined, use the metaphor as a tool for strategic planning.

Make reference to the metaphor in all presentation and materials. Be

sure that everyone understands the metaphor.

Build a visual aid to support the metaphor. Whether it is PowerPoint, an illustration, a poster or a statue, a visual aid will reinforce the vision and help remind the team about common objectives.

Reflecting on words helps diversity strategists be more intentional about their work. There are multiple different definitions of diversity and metaphors can help clarify and enhance shared understanding and synergy. Improper or inept use can lead to unintended consequences. Metaphors can make powerful music scored to produce a melodious sound or cacophony; it is the performer who interprets the music and how the instrument is played. ■

Amy E. Kahn is president of Culture Link, a consulting and training firm specializing in organizational effectiveness with an emphasis on workplace diversity. Amy is also the author of Challenging Diversity: Taking the Next Step (Budshel Press, 1999). She can be reached through her Web site at www.culture-link.com or phoned directly at 602-266-8676.