

WORDS OF AUTHORITY

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Leadership: Symbols, Metaphors and Magic

Leadership is a symbol. It is also a metaphor integrating our earliest experiences associated with order, power and authority. Symbols of leadership are potent artifacts fueling social engagement. Securing an executive position, winning an election or being sought out for advice are symbols associated with leadership.

Leaders provide direction, instill purpose and motivate action using symbolic communication to influence follower beliefs, thoughts and behaviors, and to offer compelling visions of the future. Effective leaders employ metaphors to marshal resources and galvanize power. In their 2010 book, *Leadership as Lunacy*, Jack Lumby and Fenwick W. English write that "... the essence of language for leaders is the use of metaphor."

In organizations, as in families, leadership is socially constructed. Leaders and followers engage in metaphorical transactions, jointly creating meaning associated with an object, activity or act of importance. Followers consciously or unconsciously entrust their leaders with their social and psychological well-being. Followers imbue leaders with meaning, believing they can fulfill desires or advance beliefs. As a result, leaders and their leadership are institutionalized as symbols of direction, security or hope.

HR professionals understand the dynamics associated with the leader-follower relationship, which often alternate between tumultuous and tender, or disabling and enabling. Similar to family dynamics, these relationships are independently conceived and collaboratively forged, consciously and unconsciously.

In his 1920 book *The Ego and the Id*, Sigmund Freud introduced his structural model of the mind, dividing it into ego (the conscious mind), super-ego (the conscience) and id (the unconscious comprised of instincts and drives). Freud hypothesized that the unconscious was an archive of repressed thoughts and memories associated with adverse thoughts, unfulfilled wishes and painful or traumatic memories. He believed

that the repressed material buried in the unconscious manifested at the conscious level through symbols often expressed through metaphors.

Metaphors as Magic

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote, "The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic." While managing human capital and contributing to organizational strategy is not magical, for many HR professionals it often seems that they work magic, enabling leaders to achieve organizational productivity and profitability goals. Because HR professionals support leaders in launching new initiatives, they possess expertise in managing change, crafting messages and recommending interventions promoting follower support of the leader's vision and decisions. They know that change induces followers with fear and anxiety as they anticipate workplace instability. Change can trigger unconscious responses in followers resulting in unanticipated, dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors. One approach HR professionals can use in assisting leaders to anticipate follower concerns toward change and to lessen resistance to endorsing it is through the use of metaphors.

Metaphors as Bridges

In his 1999 article, *The Use of Symbols and Metaphors in Psychoanalysis*, Dr. Robert J. Marshall offered that "metaphors provide the interface between the conscious and unconscious ... [they] are mirrors reflecting all aspects of a person's being ... and are a more powerful mode of communicating with the unconscious than confrontation, interpretation and explanation."

Metaphors reveal more about what we think or feel by creating a bridge between the unconscious and conscious mind. Metaphors enliven language in more vivid, engaging or speculative directions. Leaders energize followers when they use metaphors stimulating ideas that surface to our conscious thoughts. For



example, "Chairwoman Jane Jones planted the seeds of inspiration in the soil of the organization, cultivating a new spirit of growth and productivity."

Metaphors as Education

Lumby and English wrote that "leaders traffic in language. It stirs the imagination, defines critical issues and creates collective consciousness in followers. Language is the ultimate form of the construction of symbolic power; it stirs humanity to manage change ... the essence of language for leaders [is] the use of metaphors."

HR professionals' roles are morphing. The rapid expansion of the 21st-century global marketplace provides opportunities associated with organizational survival and sustainability. HR professionals acquiring advanced development in psychodynamic techniques and communications may find they can influence the direction of this millennium's expansion.

Through the knowledge and skills offered in these disciplines, they can enable themselves and organizational leaders to recognize the power and potential inherent in symbols and use metaphors in daily work of organizational and societal evolution.

In his 2013 article, *Magic and Psychoanalysis*, Dr. Eugene Goldwater notes that "simply by speaking to someone, you can force them to think about whatever you want them to think about. No witch or wizard could ask for more!"



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