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Metaphor as useful jump from sense-making to meaning-making in management education

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This short paper is a meditation on the bridge between sense-making and meaning-making. The crucial difference between the two is that sense-making is about perception of pattern and order, whereas meaning-making is about perception of the *consequences* of pattern and order as they affect us, or as they affect events in the organisational system. Sense-making therefore concerns epistemology, meaning-making is the field covered by axiology. The prevailing definition of sense-making (sensemaking) in management has seen it as the culmination of meaning-making and an ongoing, retrospective stage of socially constructed experience (Weick et al, 2005). There is certainly something to this, but in this article sense-making is *a distinct pre-cursor category* to meaning-making, not another facet of it. The issue proposed here is a straightforward one, namely that, despite its primacy as driver of management action, the urge for meaning-making can only be as effective as the sense-making that necessarily *precedes* it.

Most theory discussed in business and in business schools confines itself to answering particular types of question such as "what is the meaning of…?", "what is the correct thing to do?", and "how should things be organised?", without surfacing assumptions about how the data used to answer them are derived. Meaning-making deals only with consequences of pattern. Sense-making deals with the nature of pattern. In other words, is the decision-maker aware of *how* they think before they think how to act? This illustrates the central part played in *both* sense- and meaning-making by pattern and order. In science, a pattern is a generative relationship, which is to say that it is a dynamic field which carries information. In sense-making, pattern and order are to be discerned; in meaning-making they are to be derived or imposed.

Pattern and order in *sense*-making rely first on what in nature is accessible to our biological

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and cognitive capacities. A given thought may be a phenomenological artefact, but thinking is pre-requisite and underlying reality. By contrast, in meaning-making a given pattern is an extension of collective, intersubjective, social structures that have only a social reality. Leadership is arguably the best description of the dilemma faced by players when choosing and implementing courses of action from the present into the future. It is wise for decision makers to be critical thinkers, and many people seek to close the gap in their practice to become more aware of how they can think more accurately about the nature of the difficult problems they face in organisational settings. In practice, however, this is very difficult to do. Metaphor has the potential to bridge such a gap between sense-making and meaning-making in contexts of uncertainty, volatility, or novelty. Leadership and management are meaning-making constructs – patterns of relationship with no existence independent of agreed social convention. Post-experience management education, and in particular the Executive MBA (EMBA), constitutes a valid canvas for studying the relationship between sense-making and meaning-making. EMBAs are usually in their late 30s or older and bring years of significant experience from their managerial or leadership roles. Along with a wish for growth and change, however, they often bring a sense of leader or manager stuckness - the deeper conditions of which may not be immediately evident because the kind of thinking needed for implementation of sustainable business models is precisely not to be found in the uncritical application of much of the existing theories, models, and frameworks in general circulation.

Metaphor is about getting at one thing through another and is pervasive in human communication (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). the usefulness of metaphor to the practitioner is always as conduit to new ways of seeing a situation where conventional or literal thinking has failed to have impact. The usefulness of metaphor to the theorist is in exploration of the nature of pattern and order, which is a response to Meyer & Gent's (2003) call "to bring into light what has generally been hidden in management education" (p. 631). Abductive in inference, metaphor involves discovering isomorphic patterns between normally unrelated concepts. The formula for metaphor may be stated in terms of $x = y$, where y doesn't mean literally what y would normally mean. Metaphor provides new information or insight by the imposition of an unrelated but known pattern to an enquiry. Tsoukas (1991) highlights the value of this to the individual by saying:

> "through metaphors I can say what cannot be said in literal language, thus expressing an emotional reality lying beyond even conscious awareness" (p. 571).

and in this regard elicitation of metaphor for self-perception may have much potential for personal development. Morgan (1996) suggests that metaphor may offer a:

> "primal, generative process that is fundamental to the creation of human under-
> standing and meaning in all aspects of life." (p. 228).

Despite risking reification through over-use, stereotype or cliché, metaphor has often been used in career research. Perhaps this is because metaphor can illuminate the gaps between one school of thought and another when thinking has become stuck (Alvesson & Sandberg 2011).

A metaphor can be arrived at by the creation (imposition) of a sense-making frame onto data. This is often where linguistic metaphors are employed as tools for sense-making. When we meet new or difficult circumstances sense-making may appear in terms of coding of raw experience into a metaphoric category. Of course, the application of metaphor to decipher organisational or strategic patterns is not new (e.g. Handy 1978, Mintzberg 1989, Morgan 1998, Kornprobst et al 2008). In line with Lakoff & Johnson (2003), metaphors are not taken as just decorative use of words but as categories of conceptual meaning facilitated by the *structure* of language. As such, one significance of metaphor in the movement from sense-making to meaning-making is the observation of just how reliant on it we are for meaning-making (Morgan 1996).

Metaphor is a concept where meaning is immanent in the relationship between different ideas. That it appears universally in every culture suggests that it is *relationship* rather than language that is its defining feature. The meaning-making level of relationship concerns a culturally-bound understanding of the consequences of a *particular* metaphor in use. Because the structure of metaphor has been so thoroughly investigated and catalogued, once the particulars have been found, it may appear that there is little more to say; understand what a metaphor does and you understand all that a metaphor is. The sense-making level, however, should not be missed. For any particular metaphor to be resonant *and* generate insights, its elements must be sufficiently related while at the same time sufficiently clear as an abstraction to remain identifiable as a metaphor and not a tautology. Knowledge of the particular is not enough, and over-familiarity can diminish or dull a metaphor's meaning-making impact, thus killing it (until applied in a novel way). Novelty is a requirement, and so is the capacity for meta-level understanding of what a metaphor is. Epistemologically, metaphor operates on two levels of intelligibility. For a metaphor to be such that is operates effectively in meaning-making, its formula must also carry the sense-making meta-message of 'this is a metaphor'. Without that, we would have the risk of an erroneous and literal tautology. Such ontological mistakes can still be found, as for example in transubstantiation, or money equalling wealth, or self being ego. In these examples, each has gone from "x = y, but y doesn't mean exactly what y would normally mean", to "x = x".

The jump sought must lie in the logic of metaphor at a level of abstraction above the particular case. To seize upon one example is to risk missing the wider point, which is the

value of metaphorical logic to management or leadership thinking. The logic of metaphor can be seen at work in Gregory Bateson's "syllogism in grass" (1991), which says:

> Men die,

> Grass dies,

> Men are grass.

The poetic power of the syllogism comes from a pattern revealed through identification and agreement of predicates. This a logic which does not stand up to analytical explanation except, Bateson argued, in all poetry, art, humour, games, fantasy, dreams and – importantly to the idea of sustainable business, circular economy – in natural history. As managers now face the complexities of climate change, environment degradation, and resource scarcity, we may find metaphor's emancipatory promise to align meaning-making and sense-making. Meaning is not in the nouns, nor in the perception of the thinker, but a property of an organising principle in the system that includes all those elements. The radical implication is that our unconscious thought processes are metaphorical, and that perhaps in nature *all* mental process is organised in this way. Sustainable business and regenerative leadership models (Hardman, 2010) may turn out to mimic as metaphor those ecological systems we discern in nature but have so far eschewed as paradigms in human economic development.

Metaphor conveys vivid and concise wisdom. Adventurous and creative use of metaphor in management education should be celebrated. There is much untapped potential in this broad a view of metaphor to contribute fresh perspectives to other key questions in management, business and society, all of which ought to be meaning-laden queries grounded in sense-making awareness.

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