Metaphor as Tool in Leadership Classroom

Abstract:

Metaphors have been used in management education to enrichen student experiences with abstract concepts. This paper summarizes the use of metaphor as a teaching tool and documents the design of a leadership assignment that requires students to come up with a metaphor that symbolizes their vision of who they aspire to be as a leader. This paper proposes an activity whereby participants of the conference session have to envision a metaphor that represents what leadership is for them. The conference session will end with the presenter sharing content and thematic analysis of students' write-up on their metaphors of leadership.

Keywords: leadership, assignment, metaphors

Introduction

Metaphors have been used as a teaching tool in business education (e.g., Ryman et al., 2009). They have been used to teach organizational theory (e.g., Taber, 2007), strategic management (e.g., Weick, 2003; Mills, 2009) and team dynamics (Fairfield and London, 2003). In the leadership courses, metaphors have also been used as a teaching or assignment tool (e.g., Clouse et al., 2009; Singh, 2010).

This paper describes a leadership philosophy assignment that requires students to come up with a metaphor that symbolizes their aspired vision of themselves as leaders. This assignment is best suited for a leadership module and is suitable for both undergraduates and post-graduate students.

Theoretical Foundation

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are used to build abstract concepts from concrete ones. Metaphors allow us to gain understanding of something uncertain by associating it with something we know a lot about. They also serve as serve as "constructive instruments…like glasses to astigmatic eyes, to reveal reality truly or effectively in ways we have not previously seen" (Pepper, 1973, p. 198). For instance, an organization as a machine is a classic metaphor used in organizational studies (Morgan, 1997), defining how we perceive and study organizations.

Beyond enhancing our conception and creativity of how we see certain phenomenon, scholars propose that metaphors may also incite action (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980); Akin and Palmer, 2000). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that "much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones" (p. 145) while Akin and

Palmer (2000) note that "metaphors have the effect of both describing and constructing our organizational realities. By naming a situation through a metaphor, we not only give it a rich identity but also engender actions that actually create the reality" (p. 69).

In their book, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) concluded that metaphor is used effortlessly in everyday life by ordinary people. In their words:

"Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but also in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature…The way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (p. 3).

Teaching Implications

Given the power of metaphors in our daily experience of life and phenomena, and also in our conceptualization of abstract concepts and phenomena, how can metaphors be a teaching tool that allows students to gain further insights into abstract concepts such as leadership?

According to research on teaching and learning, learning takes place in two separate areas of the brain – each side of the brain is specialized in their own mode of thinking and learning (Sanders and Sanders, 1984). The right side of the brain controls visual thinking, holistic concepts, and pattern recognition while the left-brain, controls verbal and linear thinking. A summary of the two different sides of brain in relation to teaching and learning is depicted below:

Left Brain	Right Brain
Logical / orderly process	Random process

Sequential	Intuitive/ simultaneous
Rational	Holistic
Analytical	Synthesis
Objective	Subjectiev
Looks at parts	Looks at wholes
Practical	Emotional
Serious	Playful
Structured / systematic	Flexible
Judgmental	Nonjudgmental
Recogizes names	Recognizes faces
Responds to verbal instruction	Responds to visual and kinesthetic cues
Uses language for memory	Uses imagery for memory
Dependent upon words for meaning	Interprets body language

Table 1: Summary of Left Brain versus Right Brain (Adapted from Sanders and Sanders, 1984, p. 18).

Research indicates that both left and right brain has to be employed equally for optimal learning to take place (Sanders & Sanders, 1984). With the metaphor, "the sequential, analytical, verbal knowledge of the left brain becomes "real" to the right brain, which relies on holistic conceptual patterns and images to understand what the "big picture" means" (e.g., Clouse et al., 2013, p. 82). The metaphor acts as a bridge to connect these two separate thought processes of the brain, connecting the literal with the figurative, the factual with the imaginative, and the rational with the intuitive (Sanders and Sanders, 1984). In fact, Sanders and Sanders (1984)

assert that the metaphor "is perhaps, the fastest and most effective route we have to link the right brain with left" (19).

According to Clouse et al (2013, p. 90), the teaching implications of metaphors are listed below from their paper:

Metaphors "allow us to express abstract thoughts in terms of our past experiences thus connecting with the framework of the learner. They link concepts (left-brain functions) with imagination (right-brain functions) thus fostering a whole-brain scholastic experience. They stimulate the mind to further exploration by revealing insights into underlying connections or parallels among seemingly dissimilar phenomena. They contribute to understanding by utilizing one idea or situation to make sense of another. They facilitate communication by invoking multiple perspectives. They provide the student the opportunity to connect the learning with other concepts and ideas already known by the learner" (p. 90).

Learning Objectives

Given the benefits of teaching with metaphors, students in a leadership module were tasked to find a metaphor that symbolize their vision of leadership. The learning objectives are found below.

Students will be able to:

- Gain multiple perspective on the concept of leadership
- Explore connections between an object / person or image and leadership
- Utilize the metaphor to gain additional perspectives and insights on leadership
- Gain self-awareness on one's vision of leadership

Exercise Overview

In an individual assignment, the students were asked to form their own metaphorical expressions relating to their aspirations as a leader. Specifically, they were asked to think of a metaphor that represents their leadership aspiration and philosophy. In the assignment, they were also tasked to explore their own personality, strengths and weaknesses via some online tests, and to reflect on their own values as well. Using their chosen metaphor as the anchor for their assignment, they were tasked to construct a leadership philosophy using information regarding their personality, strengths, weaknesses and values, and to anchor their philosophy around the image of the metaphor (see appendix A for exact assignment instructions).

Students were also instructed that the concept of a metaphor in this assignment is used in its popular context -for instance, A is B or that A is like B. In the context of this assignment, students have to come up with statements like this, "I aspire to be like a bridge as a leader", or "I aspire to be like a gardener as a leader".

Session Description

In this conference session, the presenter will present on the use of metaphor as a teaching tool, and describe the assignment students had to do. Participants will be given 10 minutes to come up with their own metaphor of leadership to share with the group of participants. Next, the presenter will then present classification and content analysis of the metaphors from student assignments. A classification of metaphors students came up with is shown in the table below.

Category	Example

Objects / Structures	Roman arch, matryoska doll, compass
People	Shepherd, pastor, mother, gardener, coaches, Spartan group of army, stage manager, music conductor,
Transportation	Ship, boat, dragon boat
Nature	Moon, sun, stars, river
Animals	Pride of lions, pack of wolves, mother hen
Guidance	Lighthouse, bridge, compass

Table 2: Classification of Students' Metaphors of Leadership

The session will then conclude with a mini-discussion on alternative uses of metaphors in the management classroom.

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Appendix A: Assignment Instructions for Students

What is A Leadership Philosophy?

A leadership philosophy is your personal vision of how you want to be as a leader. Crafting a good leadership philosophy involves you having a good grasp of your own beliefs, values, and principles in addition to knowing your own personality type and values and weaknesses. Having a leadership philosophy is important as it can serve as a guide should you ever face challenges in your leadership journey. It can also help you find ways to develop yourself into a leader you aspire to be.

Task A: Understanding the Self

Do ***all*** of the following:

a)   Identify 5 values that are important to you as a person

b)   Find out more about your own personality via the following link:

https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test

You can also read up more about your personality type via the following link:

http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/take-the-mbti-instrument/

c)   Find out more about your strengths and weaknesses via the following link:

http://richardstep.com/richardstep-strengths-weaknesses-aptitude-test/#takethetest

Task B: Building a Leadership Metaphor or Imagery

Do *one* of the following after thinking about what kind of leader you aspire to be

1)   Find an image of a metaphor that represents your leadership aspirations or philosophy

2)   Draw an image / metaphor to represent your leadership aspirations or philosophy

3)   Create a digital image (could be digital art or photography) to represent your leadership

       aspirations or philosophy

4)   Insert the selected or created image / metaphor at the start of your leadership philosophy

Task C: Writing your Leadership Philosophy

Write your leadership philosophy referencing the image / metaphor you have created or selected, incorporating the knowledge you have of yourself. In your leadership philosophy, you can cover the following questions:

a)   Who am I as a person? What are my values?

b)   What are my strengths and weaknesses?

c)   How does my image represent the kind of leader I want to be?

d)   What would I do to enable myself to be the kind of leader I want to be