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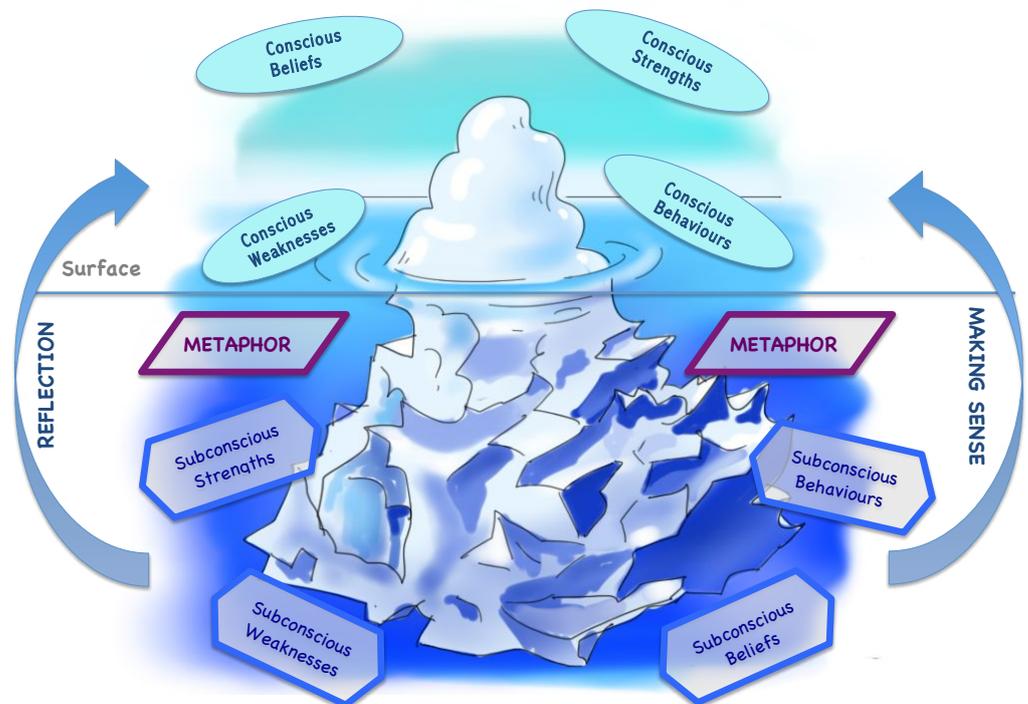
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The Inner World of Leaders

Why Metaphors for Leadership Matter

By Heather
Cairns-Lee

Self-Awareness – The Foundation of Leadership Development

Much leadership development is delivered using strategic frameworks and competency models that specify the knowledge and skills desired of an effective leader. Along with personality assessments and 360 feedback, these all take an external perspective; a perspective that lies outside the individual. These frameworks and models can be useful but their over-use can imply that there is 'a right way to do leadership' which can divert people's attention away from understanding their own inner models. Whilst development from this external perspective tends to provide an efficient way to develop large numbers of people in skills relevant to leadership it might be less effective at uncovering the mental models by which leaders actually operate.

Research I have undertaken explores how leaders can become more aware of their inner mental models and the implications that result from them. This exploration surfaces and examines the naturally occurring metaphors and implicit theories held by leaders – the everyday images of what they think leadership is.
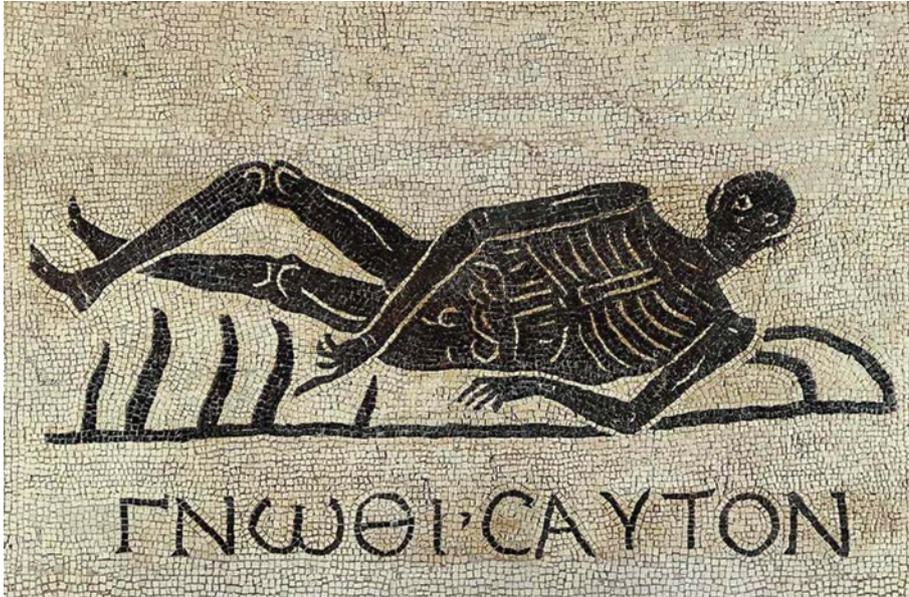
Know Thyself − Inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, 4th century BC

Leadership Development and Self-Awareness

Leadership development can encompass the traditional skills of management but for it to be really effective, it should emphasise personal development; a discipline of learning that focuses on understanding oneself through insights gained from feedback and reflection. This desire for self-awareness is evident in the stated expectations of leaders attending development programs at top European business schools. Over the past five years I have collected and collated the stated expectations of 250 leaders with whom I have worked. From this data, it emerged that their top two expectations for development were:

- "To understand myself"
- "To learn about the strengths and weaknesses of my leadership"

These expectations of twentieth century leaders resonate with the timeless inscription, "Know Thyself," on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi dating 2000 years ago. It is as if, despite all the theories of leadership, people know that we lead from who we are. To enhance leadership, therefore, we need to look inward and develop an understanding of our models or maps of the world.

Developing self-awareness calls for leaders to reflect critically on the situations they face as well as the attitudes and behaviours they bring to those situations. Facing themselves in this way enables them to challenge their assumptions and taken for granted ways of thinking and acting. In turn, this allows them to understand themselves as an instrument of leadership and both hone and refine their leadership style. This focus on reflexivity suggests the need to personalise development as articulated by my colleagues, Gianpiero Petriglieri, Jack Wood and Jennifer Petriglieri.

Self-awareness, therefore typically described as an introspective journey, is a critical component of authentic leadership, which is seen as an evolving process that can be nurtured and developed over time. It is during this journey that people reflect on assumptions, core values, identity, emotions, motives and goals. Yet, how in practice do leaders engage in introspection to become more self-aware?

"Every picture is worth a thousand words, but the right metaphor is worth a thousand pictures!" Daniel Pink

Assumptions, Mental Models, Maps, Frames, Symbolic Universes

People construct mental models of the world and then operate according to these models. But because mental models are invisible and out of conscious awareness, leaders may not be aware of them or the assumptions contained within them; assumptions that inform the way they are operating and shape the way they are behaving. Thus a powerful way to develop self-awareness is through surfacing and exploring internally held metaphors about mental models and assumptions. This provides an opportunity for people to personalise their development and learn from the 'inside-out' about their leadership. In their landmark book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckman proposed that all people inhabit their idiosyncratic inner symbolic universes in taken-for-granted ways; this points to the idea that people tend not to question their own constructions, which determines what they notice and what they do not notice. When people fail to notice their assumptions, (also known as world-views, mental models, frames, images or maps of the world) thoughts and actions can be limited.

When assumptions are surfaced and questioned, a space is created for alternatives to be considered, and movement from one fixed way of seeing the world to another becomes possible. It is this awareness that provides insights that enable leaders to learn and change. Articulating and examining assumptions held in metaphor offers leaders an opportunity to reconsider aspects of their leadership that have previously been out of awareness. As a result, the choices available to them are broadened and multiplied.

Different maps or frames, based on different underlying assumptions, shape management philosophies, guide thought and behaviour and result in different expectations for organizations and leaders. As we have seen, many of these mental models are based on metaphor, which understands one thing in terms of another. So understanding our inner metaphors can be a powerful way to surface assumptions and develop self-awareness.

Metaphors – "Unavoidable, Ubiquitous and Unconscious"

From antiquity through to the modern day, metaphors have been part of everyday communication. They have been used to make sense of situations, to build theory and to carry meaning. Metaphors are pictures used as provisional aids to understand something new and they have been used in domains as diverse as psychology, mathematics, biology and leadership. For example, Darwin used the metaphor of a tree to make sense of the vast data he collected about the origins of the species and Newton's theory of universal gravitational forces was conceptualised based on his observation of attraction between people. As Aristotle said, "It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh."

Typically viewed as an adjunct to more rational language, metaphors are in fact fundamental to our cognition and to how we think, talk, structure and make sense of our experience. Typically we consider metaphor to be the conscious comparison between two things. This conscious use of metaphor tends to be where most people stop when considering their symbolic depth. Yet the real power of metaphor is not simply in comparing one thing to another but in understanding what Lakoff and Johnson describe as "unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious" nature which provides conceptual categories and models with real world implications.

Metaphor derives from the Greek and literally translates as "carry over". Indeed this is the essence of metaphor to carry over meaning from one place to another

Previous research using metaphors has applied externally generated metaphors to Organizations or leadership. For example, Gareth Morgan's (1986) well-known eight "Images of Organization" and Alvesson and Spicer's (2012) six metaphors of leadership, which include the commander, the gardener, the bully and the saint. The research study presented here starts the other way round. It surfaces and explores the leader's own metaphors to understand the implications of their leadership. It is believed that the articulation and recognition of leaders own implicit models could contribute to a more robust sense of self and lessen dependence on other people's frameworks. Such an articulation would also lead to a greater acceptance of one's own models as well as highlight developmental needs.

Metaphors of Leadership

Does it matter which metaphor people use to describe their leadership? Yes it does, for just as metaphors reveal some things, they hide others. For instance, one aspect of a metaphor might be over-emphasised and celebrated whilst other aspects might be hidden and neglected. This tendency towards an 'unbalanced' interpretation has implications for how leadership is exercised and experienced.

We know that different conceptualisations of leadership through different metaphors result in different expectations and implications. However, if some of the metaphor is hidden, the leader may fall into the trap of ignoring the 'dark side' and be unprepared to deal with it. To illustrate this point, notice what is hidden and what is revealed in the following common metaphors of leadership:

Implications of Metaphor	Leadership As Sailing	Leadership As Construction	Leadership As Playing a Game	Leadership As Battle
Emphasis of the Metaphor	Navigation, Unpredictable Elements	Building step by step, Safety	Team Work Team Spirit	Winning at All Costs Competition
Hidden By the Metaphor	Getting Lost	Organic Growth	Difficult Aspects of Work	Co-operation
Role of Leader	To Navigate	To Plan & Build	To Facilitate	To Command
Role of Group	To Co-operate	To Construct	To Perform	To Obey
Goals	Can shift suddenly in response to market dynamics	Set in concrete, slower to change, built up step by step	Collaboration in goal setting within the rules of the game	Set by chain of command to outmanoeuvre competition

Adapted from Oberlechner, T. & Schonberger, V. "Through Their Own Words" (2003)

The Idiosyncratic Nature of a Leader's Inner Metaphorical Landscape

Unlike previous research that might consider one metaphor (as above – sailing, construction etc.) the exploration of naturally occurring metaphors results in many metaphors that typically combine to create a complete metaphor landscape. Here is an example of a German Chief Technology Officer's metaphor for his own leadership. Let's call him Tobias. For example, Tobias, has a "push and a pull" in his model of leadership as he recognises that at times he must get friction to pull things along and at other times, he needs to push people to innovate, to develop, to move into the unknown – himself included. The unknown is also a major leitmotif in his metaphorical landscape identified as an iceberg, under which he wishes to dig deep to take a close look at the things normally hidden. He identifies the need for a solid and robust anchor, a safe house that provides a constant comforting presence within a sea of change. This solid anchor holds a ship steady on a rough sea. The steadiness is provided by attention to clear boundaries, to not forgetting about issues, to not having loose ends (important on a ship in a rough sea). This is a very brief view into his images of leadership and tells us something about how he sees his role – that of a steady presence, pushing and pulling and encouraging and engaging people in a sea of uncertainty – perhaps not a surprising metaphor, given that he works in the fast changing "sea" of software development. His final words in the interview give some additional insight into the notion of "push and pull" in his leadership metaphor. In German, the words for challenge and promote are almost the same. He says, "My first boss was an awesome mentor, he pushed me into cold water and brought me along." Tobias's focus on developing people through the "push and pull" approach seems to have its origins in his first good model of leadership. Tobias's metaphor for leadership looks something like this.


Whilst the details of his inner metaphors for leadership are a fascinating example of how internal metaphors combine to form idiosyncratic personal models, his observations about the process of exploring his metaphors are also highly relevant for how self-awareness can be developed in leaders.

In a review of our interview, we discussed what Tobias had learned through an exploration of his metaphors.

1. Surprise at how many metaphors there are.
2. The metaphors came naturally as part of thinking and talking. They were not forced or 'made up'
3. Reflection on the metaphors identified a theme or pattern that had not been consciously recognised. The theme of security.
4. This identified theme prompted further reflection about the desire for steadiness and helped to make sense of previous experiences and the current situation.

Image of the process of exploring metaphors as a way to integrate conscious and unconscious aspects of the self
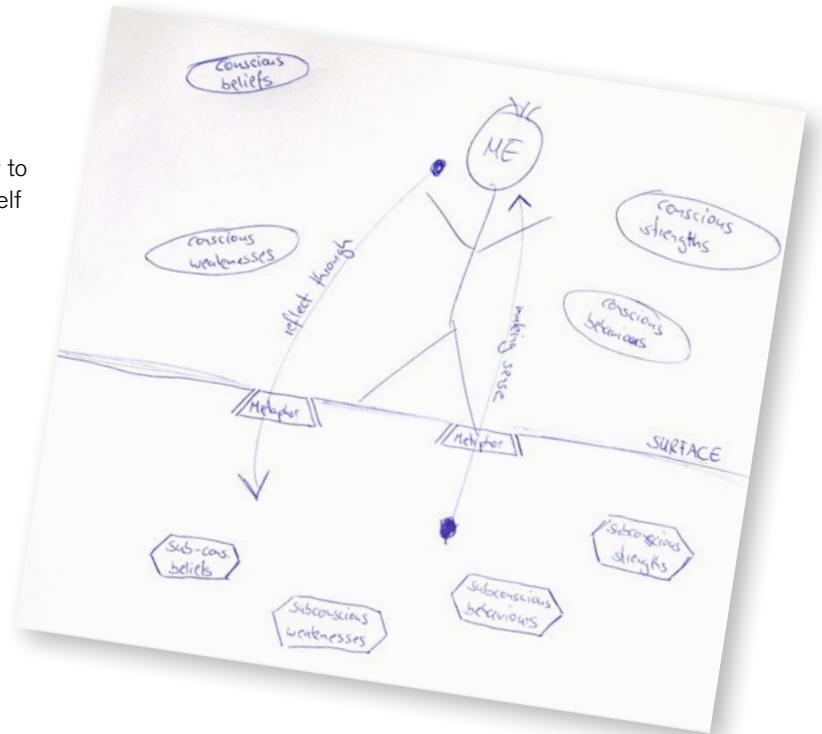
Research Study

The research is based on in-depth interviews with 30 people who hold positions of leadership in international businesses. The interviews are conducted using Clean Language (CL), which is a process to facilitate exploration of the inner world. CL is notable for its fidelity to the client's inner world and lack of interference from the facilitator's metaphors, assumptions, paradigms and sensations (MAPS), hence the term Clean. It originated from David Grove's (1989) work in clinical environments and has been developed as a process of facilitation and communication by Lawley and Tompkins (2000) as a way to aid self-discovery and development through it's attention to naturally occurring metaphors. It has also been pioneered as a research method by Paul Tosey, Senior Lecturer in Management and Head of the PhD programme at the University of Surrey.

The research builds on the ideas of the Evolving Self by Robert Kegan, which advocates an increasing reliance on one's own authorship of life rather than the learned models of others. It also draws on Carl Jung's ideas about 'wholeness' – the integration of visible and invisible strengths and weaknesses as well as conscious and unconscious aspects as part of becoming an authentic leader.

And Your Metaphors for Leadership?

Metaphor derives from the Greek and literally translates as "carry over". Indeed this is the essence of metaphor to carry over meaning from one place or part of a system to another. It also represents the essence of this study that aims to find out what happens when leaders actively engage with their inner symbolic worlds to learn more about their metaphors and mental maps that inform their thinking and action about leadership.

If you ask yourself, "When you are leading at your best, that is like what?" You might just find out something more.

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Many thanks to the participants in this research. Images created by participants and Harry from zicht.com and used with permission and gratitude!

Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

Developing Leaders looks at the critical confluence between the provision of executive education and the real everyday needs of organizations to strengthen their management teams, their corporate performance, and their leadership.

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