

# The Organization as a Person: Utilizing Metaphoric Analysis to Transform Organizations

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Leadership Advance Online– Issue XV, Winter 2008

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What is an organization? Is it a place, a process or a person? Individuals at all levels of employment often wrestle with what many deem to be the daunting task of succinctly articulating the nature of the organization. Countless texts exist that attempt to provide a model for describing the construct and function of organizations. However, depending upon one's worldview, tolerance for abstraction and personal presuppositions, many conflicting perspectives may exist within a single organization. Most leaders emphasize matters related to organizational behavior over those that help to elucidate corporate identity. The work loosely informs identity rather than vice versa.

Organizations that hope to maintain a competitive edge in the 21st century, while resisting the temptation to downsize, may arrive at the startling realization that they are suffering from dissociative identity disorder. For those organizations hoping to initiate a plan to remedy or to prevent this state of being, alternative thinking or experimentation is required. The solution to this malady may not be as easily accessible, organized and available as those conveniently found in the business section of the local Barnes and Noble bookstore. Despite the reluctance that some leaders may have to delve deeply into a critical analysis of the relationship of organizational identity to the climate and output of the organization, Margaret Wheatley (2007) makes a strong case for its absolute necessity:

Mort Meyerson, the former chairman of Perot Systems, said in an interview in *Fast Company* magazine several years ago, that the primary task of being a leader is to make sure that the organization knows itself. That is, the leader's task is to call people together often, so that everyone gains clarity about what they're doing, who they've become and how

they're changing as they do their work. This includes information available from customers, markets, history, and mistakes. A good leader supports a continuous conversation about organizational identity and how it is changing as it does its work in a changing world. Organizations that are clear at their core work form congruence, not coercion. People feel free to explore new activities, new ventures, and customers if they feel it makes sense for the organization. It is a strange and promising paradox: clarity about who we are as an organization or team creates freedom for individual contributions. People exercise that freedom in service to the organization and, as they develop their capacity to respond and change, this becomes a capability of the whole organization. (p. 69)

### **Organizations as Metaphors**

My unpublished article titled, *The highly human side of leadership*, discussed the impossibility to gauge organizational reality and enter the decision-making process, free from carrying our personal baggage with us to the table of inquiry (Marchesi, 2008). Factors such as our life experiences, education and gender all influence our perceptions. I am reminded of a great book that I read recently called, *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, by Carol Dweck (2006). It discussed the differences between a fixed mindset and a growth-oriented mindset; and how our particular disposition characterizes how we frame challenges, failures and other experiences. These divergent positions reminded me of the polarity that exists between two popular metaphors used to describe organizations: the machine and the organism. One (the machine) is fixed, as it only functions within the paradigm provided by its programmer, while the other (organism) possesses adaptive qualities that serve to perpetuate the evolutionary process. The differences between the two have severe ramifications for matters related to corporate identity, growth, management, performance assessments, human resource management, employee satisfaction and productivity.

My timely introduction to organizational metaphors as a graduate student marked the beginning of a renewed sense of purposefulness and stamina as I began to discern how the humanities and social sciences could find a comfortable and complimentary intersection in my research. I eventually discovered that the efficacy of the discipline of organizational leadership required that the historical enmity, which existed between the two intellectual approaches, needed to be eliminated. Gareth Morgan's (1998) seminal work titled, *Images of organization*, established a superb foundation upon which both leaders and academics could better address the dynamics of

organizational life through the non-traditional system of organizations as metaphors.

Unlike traditional mission statements and vision-casting activities, metaphors capture the messy, mystical nature of organizational life. They provide a useful distortion of reality, which allows leaders to consider organizational identity, responses to change and the anticipated evolutionary process within a system. Metaphors can be comprehended by both those who are comfortable with abstraction and those who resonate with the concrete.

### **The Organization as a Machine**

The metaphor of a machine has remained prevalent within organizations for well over a century. With the industrial revolution and the popularity of classical management theory or “Taylorism,” organizations established very specific, rational systems to direct human behavior. Morgan (1998) calls these systems bureaucracies. People essentially found that they were reduced to cogs within a great machine, as they were expected to unquestionably function according to the rigid guidelines that were programmed by their managers. In this model “all the ‘thinking’ is done by the managers and designers, leaving all the ‘doing’ to the employees” (p. 23). Opportunities to “self-create” and to feel a sense of personal ownership over the work were minimal. Wheatley (2007) explains it this way, “In our machine-organizations, we try to extinguish individuality in order to reach our goal of compliance. We trade uniqueness for control and barter our humanness for petty performance measures” (p. 21).

According to Morgan (1998), there are some clear advantages to organizations as machines:

The strengths can be stated very simply. Mechanistic approaches to organizations work well only under conditions where machines work well: (a) when there is a straightforward task to perform; (b) when the environment is stable enough to ensure that the products produced will be appropriate ones; (c) when one wishes to produce exactly the same product time and again; (d) when precision is at a premium; and (e) when the human ‘machine’ parts are compliant and behave as they have been designed to do. (p. 27)

As you consider the culture of your organization, does the description above sound similar? I posit that while many organizations do operate as machines, they do not have to. Consequently, their capacities are crippled as major decision making is confined to a select few within the

organization. Employee commitment is purely transactional, resulting in minimal personal investment beyond the job description and the 40-hour work week. Morgan (1998) explained this:

The mechanistic approach to organization tends to limit rather than mobilize the development of human capacities, molding human beings to fit the requirements of mechanical organization rather than building the organization around their strengths and potentials. Both employees and organizations lose from this arrangement. Employees lose opportunities for personal growth, often spending many hours a day on work they neither value nor enjoy, and organizations lose the creative and intelligent contributions that most employees are capable of making, given the right opportunities. (p. 31)

Perhaps the most debilitating consequence of operating as a machine is the inability of the organization to adequately anticipate, assess and acquiesce to a changing external landscape. Essentially, the machine becomes irrelevant and ceases to exist.

### **The Organization as an Organism**

Unlike the limitations of the machine, which operates according to a fixed, predetermined mindset, an organization whose identity and behavior exhibit the fundamental capabilities of an organism, or more precisely, a person, is uniquely endowed with the tools to interact and adapt within a rational/affective framework. According to Morgan (1998), this “open system” (cycle of input, transformation, output and feedback) finds its support within contingency theory and exemplifies the following characteristics:

- Organizations are open systems that need careful management to satisfy and balance internal needs and to adapt to environmental circumstances.
- There is no one best way of organizing. The appropriate form depends on the kind of task or environment with which one is dealing.
- Management must be concerned, above all else, with achieving alignment and a good fit.
- Different approaches to management may be necessary to perform different tasks within the same organization.
- Different types of “species” of organizations are needed in different types of environments.

Wheatly (2007) described how an organization that functions as an organism operates:

Some part of the system (the system can be any size: an organization, a community, a team, a nation) notices something. It might be in a memo, a chance comment, or a news report. It chooses to be disturbed by this. 'Chooses' is the important word here. No one ever tells a living system what should disturb it (even though we try all the time). If it chooses to be disturbed, it takes in the information and circulates it rapidly through its networks. As the disturbance circulates, others grab it and amplify it. The information grows, changes, and becomes distorted from the original, but all the time it is accumulating more meaning. Finally, the information becomes so important that the system can't deal with it. Then and only then will the system begin to change. It is forced, by the sheer meaningfulness of the information, to let go of present beliefs, structures, patterns, and values. It cannot use its past to make sense of this new information. It truly must let go, plunging itself into a state of confusion and uncertainty that feels like chaos, a state that always feels terrible. Having fallen apart, having let go of who it has been, the system is now and only now open to change. It will reorganize using new interpretations, new understandings of what's real and what's important. It becomes different because it understands the world differently. And, paradoxically, as is true with all living systems, it changed because it was the only way to preserve itself. (pp. 85-86)

### **The Organization as a Person**

For the purposes of this discussion, the species that we will now consider is the human. It must be emphasized that despite the vast distinction made between the metaphors of machine and organism, the person can still behave according to a predetermined set of guidelines should it choose to. It is not limited to this structure, however. Wheatley (2007) explains it this way:

As we think of organizations as living systems, we don't discard our concern for such things as standards, measures, values, organizational structures, and plans. We don't give up any of these. But we do need to change our belief about where these things come from. In a living system, they are generated as people figure out what will work well in the current situation. In a machine these features are designed outside and then engineered in. (p. 94)

How can the metaphor of a person help an organization plan for its preferred future? What should this person look like? I contend that this metaphor, when properly used, provides a superior

infrastructure for implementing profound organizational change. It acts as an integrative force for strategic messaging, both internally and outside of the organization. This planning process, however, is both nontraditional and potentially messy. This activity considers both the being and the behavior of the organization. Please note: this is not a methodology that is taught in MBA programs.

Wheatley (2007) provides us with some timely advice as we establish our infrastructure for our activity:

As leaders ensure that the organization knows itself, that it is clear at its core, they must also learn to tolerate unprecedented levels of 'messiness' at the edges. This constant tinkering, this localized hunt for solutions, never looks neat. Freedom and creativity always create diverse responses. If conformity is the goal, it will kill local initiative. Leaders have to be prepared to support diversity, to welcome surprise, to expect invention, to rely on highly contributing employees. (p. 69)

An exercise called, "creating the organizational person," should be conducted annually and be utilized to provide the conceptual construct for identity clarification, marketing/branding and assessment. This brainstorming activity should be facilitated, at least initially, for the senior leadership of the organization. The purpose of the activity could be to either determine what the current situation is, or else to look at what the future could or should look like. Both versions have merit depending upon the needs of the organization. Lastly, the attributes listed below are not exhaustive. One may wish to include additional human characteristics depending upon the specific outcomes for the session. A large outline (human size) of a person should be placed on the wall (butcher paper works well). Each participant will have "post-it" notes and markers to complete the exercise. As each element of the person is presented, participants will write their responses on the paper and the facilitator will place them on the outline of a person in their appropriate places. Participants will share their responses.

## Creating the Organizational Person

### Getting Started

If the following three organizations represent a person, how would you describe the characteristics of each?

- Enron
- Verizon
- General Motors

#### 1. The Environment

Where does the person live and function? How does the environment validate and shape identity?

#### 2. Lineage

How does a person relate to the past?

#### 3. The Person

What makes a person unique? If there are ten other similar organizations, how is this person different?

#### 4. Mind

How does this person think? Is this person predominately right brained, left brained or whole brained?

#### 5. Passions

What is this person's *raison d' etre* or calling? Where does this calling come from?

#### 6. Heart

Does this person have compassion for others? Does this person exhibit forgiveness?

#### 7. Personality

Is this person an introvert or extrovert? Why?

**8. Voice (communication)**

Does this person have a story to tell? Does this person tell his or her own story to others?

**9. Arms/Hands**

This stands for outreach/impact. What types of strategic relationships should this person initiate to accomplish calling/purpose/function?

**10. Legs/Feet (support)**

Who supports and champions this person?

**11. Fears**

What keeps this person awake at night?

**12. The Behavior**

How does this person typically behave?

**13. Meaning-Making Disciplines**

How does this person self-organize and make meaning? What disciplines of engagement/abstinence are necessary?

**14. Ambiguity**

How much tolerance for ambiguity is needed for this person?

**15. Relationships**

Does this person have friends or prefer to be a loner?

**16. Leadership Style**

Does this person assume a masculine, feminine or androgynous approach? What leadership behaviors are prevalent?



**17. Dress**

How does this person dress? Is it a coordinated outfit?

**18. Vices**

As all these characteristics are taken into account within the context in which this person will function, what types of personal challenges is this person likely to face?

**19. Proficiencies**

What else must this person be good at in order to fulfill the *raison d'etre*?

**20. The Future**

How does this person maintain vitality and regenerate the self? How does this person feel about the future?

All metaphors eventually break down since they are comparing two unlike things and invoking a directed distortion of reality. However, they serve as an effective means to help individuals consider the present and preferred future of the organization. An organization must spend time considering its identity and core competencies. Behavior logically follows being. “Localized change activity does not mean that the organization spins off wildly in all directions. If people are clear about the purpose and real values of their organization, their individual tinkering will result in system wide coherence” (Wheatley, 2007, p. 68). Is an organization a place, a process or a person? I hold that it is all three. The metaphor of organism/person helps ensure that the organization is growth-oriented versus fixed; actively and meaningfully engages its environment; and chooses to adapt in order to evolve. It possesses intelligence and affections. It is self-aware and it communicates its identity through its behavior that is supported by its values.

Wheatley concludes:

Organizations that are clear at their core work form congruence, not coercion. People feel free to explore new activities, new ventures, and customers if they feel it makes sense for the organization. It is a strange and promising paradox: clarity about who we are as an organization or team creates freedom for individual contributions. People exercise that freedom in service to the organization and, as they develop their capacity to respond and change, this becomes a capability of the whole organization. (p. 69)

Leaders who endeavor to cultivate an organizational culture that is responsive to a changing environment, while also affirming the human capacities to self-organize and to relate should find the exercise of “creating the organizational person” useful. Organizations are complex systems and require a myriad of methodologies to ensure that they are strategically mobilized to generate the greatest impact. Though the survival instinct may tempt some to concentrate solely upon organizational charts, fiduciary goals and corporate policies, the consequence of emphasizing behavior over being is terminal. Like people, organizations that need to change must address both symptoms and causation. As you consider your organization, how does its identity inform its practices? Is there coherence? How healthy is the organizational person?

### **About the Author**

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