

On Cornhuskers, Navy Seals, and Spider Plants: Choosing the Right Root Metaphor to Help Your Organization Grow

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by Hyun Sook Foley

My Navy Seal Can Beat Up Your Cornhusker Any Day

Bo Pelini is the head football coach of the University of Nebraska Cornhusker football team. On a recent sports talk radio program, he was asked why he invites Navy SEALS to his football camp every year to address the players.

"I think the Navy SEALS are the ultimate team," he said. "They are the ultimate team players. They understand accountability. One thing you hear about the Navy SEALS is that it is team, team, team, team first. That is lacking in today's society.

We try to use as many ways as we can to instill that it's about the team; it's not about one guy. The Navy SEALS allow us to do that." (Berman, 2011)

A sports club's nickname is perhaps the most obvious and prominent example of a root metaphor—the primary word picture an organization invokes to describe the organization in its formal and informal communication organs.

In the case of the University of Nebraska (NU Media Relations, 2009), prior to 1900, its teams were known variously as the Old Gold Knights, the Antelopes, the Rattlesnake Boys and the Bugeaters. Following a ten year Bugeater losing streak, legendary Lincoln sports journalist Charles S. (Cy) Sherman, perhaps sensing that a new root metaphor might motivate the team, applied the term Cornhusker, which has now stuck for more than a century.

Does it make a difference that Pelini selects the root metaphor of Navy SEALS instead of Cornhuskers, or that the University of Nebraska became the Cornhuskers instead of the Bugeaters? And, more importantly, if you are not a football club but a business, church, or nonprofit organization, does it make a difference what root metaphor—if any—your employees associate with your organization?

Machines Write Like, well, Machines.

Research answers in the affirmative: Words and metaphors contain the power to shape not only employees' views of their organization but also employees' views of themselves and the purpose of their work. Jim Suchan (1995) from the Naval Postgraduate School undertook a 1995 study which examined the effect of a mid-sized Midwestern company's root metaphor on employee roles and work product. The company's mission statement read in part:

We strive to be efficient in all our operations. To be efficient, we must lay aside an ordinary, everyday go-as-you please and do-what-you-like attitude and work as a team. This team must be like a machine, not of inert metal, but one of living men [sic], an integrated human machine in which everyone does his part for the greater good of the organization. (p. 17)

Suchan's (1995) study found that workers described their own roles and their work products using extensions of the "machine" metaphor, e.g., "deliverers," "transferrers," "copiers," "recorders," "conveyers," or "scribes." As a result, noted Suchan, the work produced had all the earmarks of having been produced in a machine-like fashion, specifically "lack of concern or awareness of their reader, the limited amount of editing and revision they do, and their unconcern about and unwillingness to employ reader-oriented document design, stylistic, and organizational strategies" (p. 25). Suchan concluded that getting staff writers to improve their work would require more than retraining in writing; the writers would have to experience a "cognitive 'restructuring'" in which they "may have to alter the metaphors the organization and its members use to think about themselves" (p. 26).

In other words, metaphors matter. Using the wrong metaphors can result in inferior work product and growth-stifling employee attitudes. On the other hand, Suchan's study suggests that choosing the right metaphors can be transformative. If going from Bugeaters to Cornhuskers can reverse a ten-year losing streak for a college football club, a new well-chosen root metaphor for your organization

may be able to foster a whole new attitude and commitment to growth on the part of your employees.

Plunging the Root Deeper than the Leader's Favorite Sports Club

Despite the demonstrated impact a root metaphor has on employee self-perception and work product, in many organizations the selection of a root metaphor is accidental and authoritarian, the product of little more than a leader's personal interests and pet illustrations memorialized in a speech or organizational collateral.

Carol David and Margaret Baker Graham (1997) analyzed the use of what they called "epic metaphor" in the inaugural speech of new Tenneco CEO Michael Walsh to his management team, distributed to Tenneco's executives and middle managers as part of a bound volume of materials designed to promote Walsh's new team management initiative. And by team, Walsh makes clear what type of team from the introduction where he intones, "Ours is a team sport" (p. 35). Throughout his presentation, note David and Graham, Walsh frequently evokes metaphors from war and sports. Not only do such metaphors tend to exclude women, the authors note, but they can actually be counterproductive to creating the sense of team that Walsh indicates he wants to create, one grounded in Total Quality Management (TQM) and requiring serious and protracted collaboration and group (rather than individual) leadership. According to David and Graham:

A value system that might portray the team management concept of TQM is collectivism, which has traditionally been part of the American culture, especially in rural and cooperative neighborhood efforts. Terms associated with collectivist values, such as "cooperation, unity, social good, equality" (Rieke and Sillars, 124), are not evident in this speech nor are they prominent in public language, although they may be associated with service organizations. Although leaders talk about "the team" (Rieke and Sillars, 123), they may be thinking more about the competition and achievement of winning the game than the cooperative efforts of team members, and the image they wish to project is more the commander than the coach (p. 37).

So Who Decides What is a Good Metaphor?

As a new CEO, Walsh missed a powerful opportunity to embody the very teamwork he promoted in his speech. That opportunity could have taken the form of involving executives and middle managers in the intentional selection of a root metaphor grounded not in Walsh's personal experience, but rather, in the best of the collective knowledge and instincts of the company—a subject about which

Walsh admitted knowing very little. “At the time [he was hired], I didn’t know what PERCS was,” said Walsh with regard to a major Tenneco initiative. “For all I knew, it could be a test for a septic tank on a piece of property in California” (David & Graham, 1997, p. 28).

The process of collectively selecting a new root metaphor could have given Walsh the opportunity to learn not only about PERCS, but also about the way employees at Tenneco viewed the initiative and their work in it. Such a process of surveying, surfacing, and synthesizing positive and prescient employee perceptions of the organization may yield more than a new root metaphor; it could also have helped Walsh uncover potential organizational undercurrents in a way that permitted him to address them productively at the start of his tenure.

Organizational theorist James Lawley’s (2001b) symbolic modeling approach could provide a helpful framework for collective participation in root value selection. One can envision a series of individual interviews with executives and middle managers in which Lawley’s approach enables familiar and new metaphors to surface as individuals are challenged to use word pictures to describe both the good and bad parts of their present involvement with the company. Consider the following conversation Lawley imagines between a manager and a facilitator:

M: I want to understand why our organisation is not more successful.

F: **And when** you want to understand why your organisation is not more successful, your organisation **is like what?**

M: You could say it's like a machine.

F: **And what kind of** machine?

M: [Pause] It's like a combine harvester I suppose.

F: **And is there anything else about that** combine harvester **that** your organisation's **like?**

M: It's flexible with interchangeable parts depending on the type of crop.

F: **And is there anything else about** it being flexible with interchangeable parts?

M: Timing is so important. Too early or too late and you miss the opportunity. It's no good harvesting until the crop is ready.

F: **And then what happens?**

M: We go through the whole cycle again.

F: **And where could that cycle come from?**

M: It's the natural order of things. [Pause] That's right. We have to educate the new recruits in the nature of the cycle. They try to rush things or they give up too quickly. If they knew about the cycle... (<http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/Metaphors-of-Orgs-2.html>)

Root metaphors from other disciplines can also be imported and evaluated for fit. For example, how might your organization be like or unlike Gareth Morgan's (1993) spider plant metaphor for organizational structure? Is your "central plant" feeding the subunits, or is it sucking up their nutrition and leaving them dry? Do your subunits have a robust root structure? Do certain of your subunits need to be pruned? Drawing from Morgan, Lawley (2001a) lists a series of what he calls "archetypal metaphors" from different disciplines that may stretch your thinking as you assemble an organizational task group to select an appropriate root metaphor to help frame employee self-identity and to shape organizational work product. Among the metaphors he proposes for consideration: machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination.

Maybe Cornhusker is a Better Metaphor than We Might Think

Can surfacing hidden employee metaphors and intentionally proposing new root metaphors really impact employee self-identity and organizational work product? Suchan's research says yes. Linguist George Lakoff (1980) suggests why: "What metaphor does is limit what we notice, highlight what we do see, and provide part of the inferential structure that we reason with" (p. 71).

What University of Nebraska head coach Bo Pelini may not have noticed is the potency of the term "Cornhusker" in the minds and hearts of a team and a fan base surrounded by a sea of corn. If the goal is to convey the importance of the team concept, one could do a lot worse than referencing the Navy SEALs. But is it the most evocative root metaphor for the team? There might be real power in asking the Nebraska football players to consider, discuss, and embody from their own childhood experience the ways in which farming itself may be the ultimate team sport.

About the Author

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