



Back to the Future: A Metaphorical Analysis of Organizations as a Time-Traveling DeLorean

Michelle G. Segundo

School of Business and Leadership, Regent University

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Abstract

Metaphor generates new meaning for organizations by providing a deeper understanding of organizational identity, organizational life, and its day-to-day processes (Cornelissen, 2005). Metaphor offers a new perspective to an organization by comparing elements of one experience to another, creating powerful insights, and elevating the importance of certain structural dimensions and practices within the organization as it relates to its environment and unforeseen situations (Morgan, 2006). As organizational leaders seek ways to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses, they often reflect on past practices that inform current strategic planning for future success. The DeLorean, as a time-traveling vehicle from the popular 1985 film, *Back to the Future*, serves as an ideal metaphor for organizations evolving and adapting as open systems that refer to the past for future organizational vision, planning, and successful implementation. The purpose of this analysis is to expoit the role of the DeLorean as an organizational metaphor, as organizations reflect on past practices, operate in the present, and plan for the future as a complex adaptive system.

Keywords: complexity theory, complex adaptive system, organizational metaphor, DeLorean, time travel, *Back to the Future*

Metaphors create valuable insights in understanding organizational life, making room for organizational theories and management (Morgan, 2006). As leaders attempt to generate a deeper understanding of organizational life, they rely on the utilization of implicit images or metaphors that compare one element in terms of another, contributing a meaningful way of thinking and seeing the organization that influences leaders to manage their organization distinctively. Metaphors have generative capacity in terms of organizational identity and capture organizational life as it exists in real-time through the interactions and experiences of its leaders, subordinates, and stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2002).

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As organizations, along with their boundaries and processes, are being reshaped in an attempt to adapt to turbulent circumstances, they are being challenged to learn from past experiences to move toward a successful future (Gilmore & Shea, 1997). Organizational identity is shaped along a continuum of simple and complex extremes, reflecting on past successes and failures, implementing present interchange, and strategizing future endeavors that influence organizational emergence and balance (Gilmore & Shea, 1997; Konopaske et al., 2018). The challenge organizations face is implementing these past, concrete lessons in a futuristic, abstract context while addressing current obstacles which, consequently, creates a space for considering the organization as the time-traveling DeLorean featured in the 1985 blockbuster film, *Back to the Future*. The purpose of this metaphorical analysis is to exposit the value of organizations recognizing their position on a time continuum, allowing access to essential elements from the past to inform present and future endeavors as the organization adapts to its environment, as informed by complexity theory (Gilmore & Shea, 1997). The DeLorean metaphor offers three areas of contribution that are interdependent where each affects the other on a time continuum, allowing the organization as a DeLorean to: (a) revisit the past, (b) operate in the present, and (c) plan for the future.

The Nature of Organizational Metaphor

Metaphors provide a practical, heuristic way to understand organizations and their intricate subsystems (Gleave, 2019). Metaphor serves as a precursor to organizational theory development, empirical research, and theory testing, providing a foundational, more realistic explanation of organizational life in lay terms (Bacharach, 1989; Cornelissen, 2005). As a literary tool, Bacharach (1989) posited that the use of metaphor does not necessitate a list of analytical questions because the metaphor speaks for itself as it evokes powerful emotional imagery. Metaphors reflect a process of correspondence between the organization and the metaphoric characteristics that constantly compare similarities and differences, creating an extensive organizational perspective (Gleave, 2019). The use of metaphor is important as it fosters a clear picture of an organization, its practices, and its culture that shapes the identity of its members, creating a sense of who they are and who they are not that serves as the premise for overall organizational success (Haslam et al., 2003).

Cornelissen (2004) introduced two criteria for which a metaphor can be assessed concerning (a) its aptness serving as a meaningful fit, and (b) its heuristic value, offering new insights into an unfamiliar domain. Metaphors invite organizational members to recognize similarities and differences between two concepts by comparing one concept in terms of another, providing an extensive and meaningful identity to the organization (Schoeneborn et al., 2012).

The Praxis of Organizational Metaphor

Organization serves as a noun and verb, emphasizing the need to understand what an organization is and does. According to Gleave (2019), organization as a noun is a group of people who share a common purpose, whereas organization as a verb entails the action or process of organizing. The being of an organization drives the doing of an organization. The organizational metaphor plays a significant role in revealing the nature of the organization, ultimately explicating the actions or processes of the organization.

Morgan (2006) contributed significant metaphorical perspectives that empower members with a way of thinking that helps in navigating organizational ambiguity by understanding organizational nature, life, strengths, and limitations. Organizations have been metaphorically compared to (a) machines with clearly defined roles that usually evolve into bureaucracies; (b) organisms consisting of different species adapting to their environmental needs; (c) brains that process information, setting the premise for a learning-type organization; (d) cultures focusing on values, beliefs, norms, rituals, and shared meanings; (e) systems of government with different sets of interests, conflict, and power plays; and (f) psychic prisons where conscious and unconscious processes form the preferred management style. Each metaphor provides a practical demonstration of the nature of organizations and organizational life.

Metaphor Limitations

Metaphors only create partial ways of seeing and understanding the world that eventually serve as a barrier providing a limited, one-sided perspective (Morgan, 2006). Because metaphors highlight similarities but ignore differences, theories or perspectives based on metaphors can create valuable insights yet are also incomplete, biased, misleading, and paradoxical. Rather than allowing a particular metaphor to define and drive an organization through a limited scope, organizations should increase their ability to welcome and integrate diverse perspectives. Pinder and Bourgeois (1982) criticized metaphors for being inherently imprecise and ambiguous because they cannot be tested and risk falsification since metaphoric terms lack falsifiable content as a social construct. No metaphor can truly capture the social and psychological subtleties and complexities within an organization, as it hinders the organization's creative advancement by asserting untested assumptions (Oakes et al., 1994).

Organizations as a DeLorean

The Nature of Organizations as a DeLorean

As peculiar as it seems to compare organizations to a time-traveling DeLorean, Schoeneborn et al. (2012) asserted that metaphors gain their heuristic value not from similarities between the organization and the proposed metaphor, but from the unusual, unconventional, and imperfect differences between the two that ultimately offer profound and exotic meaning to the organization (Cornelissen, 2005).

The DeLorean, the primary vehicle in the iconic film, *Back to the Future*, is a sports car known for its unique low profile, hard aero-dynamic angles, two-seat capacity, brushed stainless steel exterior body, and vertically opening gullwing doors (Lapham, 2013). The film's DeLorean features time circuits on the dashboard, reflecting the traveler's time and date of his current location (where he is), desired location (where he wants to go), and previous location (where he has been). The DeLorean's flux capacitor is a rectangular box characterized by a Y-shaped, Geissler-style tube that transmits high-flux magnetic fields, making time travel possible, according to the film's character, Doc Brown (Woodward, 2004; Zemeckis, 1985). As a scientist, Doc Brown invented the flux capacitor by way of revelation, a vision and a picture in his head that he eventually revealed to the film's teenage protagonist turned accidental time traveler, Marty McFly, who not only altered history but also the present and the future through his many time-travel adventures. The flux capacitor required a nuclear reaction using plutonium to generate 1.21 gigawatts of electricity for time travel while in the present (Zemeckis, 1985). However, time travel, once in the past, required a bolt of lightning to be harnessed to generate the 1.21 gigawatts of electricity needed to power the flux capacitor since plutonium was not easily accessible in 1955. For travel, once in the future, the DeLorean no longer required plutonium, but had become environmentally friendly, operating with fuel from banana peels, leftover beer, and a beer can inserted into a "Mr. Fusion" machine, which was a home energy reactor that converted household waste into the 1.21 gigawatts of power needed for the flux capacitor of the DeLorean, which no longer required roads but open sky. When the DeLorean's speed peaked at 88 mph, the vehicle was transported to the past or future, leaving behind a trail of fire. Whether the DeLorean traveled to the past or the future, it had to be moving forward with enough roadway distance to reach the needed 88 mph.

The DeLorean was used as a tool for time travel for several specific reasons that all involved intervening – whether in the past or in the future – in Marty's children's lives to prevent foreseen disastrous situations. The ability to time travel enabled Doc Brown and Marty to not only address the initial concern but also intervene in other people's lives and situations. Those interventions, at some point, had unintended negative

consequences due to Doc Brown and Marty's negligence and misuse of their ability to time travel, thus, changing the course of history (Zemeckis, 1985).

The Praxis of Organizations as a DeLorean

Metaphors inform organizational theory, as they provide a distinctive way of thinking and seeing organizations through implicit images and characteristics (Morgan, 2006). Stemming from complexity theory, complex adaptive systems (CAS) are composed of arranged boundaries characterized by subsystems or agents that are constantly evolving to reach a fixed point or equilibrium in their attempt to adapt to change (Holland, 2012; Schneider & Somers, 2006). As the DeLorean was used to travel to both the past and future to resolve chaotic situations, the DeLorean organization, in the same manner, references past failures and successes to rectify present situations and strategically prepare for the future. The DeLorean organization reflects the complex theory's CAS as it attempts to reach a homeostatic state by implementing changes over time, allowing the organization to adapt and evolve. The three interrelated, complexity theory building blocks that further inform and substantiate the DeLorean as an organizational metaphor include (a) nonlinear dynamics, (b) chaos theory, and (c) adaptation and evolution (Schneider & Somers, 2006).

Nonlinear Dynamics

CAS are characterized by dissipative systems that are inherently unstable, self-induced, making multiple transitions, and reacting disproportionately to chaotic situations (Kauffman, 1993). Life in general is a CAS filled with many unknowns from day to day, as no two situations are identical (Boyer, 2008), Marty McFly was in a constant state of chaos with his family, friendships, and career, necessitating the DeLorean to travel along the time continuum bringing balance to his life. The organization, as a DeLorean, recognizes similar imbalances of cause from past decisions and their effect on the present and future of the organization and its members. As a DeLorean, the organization realizes it has the power to travel, figuratively speaking, to the past as a point of reference in solving current issues.

Hatch (2018) asserted that complexity is generated by the allure that technology offers, which was the case with Marty using the DeLorean for his own benefit when he brought a future sports almanac to the past to make a fortune for his own wealth, not realizing that one alteration would impact the future for the worse (Zemeckis, 1985). Recognizing that the organization has the potential to impact its future and the future of its members and stakeholders, the DeLorean organization must be careful not to act out of a bureaucratic, mechanistic structure, as it will remain frozen and nonadaptive to emerging conflicts (Schneider & Somers, 2006).

Nonlinear dynamics involves extreme instability in dissipative systems that experience multiple transitions through a series of fixed points where each point presents the opportunity for increased instability and disproportionate reactions to the environment (Schneider & Somers, 2006). The DeLorean organization travels along the time continuum, reflecting on the past, recognizing how one solution to a particular problem created space for another problem to emerge that, in some, caused organizational leadership to overreact to a situation, failing to fully address the original problem. As Marty traveled to the past to influence his son to make the right choice and not participate in a bank robbery, Marty inadvertently became his teenage mother's crush, causing an enormous ripple in the time continuum that threatened his parent's marriage and his very existence (Zemeckis, 1985). Although the DeLorean organization cannot physically travel to the past, it must use caution in referencing the past to ensure it does not overcompensate for past failures, creating unintended consequences in the present and for the future of the organization.

Chaos Theory

Complexity theory is informed by chaos theory, as both are characterized by nonlinearity (Marion, 1999; Schneider & Somers, 2006). Chaos is a necessary process for adaptation and evolution, forming a basis of attraction, inciting non-random behavior and predictable patterns that, according to Morgan (2006), emerge as organizational members spontaneously self-organize amidst chaos. The more Doc Brown and Marty attempted to monitor and control their environment, the more complexity and uncertainty arose, requiring intervention from the DeLorean that allowed for a new order and processes to emerge within the chaotic environment (Hatch, 2018; Zemeckis, 1985). As the DeLorean organization faces uncertainty and chaos, each chaotic situation will create its own emergent pattern for new processes, just as Marty became a gunslinging cowboy in the Wild West in *Back to the Future Part III* (Zemeckis, 1990), as it was required for the chaotic, western environment in 1885.

Though chaos connotes a negative assumption, Morgan (2006) asserted that tension between opposites produces change, as organizational life is formed and transformed by unknown processes that have their own order and logic within the chaos. When Marty traveled to the past, realizing his parent's marriage was in jeopardy due to his father's painful insecurity, he purposely created a situation of tension between his father, George, and Biff, the bully, forcing George to assert himself as a confident, confrontational hero as he rescued his future wife, Marty's mother, Lorraine, from Biff's aggressive grip (Zemeckis, 1985). As the DeLorean organization is sensitive to the outside world and various environmental occurrences as a result of past organizational strategies and processes, it should remain flexible, as it can appreciate the past whether good or bad, recognize key patterns and interconnections, and make necessary adjustments within its subsystems that are open complex systems of their own

(Morgan, 2006). The DeLorean organization faces chaos directly, knowing its function is to establish congruencies or alignments between its different subsystems while identifying and eliminating potential challenges.

Adaptation and Evolution

Although not all CASs have the capacity to adapt or evolve, many CASs adapt by their own self-organization, stemming from the inter-dependency of their individuals or subsystems (Kauffman, 1993). The DeLorean's fuel source that powered the flux capacitor, evolved from using a lightning bolt in the past to using plutonium in the present, and then using natural resources, such as beer and banana peels inserted into the Mr. Fusion energy saver in the future. These changes to the DeLorean's power source reflected the nature of the environment based on technological advancement or lack thereof. The DeLorean organization must also allow itself to evolve with the changing environment, as Hatch (2018) proposed, stating organizational growth comes from its capacity to respond to environmental changes, increasing future organizational security, profitability, reputation, and member cohesiveness.

Not only did the DeLorean adapt and evolve to continue operating effectively and efficiently, but its evolvment spurred changes in Doc Brown and Marty, as well, that ranged from their clothing and speech to their mannerisms, house décor, and way of interacting with others – all depending on the era in which they found themselves (Zemeckis, 1985). The *Back to the Future* trilogy encapsulates change and reflects how culture, society, people, processes, laws, and communities as a whole progress, evolve, and adapt, beginning from the Western days with horses, town hall dances, and saloons in the 1800s, to the sock hop dance, soda parlor, and bobby socks in 1955, to neon, Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, and skateboards in the 1980s, to hoverboards, flying cars, and 3D animation in the story's future of 2015. The DeLorean organization, in the same manner as it adapts and evolves, should incite adaptation and evolution in its subsystems and organizational members to minimize organizational weakness and maximum strengths. As Marty was transported by the DeLorean to different time periods and adapted to the culture, he was able to accomplish his mission of ensuring his parents fell in love, saving his son from jail, keeping his career from failing, and making sure Doc Brown was not committed to an insane asylum. The DeLorean organization can also accomplish its many missions as it adapts to the constantly changing environment it encounters along its organizational journey.

Metaphor Limitations

The DeLorean organization faces great limitations, as an organization itself is unable to physically travel to the past since time travel is impossible, or so we have been told; however, reflecting on the past is possible to make ideal decisions based on past patterns and fluctuations within the organization and its subsystems, as well as in the

environment. It is also impossible to physically travel into the future, or so we have been told; however, seeing into the future is possible when current strategies are implemented based on past patterns of behavior and when various scenarios have been considered. Although the actual DeLorean seats two travelers at a time, most open-system organizations are composed of multiple leaders and stakeholders who collaborate together for the betterment of the organization. Having fewer people involved in future planning and strategizing can result in a frozen, nonadaptive system with a strict and rigid bureaucratic structure (Schneider & Somers, 2006). Another limitation is that leaders within the DeLorean organization must not be so focused on the past or future that they neglect the opportunity for current growth and innovation happening in real time. The DeLorean organization must not use its ability to reflect on the nostalgic past to flee the present or to be driven by ideological future goals (Gilmore & Shea, 1997). After the DeLorean was destroyed in *Back to the Future Part III*, Doc Brown told Marty “Your future hasn’t been written yet. It is what you make it, so make it a good one” (Zemeckis, 1990).

Conclusion

Morgan’s (2006) initial organizational metaphors represent extreme ends of organizational culture where the DeLorean organization conversely finds itself traveling along a time continuum that encapsulates multiple metaphors as the citation calls for it. The organization as a DeLorean not only embraces itself as the actual time-traveling vehicle, but the DeLorean organization must also embrace the essence of time travel and the stakeholders’ experiences as a result of time travel. The DeLorean organization, fully aware of its power to reflect on the past while planning for the future, is aware of its past failures, future vision, and present mission to accomplish the overall organizational vision. If organizations expect to survive in a turbulent environment, they must be flexible enough to allow the past to inform future strategies, and then evolve and adapt, requiring stakeholders, otherwise known as time travelers, to constantly learn, adapt, and expand their understanding of the organization and its life. (Holba et al., 2019; Senge, 2006), preferably through the lens of a time-traveling DeLorean.

About the Author

Michelle Gonzalez Segundo is a fourth-year Ph.D. student at Regent University, School of Business and Leadership, majoring in organizational leadership with a concentration in ecclesial leadership. Michelle’s passion is people. Whether she’s discipling others to realize their identity in Christ, calling, or leadership potential or serving the marginalized, she takes a “hands-on, boots-on-the-ground” approach to leading teams in engaging the community and connecting resources for sharing the gospel, particularly with the poor and homeless, disaster relief victims, families in need, at-risk

youth, and foster children. Michelle currently serves as an intern with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) providing research for the Combating Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) division for the Eastern Southern Caribbean (ESC) region to safeguard children, empower women, engage stakeholders, governmental and NGOs, and develop sustainable policies that will help to eliminate human trafficking in the ESC.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michelle Gonzalez Segundo, 119 Driftwood Dr., Portland, TX 78374. Email: michseg@mail.regent.edu

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