

COACHING: POTENTIAL AND LIMITS OF MANAGEMENT BY METAPHOR

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ABSTRACT

One can detect an ever increasing frustration and sense of despair within and with the fields of management and organisation studies regarding their apparent inability to provide clear, unambiguous guidance and advice to those who seek to manage and organise the workplace. Such endeavours have created a myriad of paradigms and a fragmentation of the field such that no unified front or set of best posits and practices can be offered. We discuss potential and limits to the use of metaphor to illuminate causes and effects of the use of coaching in organisations.

INTRODUCTION

One can detect an ever increasing frustration and sense of despair within and with the fields of management and organisation studies in relation to the apparent inability of these fields to provide clear, unambiguous guidance and advice to those who seek to manage and organise the workplace. A myriad of paradigms and fragmentation are now characteristic of the field. Some are now advocating we should turn to the practice of coaching rather than the ‘wisdom’ in those ‘academic’ journals and textbooks.

My paradigm is better than yours: Incommensurability debates

Practitioners have moved away from the distilled wisdom of academics because of the contradictory ‘advice’ and guidance that discourse is providing; and also because it casts managers in a negative light and so gives the appearance of being “anti-management”. For Donaldson (1995), the ‘rescue’ for the field is to resurrect structural contingency theory as the core ingredient to which he seeks to add elements from four of the fifteen competing paradigms he identified, notwithstanding the fact that these four paradigms themselves, appear to be incommensurable with structural contingency theory. This solution has been described as “a discourse of the myopic” (Carr, 1996) for the fact that Donaldson has to cannibalise some of the paradigms’ ‘antagonistic’ and ‘competing’ insights to accord his own synthesis.

This latter discourse is one that has its origins in the so-called ‘incommensurability debate’ that owes much of its framing to the now very familiar work by Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis. Here, the authors discussed four narratives they deemed were “mutually exclusive views of the social world”.

The problematic world of management by metaphor

When using a simile, we are creating incommensurability as the subject can only be ‘like’ or ‘as’ one other thing. However, when using metaphor, there are no potential limits as the likeness, based upon the perceiver, could have infinite possibilities: metaphor is a paradigm’s paradigm. In using metaphor in our

everyday language, there are inherent dangers of being misled or to misconceive, as metaphor by its very definition is about perceived resemblance rather than exactitude. In using a metaphor we invest an object or experience with a meaning associated with another object or experience. The communicative competency involved in the 'transfer' use of metaphor is well captured by Ricoeur (1978) when he argued that "a word receives a metaphorical meaning in specific contexts within which they are opposed to other words taken literally; this shift in meaning results mainly from a clash between literal meanings, which excludes literal use of the word in question" (p. 138).

Amongst other things it needs to be noted that metaphor tend to have a carry-over effect or gestalt-like quality such that the image that it conveys may go beyond drawing attention to one element, but instead, when taken literally, imply unintended meanings. This in itself is important, but even more so because we are attracted to the use of metaphor in our understanding and construction of 'truth'. Nietzsche argued that "truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer coins" (Breazeale, 1979, p. 84; see also Kofman, 1983/1993, p. 154). Thus, in the realm of our everyday communication, there is no doubt that metaphors are the very stuff of language. They cannot be avoided, even if we had a desire to do so.

Gareth Morgan (1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1986) is arguably the writer that brought the use of metaphor to some prominence in organisation studies. Morgan (1986, p. 11) argued that metaphors provide us with a way of seeing and a way of thinking about organisations in manners that may generate new insights. The reader might recall that Morgan (1986) told us that organisations can be conceived as: machines; organisms; brains; cultures; political systems; psychic prisons; flux and transformation; and, instruments of domination. This imagery was not, however, metaphorical as he inferred because his end claim was that they were actual descriptions of organisations. In drawing attention to Morgan's mistake, we wish to reinforce the point that language is the form of transmission of ideas and as such, we need to be clear as to what it is we wish to convey.

Management of metaphor through coaching

It is not that we need to try to curb the use of metaphor per se, for metaphor is the crux of language, of human experience; and of social evaluation. It is the un-reflexive deployment of metaphors in organisation studies that is the danger to the field. In 2003, it was estimated that there were some 15,000 full-time and part-time management coaches world-wide and growing at a rate of about 40% per year (Arnaud, 2003, p. 1133). Yet, what eludes us is a concrete definition of what coaching paradigm really is, which of course, impacts what the coach does, how and for what reasons. For instance, in the course of making a distinction between psychoanalysis that occurs on the couch with management coaching, Arnaud (2003) stated:

To put it another way, the horizon of executive coaching is rather one of a pragmatics of the Ego, which can in theory refine or enrich its operating patterns (to make up for its shortcomings, etc.). In this perspective, any eventual resurgence of the unconscious can only be assimilated to a failure, which one must learn to better master. (p. 1137)

In terms of egoism, coaching automatically conveys that some improvement can and or must be made -- the individual as paradigm can become better.

Beardwell and Holden (1994/2001) said that coaching is: analogous to the sports coach who is seeking to improve performance by continually analysing and

offering constructive criticism and guidance to an athlete or player... There is then a transfer of responsibility for the task. Throughout the process there is a dialogue, with regular feedback on performance in the form of constructive criticism and comments. (p. 397)

One can only ask how it is that the individual is already competent when there is a double call for constructive criticism.

Some of the organisation discourse that has adopted the terms coach and coaching has done so assuming a likeness to the manner in which those terms are used in sports. Indeed, from a period even before the 'paradigm wars' we find some in the organisation discourse talk of the coach and coaching and assume, or overtly argue, that: "the world of sport mirrors the world of work, that game or play structures parallel work structures. ...Baseball is a metaphor for the autonomy of organisational parts, football, for hierarchical control over the parts, and basketball, for voluntary cooperation among parts" (Keidel, 1987, p. 591 & p. 592). For Keidel (1987), management could do well to look to the world of sport as offering a "unifying conceptual framework" (p. 591). With the passage of time, Arnaud (2003), in the context of advocacy for coaching, suggested "what remains of the sports metaphor is the competitive dimension, which is, in fact, more bitter, individualistic and prevalent in the workplace now than ever before" (p. 1132). Indeed, Arnaud (2003) argued that the context, or matrix (our preferred terminology), in which the activity of coaching is embedded, i.e., the world of sport, is something that is "diametrically opposed" (p. 1132) for example, with "psychoanalytically inspired executive coaching" (Ibid). Do we associate the notion of a coach and coaching as being connected to a vision of the organisation as a team involved in a competition?

Gabriel, Fineman and Sims (1992/2000) said it is what it is -- competition is conflict. Competition is "a form of conflict, in which different parties are vying for the same resources and rewards, while usually agreeing to abide by a set of rules" (p. 286). So, when we expand the metaphor of coaching for competition, we can also be saying that coaching is also instrumental in causing conflict in the first place (Carr & Lapp, 2006b). Then, more coaching is required to eliminate the conflict of losses the 'not-winning' organisation is experiencing and the still ever pursued 'betterment' the 'winning' organisation wants. Arnaud (2003) stated that: "While coaching remains a polysemous notion, the question may well be asked if it might not also potentially serve, for this very reason, as a Trojan Horse for psychoanalysis" (p. 1133). We believe that mismanagement by the metaphor of coaching is a Trojan Horse when in the workplace, it is used as a 'nice' way to inform employees that they are deficient at helping the organisation become more competitive and more conflict oriented. In both scenarios, it is the individual who is at risk of being engulfed by the more powerful other's metaphor: "the commercial and the personal may indeed mingle, even fuse" (Taylor, 2006, p. 106). In other words, it is the brand on the Trojan Horse that determines from whom and how the coaching is given. The basic point here is that the notion of a coach and coaching is not indigenous to the field of organisation studies, but in fact is a figure of speech that is being borrowed or applied from one discourse to guide and inform the discourse of organisation studies and that of management. It is in such a context that we need to clearly understand that the terms 'coach' and 'coaching' are being used as metaphors causing training injuries for employees. The paradox of coaching is that it is one metaphor that 'competes' with other metaphors (i.e. one or many paradigms) to extricate an internal locus of control from an external source. Yet, if incommensurability is not the pragmatic, winning way, then why is there management's tendency to internalize or to buy-into an other's paradigm? The potential of learning theory through coaching becomes its own potential limitation of management by metaphor.

References available upon request