

Examining the Strategic Leadership of Organizations Using Metaphor: Brains and Flux–Interconnected and Interlocked

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INTRODUCTION

Strategic leadership in the competitive global marketplace requires a flexible and adaptable stance that not only infuses stability and purpose into an organization but also creates an environment with open communication that is conducive for creativity and innovation. Morgan (2006), an organizational scientist and consultant, explains the paradoxical insights that can be gained by using metaphors to describe the nature of organizations as a way of seeing, understanding, shaping, and reshaping modern workplaces. Metaphors enlighten by distortion and interweave what is known with what is unknown to create different perspectives and diverse images of the nature of organizations. From these diverse images, new connections and patterns may appear and innovative potentials for transformation may emerge. New patterns and potentials for change may then reveal the interconnection of causal loops, and these loops may contain disturbances or unpredictable events, which reverberate through complex systems and reshape paradigms (Morgan, 2006; Weick, 1969). It has been argued, the shaping and reshaping of organizations occurs through interconnections (Smith & Graetz, 2011), and understanding these interconnected organizational behaviors can be beneficial for strategic leaders and managers.

Weick (1969), another organizational scientist, is well known for his research on sensemaking and the social psychology of organizing applied to understanding organizational life. He defines organizing as “a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors” (Weick, 1969, p. 3). Equivocality refers to uncertainty, and in a world of rapid, continual change, individuals attempt to reduce ambiguity and increase stability in their organizational life. Interlocked behaviors, according to Weick, are the rules and conventions that develop and are maintained as individuals engage in the process of organizing.

Weick (1969) states, “Organizing is accomplished by processes” (p. 89), and “Processes contain individual behaviors that are interlocked among two or more people. The behaviors of one person are contingent on the behaviors of another person(s)” (p. 89). Not only do interlocked behaviors explain how individuals attempt to remove equivocality, but these behaviors also reveal how people become entrapped in cycles that maintain the status quo and make change difficult. By carefully observing the process of organizing as well as identifying interconnected and interlocked behaviors in everyday events, patterns of relating are revealed. Weick (1974) explains, “Nothing special happens in organizations that does not also happen elsewhere in a more visible form. The problem then is to locate these ‘elsewheres’ and know what to do with them” (p. 487). Using metaphors can help strategic leaders identify these ‘elsewheres’ by noticing obvious but simultaneously hidden convergence and divergence of interests among individuals in the organization. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2014) define convergence as “communicatively accommodating or adjusting to each other’s interests or needs in the encounter” (p. 35), whereas divergence

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is revealed through distancing, disengagement, and avoidance behaviors and defensive communication. In this chapter, the nature of organizations is examined using metaphors in order to gain insights for overcoming barriers of communication, imagination, and change. Gaining new insights about organizational life through the use of metaphors such as brains, flux, and transformation, strategic leaders may develop new paradigms from which to improve communication, become better equipped to facilitate organizational learning, and develop into more effective change agents.

Brains in Organizations and Memory as Pests

The human brain allows individuals to think, reflect, and process information. The brain controls movement and communication, yet brains are somewhat mysterious. Baars and Gage (2010) state, “The brain is said to be the most complex structure in the known universe – with tens of billions of neurons, connected by trillions of transmission points” (p. 3). Even after centuries of brain study and great discoveries about brain activities, there remains much to learn. Even neurologists and scientists do not know exactly how all aspects of the brain function; yet, research reveals brains have both general and specific functional characteristics. Russell (2012) states, “Normal brain function includes both a general ability related to the whole brain and specific abilities related to certain areas” (p. 61). The cortex is divided into left and right hemispheres. Morgan (2006) explains the left hemisphere is responsible for the analytical, rational, verbal, and visual functions, and the right hemisphere of the brain controls the creative, intuitive, and emotional functions. Even though the left hemisphere is primarily language-oriented and the right hemisphere primarily visuospatial-oriented, a band of nerves, the corpus callosum, connects the left and right hemispheres, creates interhemispheric harmony, and unifies thought and action (Iaccino, 2014). These two separate and distinct sides of the human brain are specialized in function but work together (Hellige, 1993). The brain is also divided into top and bottom brain functions. Kosslyn and Miller (2015) explain, “the top brain formulates plans and put them into motion, and the bottom brain classifies and interprets incoming information about the world” (p. 2). Working together, simultaneously, the distinct hemispheres of the brain as well as the different modes of the brain, complement the other.

Brains are also responsible for cognitive functioning. Restak (2001) defines cognition as the brain’s ability to attend, identify, and act, and he posits the cognition of the brain changes with experiences. The brain’s capacity to change refers to its plasticity. In fact, Restak states, “we have no choice about whether or not our brain will change from the way it is today” (p. 15). The brain constantly changes as the individual engages in activities, and these experiences impact the brain. The brain is also resilient, contains a lifetime memory, and improves with usage. Unlike the tendency of other body organs to wear down with use, the brain continues to function without wearing down in large part because of memory (Restak, 2001). Restak indicates the most important cognitive function of the brain is the memory because “we are what we remember” (p. 116). He explains, the behavior of Alzheimer’s patients reveals the importance of memory by what they forget thus underscoring how remembering and forgetfulness influence attending, identifying, and acting. The memory helps people think and act; therefore, cognition plays an important role in the mental functioning of the brain. The mental functioning of the brain, or cognition, determines how the brain generalizes, interconnects, and specializes using the left and right hemispheres. Through the specialized and generalized functions within the brain, the brain operates as a system of intelligence and a system of organizing; brains are paradoxically logical and simultaneously creatively (Morgan, 2006; Restak, 2001).

According to Morgan (2006), the brain also functions as an information system with memory functions that collect and store information in memory for later retrieval and use. An information system is

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