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Understanding of Leadership Through
Metaphors**

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Through Their Own Words:
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This article suggests that metaphors are essential to understanding leadership. Metaphors can serve as underlying organizing structures of leadership thinking and experience, and they can be mobilized in order to accomplish interpersonal goals. The literature on leadership abounds with metaphors such as leadership as game, sports, art or machine. While the multitude of leadership metaphors used by authors and leaders alike appears determined by a complex interplay of personal, situational, and cultural factors, the analysis of a leadership interview indicates that these metaphors center around experientially significant nuclei of meaning. By examining the entailments of leadership metaphors on such dimensions as highlighted and hidden leadership aspects or the suggested relationship between leader and followers, metaphor analysis allows the exploration of leadership conceptualizations on an experiential level. An exploratory grid presents possible entailments of selected metaphors on important dimensions of leadership. We propose that the study of leadership metaphors can provide valuable lessons to leaders. For example, effective leadership may require a rich and situationally attuned metaphorical vocabulary. Because leadership metaphors carry implicit suggestions about values (e.g., what is good, what should be done, and how), they may also allow for new insights into the ethics of leadership.

Through Their Own Words

Towards a New Understanding of Leadership through Metaphors

1. Introduction

“But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius...” (Aristotle, *Poetics*)

Leadership, as anybody knows who has actively sought to engage in it, is a complex social phenomenon lacking real boundaries and a clear definition (Bennis, 1959; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Kakabadse et al., 1998). The collection of behaviors, interactions, outcomes, and social phenomena labeled as leadership is heterogeneous and often contradictory, and complimented by a plethora of prescriptive advice on how to lead, guaranteed to justify almost any approach to leadership. Biographies of leaders and books written about the experience of leaders in all walks of life proliferate. Practitioners who have been perceived by others to be leaders, self-proclaimed leadership gurus, and academics researching the subject, all try to explain leadership and propagate their views of how one should be and what one should think and do in order to lead.

Accordingly, the last century has produced a large number of different approaches to leadership, placing different emphases on what constitutes good leadership. For example, trait theories (Galton, 1869; James, 1880) have attempted to explain leadership in terms of certain distinctive personality characteristics of leaders, an early “great person” approach reborn in the more recent accounts of “charismatic” leadership. In a radical move away from the traits inherent to leaders, situational leadership theories have explained leadership as the consequence of

specific contexts which give rise to specific kinds of leadership and to specific persons who embody this leadership. Similarly, behavioral theories of leadership focus on observable and measurable acts and behavior of leaders rather than on their invisible traits. Interactional or contingency theories of leadership stress the interaction between traits and situational variables (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Vroom & Yetton, 1974). Transactional leadership theories focus on the exchange taking place in the relationship between leaders and followers. However, as Barker (1997) observes the “obsession with the rich and powerful, with traits, characteristics, behaviors, roles, styles, and abilities of people who by hook or by crook have obtained high positions” has not lead to significantly more knowledge about leadership. What leadership is all about is still little understood (Kakabadse et al., 1998).

In this article, we do not aim to add another definition of leadership. Neither do we attempt to explain why certain elements involved in the phenomenon of leadership need to be stressed at the expense of others. Our modest goal is to shed light on the concept of leadership from an unusual perspective. This perspective puts an emphasis on how leadership is experienced and expressed by leaders and by the persons writing about leadership. We approach leadership by paying attention to what people actually say and write when talking about leadership. In other words, our perspective of leadership is based on an analysis of the implicit conceptualizations people use when thinking about, explaining, and enacting leadership. As we will show, these conceptualizations are commonly expressed by metaphors.

2. Approaching Leadership through Metaphors

Metaphors are based on a correspondence of two different concepts. Understanding and expressing one concept in terms of the other, metaphors achieve a cross-mapping from a source

domain (such as friendship, or sports) to a target domain (such as leadership) by a simultaneous activation of the two domains involved. While highlighting specific aspects of the target domain, each metaphor necessarily hides other aspects (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and thus provides a filter for examining the concept under a different light (Black, 1977).

Metaphors often build a bridge from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the unfamiliar. They help us understand and interact with phenomena which otherwise would be too abstract and too complex. It is therefore not surprising that in talking and writing about leadership metaphors are widely used. In social sciences today, metaphors have become a “hot” topic and the analysis of metaphors has been largely successful in reaching a better understanding of such complex and diverse areas as foreign policy decisions (Shimko, 1994), financial markets (Oberlechner, Slunecko & Kronberger, 2002), moral politics (Lakoff, 1996), sexual experience (Wagner, Elejabarrieta & Lahnsteiner, 1995; Weatherall & Walton, 1999), and social dilemma (Allison, Beggan & Midgley, 1996).

Our article suggests that cognitive and discursive insights into metaphors may contribute to a better and more concrete grasp of leadership and the actions of leaders. Leadership metaphors promise to provide us with a more differentiated appreciation of different conceptions of leadership—people indeed talk about, and enact very different things, when referring to leadership. Examining metaphors may help leaders reflect about how they implicitly construct leadership. The study of leadership metaphors may reveal the hidden strategies of leaders and may expose metaphorical manipulations of those led or taught about leadership.

The examination of leadership on a linguistic level focuses on the subjective experience of leaders and on the role of metaphors in their experience. Rather than understanding leadership as an objective phenomenon, we suggest that the metaphors used by leaders and those who describe leadership are essential for understanding leadership itself. Metaphors are not linguistic

decoration or verbal artistry; instead, metaphors are indicative of leaders' thinking and form a basis of their actions. Leadership metaphors create leadership reality by defining such important aspects as the leader's role and the context in which leadership takes place.

Leadership metaphors can be approached from two theoretical perspectives: from the cognitive approach and from discourse theory. The cognitive approach stresses that metaphors function as organizing principles of leadership thought and experience. This understanding of metaphors is based on assumptions of cognitive linguistics (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). Cognitive linguistics infers root metaphors from everyday linguistic expressions. For example, if leadership is structured by the metaphor of war, then statements like "shooting down the arguments of an opponent", or "to defend one's strategic goals" seem natural. The full impact of metaphors shows in metaphorical entailments, which pass on characteristics of the metaphorical image, or source domain, to the target domain. For example, the metaphorical entailment "leading is applying military strategies" is a logical consequence of the leadership-as-war metaphor and the principle that wars are conducted by military strategies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The internal logic of "leadership is war" gives rise to a wide range of entailments on what leadership is about, e.g., that it is conducted on a battlefield where attacks and counterattacks take place, that the goal is to defeat an enemy, and that being defeated oneself may carry the ultimate risk of one's own death. Understanding a metaphor's entailments is a matter of our commonplace cultural knowledge about the domains activated by the metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). Entailments are especially important because they suggest which rules are valid in the context of leadership, and because they provide guidelines for how to act in this context.

While cognitive linguistics investigates culturally shared repertoires of metaphors in a de-contextualised way, discourse theory sees metaphors as sources which are positioned and used within specific conversations. Discourse theory calls attention to where and how metaphors are

placed in communication (Edwards, 1991, 1997; Weatherall & Walton, 1999). Thus, while cognitive linguists focuses on cognitive repertoires on a conceptual level, discourse analysts stress the importance of discursive practice and the functions performed by the use of these repertoires.

A discursive understanding of leadership metaphors emphasizes how leaders, or authors on leadership, mobilize metaphors in order to accomplish certain interpersonal goals. Highlighting and hiding aspects of entailment are particularly important to the discursive management of causal attribution and accountability (Edwards, 1997). Metaphors thus not only describe and illustrate a target domain such as leadership; they also carry normative assumptions about what is right and what is wrong. This is yet another reason why discourse analysts insist that even closely related metaphors are not equivalent and interchangeable, but that one should consider the grounds for the choice of one over another, and what kinds of discursive business such choices may perform. The discursive view thus sees metaphors not only as available sense-making devices that are triggered by events, but rather as actively employed tools that manage one's interests in social interaction.

3. Examples of Leadership Metaphors

Even a cursory glimpse at today's leadership literature uncovers countless metaphors. This abundance of metaphors is not surprising if one considers that people need metaphors in order to grasp such abstract and complex phenomena as leadership. How metaphors of leadership are employed ranges from such obvious descriptions as leadership as a martial art (Mindell, 2000) or as "leadership engine" (Tichy, 1997) to more subtle ones, such as those of

former political adviser Dick Morris, who, for example, describes how leaders "play the game" (Morris, 2002).

A closer look at the use of metaphors suggests that the metaphors used to describe leadership are neither invented nor used randomly. Instead, they center on experientially significant nuclei of meaning, expressing socially shared senses of leadership. Most leadership metaphors take up recurring themes, and they can be clustered accordingly. In this study, we will first list some of the most frequently found leadership metaphors. These examples suggest that while there exists a wide variety of leadership metaphors in the literature, many of these metaphors revolve around defined themes which play a central part in various conceptualizations of leadership. To be aware of some of these frequent metaphorical themes helps one to better understand some of the common conceptualizations of leadership. We will briefly describe some of these recurring metaphors and then examine the complex interplay of leadership metaphors found in the verbatim text of an interview with a leader.

(a) War Metaphors

The literature on leadership is abundant with metaphors of war and fighting. For example, the subtitle of a recent book on Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, promising "leadership wisdom of a battle-hardened maverick", explicitly connects leadership with war and links the personal management style of the Secretary of Defense with his position as head of the Pentagon through the use of a powerful metaphor (Krames, 2002). Other authors refer to the need for "iron rule" when leading (Ledeen, 1999), point to Attila the Hun as a leadership role model (Roberts, 1991), as well as the United States Marine Corps (Carrison & Walsh, 1998). A "fieldbook" analysis of Jack Welch's leadership style, advertising itself as a "battle plan" for a "revolution",

activates a range of war metaphors that implicitly transport the image of leadership as engagement in military conflict (Slater, 1999). Readers who fail despite such battle-hardened advice may later take recourse to "The Wounded Leader" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

(b) Game and Sports Metaphors

Another group of leadership metaphors is drawn from the world of playing games and sports. For example, author Dick Morris offers his view on how "leaders play the game" (Morris, 2002). In "Leadership and Golf" (Wentz & Wentz, 2002), the authors tell the story of business executives who "remain handicapped by the muscle memory of their old game" combining a number of game metaphors, and suggest that leaders "trust their swing". Another book title suggests that leaders should "first, break all the rules" (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). Also, William Boetcker has linked leadership to the "great game of life" (Goodman, 1997). Game and sports metaphors often emphasize the constructed and changeable nature of the setting within which leadership takes place; they encourage the leader to "toy around" with different game rules (in game metaphors), or they stress the importance of practice to achieve leadership mastery (in sports metaphors).

(c) Art Metaphors

In a recent presentation, Warren Bennis (2002) equated leadership with the art of acting and performing. Repeatedly, it has been suggested that leadership is similar to being the conductor of an orchestra, producing "an expressive and unified combination of tones" (Bailey,

1997), or that it requires the leader to "turn his back on the crowd" (Crook, 1997). Cameron's statement that "a symphony may be played by a hundred musicians responsive under the baton of a master conductor or by fifty thousand mechanics playing a blueprint score" not only links leadership once more to metaphors of playing music, but also contrasts the metaphor of arts to the machine metaphor of a mechanical production process (Cameron, 1997, p. 494).

(d) Machine Metaphors

Cameron's choice of machine metaphors is hardly exceptional. Frequently, leadership is linked to machine metaphors, which are built on such concepts as engineering and industrial production, and which see leaders as being - or running - machinery. Tichy and Cohen, for example, call their book "the leadership engine" (1997). They see organizations as a "machine", consisting of connected "parts", requiring "lubrication", "fuel", as well as constant "maintenance", prompting in turn a reviewer to call the book a "'super' hardware store" for one's empty "toolbox" (Morris, 2002).

(e) Religious/Spiritual Metaphors

Religious/spiritual leadership metaphors have a certain religious or super-human touch, linking the concept of leadership to spirituality. Authors inspired by these metaphors write about "temptations" and "obsessions" of successful leaders, and link them to "fables" telling a superficially simple story which on closer look reveals a wisdom that can be generalized (Lencioni, 1998; Lencioni, 2000). Others have suggested metaphors of magic (Pearson & Seivert, 1995), and fairy tales (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001).

Bob Galvin's statement that the job of leaders is "to spread hope" uses another spiritual metaphor (Crainer, 1998, p. 182). Similarly, Vince Lombardi's suggestion that a leader "can never close the gap between himself and the group" represents a physical-spatial metaphor, which possibly implies that a leader is not an ordinary human being but somebody extraordinary and super-human (Crainer, 1998, 183). One is reminded of Greek mythology, of the troubling consequences of overstepping the separation of Gods and humans.

4. Leadership Metaphors in Action

Moving beyond the examples of leadership metaphors given above, this section presents verbatim examples of metaphors in an interview on leadership with industrialist, management guru, and leadership author John Harvey-Jones, chairperson of British-based ICI from 1982-1987 (Harvey-Jones, 1988, 1993). The examples from the interview (Aziz Corporation, 2001) demonstrate the pivotal role played by metaphors in leaders' experiential conceptions of leadership. They also show the complex and adaptable nature of leadership metaphors, and how such metaphors complement each other in portraying a variety of aspects of a leader's meanings of leadership.

At the beginning of the interview, Harvey-Jones explicitly refers to his background in the military. Thus, not surprisingly, war metaphors play a dominant role throughout the interview; military services "place leadership absolutely at the front of everything". War and military metaphors speak when "there are no bad troops only bad leaders", and when Harvey-Jones, early in his leadership of ICI, had "to choose what the strategy" was. In a war, it is possible that the people who are led find out "the bloody truth". "Discipline" is of highest importance. Leadership

in war is a dangerous matter of life and death as “every one of us old guys has bitten the dust at one time or another”.

An overlap of war metaphors with medical and body metaphors is suggested by a leader who faces the “bloody truth”. This fusion reappears in the image of the leader as “head of the bloody company”. An example for the isolated use of medical and body metaphors is a leader who is actually “in deep do dah” but continues to pretend it is “just a local hiccup”.

In the interview, the led employees are mostly conceptualized by the use of a container metaphor, as when leadership, for example, means “getting extraordinary performance out of ordinary people”, when employees always should “have something in reserve”, and when for a leader “what you put into it is what you get back”. The last statement also exemplifies a fairness and equilibrium metaphor in this conception of the ones being led, and of the leader’s interaction with employees. Employees who “lose their balance” end up having “nothing more they can really give”. It is no wonder then that it is important for business expansions as well “to remain in balance all the whole time”. If you are trusting as a leader, “and you behave well and honestly, the balance of probability is that you’ll get a lot of trust back”.

Gardening metaphors, too, are used to describe the leaders’ interactions with the ones being led, when, for example, the leader is “helping people to grow” and is “developing and growing the self-esteem” of people. But the plants in a leader’s garden may also be poisonous; people trying to please their bosses too much carry “the seeds of disaster”.

Game and sports metaphors allow differentiating between several aspects of business leadership. Leaders are usually “trying to hold – they have been taught somewhere that there is a game of poker and you hold cards up all the time.” However, business is not poker but a “holistic game”. In the payment of executives, this may become “sort of a competitive game”.

The previous examples from a short interview demonstrate the complexity of leadership metaphors used by one leader. These metaphors show that it is impossible to reduce leaders and their leadership to only one leadership metaphor. Leaders, in their actions and accounts, use and are characterized by a multitude of metaphors. As the concept of leadership itself is complex, and as the actions and interventions of leaders are multi-determined, individual conceptualizations of leadership arise in a complex and dense interplay of metaphors.

The metaphors in the interview also demonstrate that leadership metaphors are not sharply demarcated from each other. Instead, experiential representations and expressions of leadership often seem to relate simultaneously to multiple metaphors. This is evident, for example, in the overlap of war and bodily metaphors described above. In the interview, another example for a metaphorical overlap can be found between an art metaphor and a construction metaphor, when Harvey-Jones recapitulates the importance for his leadership of “not straying into trying to fiddle around with all the other bits until the first building blocks had been assembled.” Moving beyond a mere metaphorical overlap, this image may even suggest a time sequence of leadership behavior which begins with a mechanic’s or engineer’s focused assembling of building blocks (construction metaphor) before continuing with the play of a more artistic fiddler (art metaphor).

The interview also demonstrates that leadership metaphors should not be understood as static and merely individual phenomena which exist independently from their environment. Instead, they arise in the dynamic interplay of leaders with the environment, and they may be triggered by environmental stimuli. The interview demonstrates such dynamics, for example, in the following sequence:

Interviewer: ... I can hear people saying that’s all very well but when you’re up to your neck in alligators there isn’t the time to do that. How do you find time do [sic] to do it?

The interviewer here asks what a leader should do in situations when there is not much time and the leader is “up to [the] neck in alligators”. Doing so, he suggests the metaphor of

dangerous and hostile animals in a struggle where the leader does not have time to proceed methodically but instead fights to carry on.

Harvey-Jones: Well of course you always do find the time actually. [...] I mean unravelling alligators in swamps and so on is really like trying to undo tangled skeins of wool – if you find the right end and pull it everything else falls apart and behold the swamp drains and all the rest of it.

Harvey-Jones takes up the beast metaphor in his answer but enhances and creatively integrates it into a disentanglement metaphor. Thus, “unravelling” the alligators leads to a drained swamp in the metaphorical mix of dangerous beasts and disentangling wool. Later in the interview, the disentanglement metaphor of leadership reappears when “a company is in a mess” or when the leadership problem of Railtrack is explained by “they got their wotnots in a twist.”

Lastly, the interview shows that the metaphors of leadership are gendered, and suggests that metaphors might constitute an essential means to discriminate in the discourse about leadership. For example, it can be argued that the war and military metaphors found so prevalently in accounts of leadership reflect male experience more than they reflect female experience. In the interview, a gendered use of metaphors is also evident when the interviewer relates money to “business virility”, when the interviewee includes men but not women in a war metaphor in which “every one of us old guys has bitten the dust at one time or another by over-expansion”, and when he remarks that 500.000 British Pounds should be enough yearly compensation for an (obviously male) leader “to keep the little woman happy”. To give another example, the “pretty nurse put[ting] the gloves on” in Health Services actually run by “a bunch of guys” is likely to be a woman working in an organization led by men.

To summarize, the metaphorical fields emerging in this brief interview in leadership demonstrate the dynamic and inter-related nature of leadership metaphors. Paying attention to

leadership metaphors sheds light on aspects of the discourse about leadership which otherwise would remain concealed.

5. The Many Layers of Metaphorical Messages

The previous sections have shown that it is possible to identify leadership metaphors and to cluster these metaphors around such recurring themes as war, game, or machine, which helps to systematize the experiential meanings of leadership. The exploration of leadership metaphors in an interview has demonstrated that identifying leadership metaphors is a qualitative endeavor focused on meanings and messages, and one of degrees, not one of counting discrete occurrences and absolutes.

It is important to keep in mind that metaphor analysis does not straightforwardly identify, for example, how an individual unconsciously conceptualizes leadership, thus allowing simple access to implicit theories about leadership. Rather, metaphors should be understood as multi-determined by cultural, situational, and personal factors. Moreover, leadership metaphors may not only bring to light underlying structures of thinking about leadership, but they may also fulfill important discursive and communicative functions in the here-and-now of the situation in which they are used.

For example, metaphors may be deliberately selected, or chosen without much individual reflection. They may reveal an individual's conception, or the individual's implicit or explicit desire to speak to a specific audience, with whom the metaphors resonate particularly well. The choice of metaphors is also influenced by the situation in which it is used; different situations may evoke different leadership metaphors in one and the same individual. Finally, metaphors are also culturally rooted. Some metaphors may come more naturally to us than others not because of

our individual preferences or because of the situation for which they are used, but because of what metaphors our society prefers. In other words, we may not just speak a metaphor, but the metaphor - culturally rooted and induced - may speak through us.

Hence, when authors use war metaphors to describe Donald Rumsfeld's leadership style, they are not simply revealing an insight into their own notion of leadership. They may also - consciously or not - think about the likely readership of a book on the leadership style of a Secretary of Defense. Our cultural understanding of leadership in general and of leadership of any Secretary of Defense in particular may have implicitly influenced the choice of their metaphors. And, perhaps reflecting a *Zeitgeist* phenomenon, situationally after September 11, war metaphors may have become more frequently used to describe leadership.

Therefore, metaphor analysis cannot act as a simple decoder key, swiftly and unequivocally uncovering an individual's true, but hidden, conception of leadership. It requires detailed qualitative analysis, much like archaeologists piecing together various artifacts to imagine how previous generations have lived. Over time, though, one may gain valuable insights into an individual's conception of leadership, a situational understanding of the conception of leadership and its cultural underpinnings.

6. The Shape of Leadership - Metaphor Analysis at Work

Identifying the metaphors which are used to conceptualize leadership is only one part of what metaphor analysis can do to deepen our understanding of leadership. Such a categorization is not an end in itself. A perhaps more important and challenging opportunity offered by metaphor analysis is to understand the entailments of particular metaphors. Once leadership metaphors are labeled, one can examine what implications their use entails. Because the use of

leadership metaphors also implies certain conceptions of leadership, examining these metaphors can point to the possibilities and constraints of leadership conceptions as culturally or situationally suggested, or as personally defined by a leader. Examining these implications can be invaluable.

Taking one of the metaphor clusters we have identified—war and battle—as an example, one may therefore ask which focus the metaphor suggests, and which roles are ascribed to the leader and to the followers. One may ask: what is the nature of the relationship between the leader and the group, and does this nature and the leadership itself adapt over time, influenced perhaps by the context and the process of leading, or is it fixed and static? With war and battle metaphors, the focus is frequently on danger, hardship, endurance, and the heroism required for success in a hostile environment. It is the Churchillian "blood, sweat, and tears". The leader is seen as the commanding officer, whose orders have to be obeyed. Roles in a battle are clearly defined and usually do not change over time. The war metaphor implies a hierarchical understanding of leadership, in which leaders—not their sub-ordinates—enjoy a substantial level of autonomy, but also carry the sole responsibility, of decision-making. Like foot soldiers, the persons being led may not need a good understanding of the overall situation, and they may have to be sacrificed in order to win the battle. Adherence to authority, not individuality is encouraged among followers. Those questioning the commanders run the risk of becoming traitors being punished under martial law.

Clearly, examining such implications for the leader-group relationship dynamic is an important step in the process of uncovering and attributing metaphorical meaning. However, further insights into the meaning of leadership metaphors can be gained from looking at the central role of information in a given metaphor, how it is passed on, and in what form. Again, in war and battle metaphors information fulfills the specific role of sustaining the existing hierarchy.

Information of fact travels upward in the command chain. Orders travel downward. Subordinates feed back what they encounter, and receive information (in the form of orders) on how to react. This is in stark contrast, for example, to sports metaphors, where one finds frequent emphasis on "team spirit" and "team play". While the members of sports teams enter the game with a certain strategy and often have such pre-defined roles as goalie or offensive player, sports games allow more readily for autonomous decisions taken to further the teams' overall goal. In sports, information flows are much less hierarchical, and regularly mix facts, suggestions, and demands. Unlike the hierarchical organization of the military, team members commonly have a say in who acts as their leader. Choosing the metaphor of war and battle over another metaphor—e.g. that of sports—gives voice and emphasis to these underlying dimensions. To give a last example of a relevant metaphorical dimension, visions and goals are important aspects of most leadership definitions. Therefore, in addition to the relationship between those who lead and those who are led, and to the role of information and communication, one might also look at what certain metaphors entail for the importance and role of goals.

Understanding what metaphors entail for such key dimensions in the conception of leadership as the nature of the relationship between leader and followers, the dynamic of information and the role of goals fosters an understanding of a much broader picture. The picture, expressed through the use of certain metaphors, consists of multiple notions of leadership, partly overlapping and compatible with each other, partly irreconcilable and contrasting each other. Comparing entailment notions embedded in different metaphors reveals overlaps but also tensions and discrepancies in how leadership is understood and enacted.

The following dimensions of leadership metaphors might be central to understanding the entailments of leadership metaphors:

- What is the leadership focus suggested by the metaphor? What aspects of leadership are stressed or highlighted, which aspects are neglected or hidden?
- What roles does the metaphor assign to the leader and to those led?
- What type of relationship between leader and group does the metaphor suggest?
- What role does the environment play in the metaphor?
- What dynamics of information (e.g., between leader and those led) and what kind of decision-making does the metaphor suggest?
- What goals are likely to be important in a given leadership metaphor, and how are they pursued?
- Does the metaphor express a static or an adaptive and dynamic concept of leadership? How open is the metaphor to change, and how is change brought about?

Table 1 maps the possible shape of leadership implicit in four different metaphors, i.e., leadership as war, as a game, as a machine, and as a spiritual experience. The cells in the two-dimensional grid aim to describe important leadership aspects expressed by these metaphors, thereby paving the way to a comprehensive understanding of different metaphorical leadership conceptions.

Table 1: Mapping the shape of leadership

		War	Play	Machine	Religious/ Spiritual Experience
Leadership Dimension	Metaphor focus (highlighting)	Winning or losing; danger; need to survive; incompatibility of goals	Joy; togetherness; team spirit; playfulness; competitiveness	To function according to pre-determined rules; completely established system	Values and beliefs; faith; conviction; superhuman person of the leader
	Hiding	Cooperation; shared goals	Serious and unpleasant aspects; conflict among the team	Chance; environmental factors	Technical and practical aspects of leadership
	Role of leader	To order, command	Primus inter pares; facilitator	Mechanic; to operate and control	Messiah; guru; inspirator; enlightener
	Role of group	To obey	To perform	To function	To believe and to follow
	Role and importance of environment	Hostile; overcoming obstacles	What is outside the game is often of little importance; To provide an impartial arena (a “level playing field”?)	Little importance	Leadership often has implications for the environment; to create a better world
	Leader-group relationship	Hierarchical; autocratic	Flat and not hierarchical; friendship; democratic or consultative	Clear split of roles	Strong bond based on values, emotions, beliefs
	Information dynamics (e.g., role of information, how it is passed on between the agents)	Possibility of espionage; not everybody is informed about everything; confusion tactics to weaken the enemy	Free and uninhibited flow	Vertical, top-down, engineered information flows	Importance of faith, spiritual traditions
	Decision-making (e.g., democratic vs. autocratic; degree of autonomy of leader and of those led)	Leader: low autonomy; Follower: very low autonomy	Consultative and democratic	Autocratic decision-making according to pre-set rules	Focus on enlightened leader
	Goals (e.g. importance and role of goals; how are they determined)	To win, often at all costs; to defeat the enemy	Collaborative and participative elements in establishing goals	Goals are pre-defined	Goals are set by leader based on conviction; very important; often with high ethical or moral implications

	Affective Dimension	Self-defense, fear; mistrust; hostility, aggression	Focus on social aspects, feelings of togetherness and enjoyment; some competition possible	Focus on rationality; emotional aspects are excluded or seen to interfere with proper functioning	Leadership as spiritual-affective experience
	Change dynamics (how is transformation and change brought about)	Victory; force and power	Breaking rules; questioning the framework of the game and its rules	Focus on maintaining status quo; usually no change necessary or needed until machine may be replaced, e.g., by new technology	Person of leader who represents higher principle; conviction and faith of followers
	Leadership conception (e.g., adaptive to change vs. rigid and fixed; process-oriented vs. static)	Fixed	Some openness to change	Fixed; no change possible within existing system	Benevolent and knowing leader acting from above

Reflecting on how key dimensions of leadership manifest themselves in various metaphor categories may also help in understanding new metaphors which relate to already examined metaphor categories. For example, understanding that leadership described as "rising above the trenches" relates to the war metaphor may suggest a wealth of possible information about the metaphor's underlying leadership conception.

It is important to keep in mind that the descriptions in Table 1 are not final but a first attempt to describe possible implications of various metaphorical conceptions of leadership. As we have already stated, the meaning of metaphors is not static but dynamic, influenced by the interplay of personal, situational, and cultural factors. Because metaphors are multi-determined and because they may have varying meanings which depend on a variety of factors, it is important to understand that Table 1 acts more as a suggestion of possibilities than as an empirically established finding. A closer and more detailed analysis may necessitate the adaptation of the grid model. As a first indication, it may nevertheless provide a guidance beacon for further studies.

7. Lessons to Learn from Leadership Metaphors

Metaphors can be used explicitly and deliberately by leaders, in order to influence others, to give shape to the world in certain ways, and even to manipulate listeners. Paying attention to such metaphors and to the implications they suggest helps the “recipients” of leadership to recognize such influences more quickly and to react to them in more informed and more reflected ways.

More importantly, in addition to metaphorical images being deliberately used, metaphors are often used implicitly, without the user’s conscious awareness of the metaphor. The language used by those leading and by those describing leadership is full of metaphors. Metaphor analysis then offers an approach to grasping how leadership is understood by those who engage in it. Moving beyond a merely theoretical and cognitive discussion of espoused theories of leadership, metaphor analysis provides access to actual theories of leadership “in use” (Argyris, Putnam & McLain Smith 1985).

Metaphors thus open a window into experiential approaches to leadership, as leaders implicitly or explicitly define their leadership through metaphors. Moreover, metaphor analysis may provide insights into why some leaders are more successful than others. For example, a rich metaphorical vocabulary which enables the use of the most appropriate metaphors in any given situation may well signify leaders who are flexible and can adjust their leadership in situationally appropriate ways. Another indication of good leadership might be a good match between the metaphors of an organization or a group, and the metaphors used by its leader. Rather than trying to link leaders to only one type of metaphor, perceiving leadership and reflecting about leadership in terms of metaphors can help avoid the pitfall of conceptualizing leadership too narrowly. Behn (1992) already stressed that not necessarily only one language of leadership exists. Similarly,

there also need not be only one “right” metaphor of leadership—certain metaphors may suit certain leadership situations, certain leadership personalities, certain leadership styles, and certain goals. As with other languages, it may be that “multilingual” leaders (and followers) fare better than those who “speak only one language”.

Another very important aspect of leadership metaphors is that they directly address the ethics of leadership. Metaphors, by their entailments, always contain messages about what should be done (and what not), what is good (and what not), how it should be done (and how not). For example, the “cowboy talk” (Sennott, 2002) in President Bush’s reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, exemplifies such implicit messages. *Smoking out* people implies unwanted vermin, conducting a *crusade* justifies the defeat of faithless disbelievers in the name of God. The choice of metaphors, whether deliberate or unconscious thus always carries ethical messages and implications. Metaphors users and the audience alike fare better the more they are aware of such implications. Again, metaphor analysis can help in creating such greater awareness.

8. Next Steps Forwards

Metaphor analysis provides an exciting perspective on how leadership is conceptualized. Its explanatory success in other fields of complex social and discursive phenomena make metaphor analysis appear well equipped for providing a wealth of insight for leadership studies.

However, substantial further research is required for a better understanding of the prevailing categories of leadership metaphors, whether they are used explicitly in order to describe leadership, or implicitly, providing guidelines to leadership behavior in action. Uncovering and interpreting metaphorical meaning is a qualitative research enterprise, a time-consuming and tedious task, not unlike that of an archeologist slowly uncovering layer after layer of history.

Therefore, the examination and substantiation of many of our preliminary assumptions will necessitate a much larger scale analysis of leadership texts—including academic and practice-oriented literature, interviews, biographies, and speeches of leaders and experts on leadership. The result of such wider studies based on metaphor analysis may facilitate a better understanding of such questions as:

- Do individuals and societies change the metaphors used to describe leadership over time? And if so, how? What kinds of leadership metaphors are prevalent when and why? Is this an indication of an evolvement of leadership conceptions?
- Are leaders more successful if their metaphors are well aligned with their audience? Do leaders need to speak the metaphors of their audience, or their own metaphors to maximize their success? To what extent is this dependent on the situational context?
- Do different societies use different metaphors, or mixes of metaphors - and what implications do these differences have for how leadership is understood?
- Do different leadership domains, such as the business sector or the public sector, use different metaphors? Is there evidence for a different understanding and conceptualization of leadership by different metaphors?
- Is there a gender gap? Can leadership be genderized, and can the genderization be deciphered by metaphor analysis?

Looking at who uses what metaphors when and for what goal provides a rich soil for addressing such multi-faceted and important research questions as the ones above. Metaphor analysis may make a small but significant contribution to offering insights and tentative answers.

9. Conclusion

Leadership—what leaders say and do, and how others describe what leaders do—is regularly expressed through metaphors. This paper has proposed that metaphors provide a stimulating way to understand leadership, and to realize what people really mean when talking about leadership. Such metaphors of leadership are often not explicit and consciously chosen. The implicit images and metaphors which can be found in leaders' everyday expressions of their actions, goals, and attitudes are especially telling and meaningful for a deeper understanding of leadership.

Expressing socially shared meanings of leadership, leadership metaphors, such as leadership as war, as game or sports, as art, as machine, or as spiritual experience, center around experientially significant nuclei of meaning. The analysis of leadership texts shows that leaders simultaneously use a multitude of metaphors and that these metaphors are determined by the dynamic interplay of personal, situational, and cultural factors. By examining the entailments of leadership metaphors on such key dimensions as highlighted and hidden leadership characteristics or the suggested relationship between leader and followers, metaphor analysis opens a window to understanding approaches to leadership on a deeper, experiential level. Metaphor analysis may also provide valuable lessons for how to lead successfully. Effective leaders, for example, may be characterized by their rich metaphorical vocabulary, which enables them to use situationally appropriate metaphors in different leadership situations. Lastly, leadership metaphors carry messages about the ethics of leadership, suggesting what is good, what should be done, and how. Being aware of these messages is an important basis for ethical leadership.

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