

Challenging Organisations and Society

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Leadership That Counts

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Tom Brown and Gary Wagenheim

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Larry Green

The Metaphor as Stepping Stone: Navigating Postmodern Uncertainty

Abstract

In a fluid environment, where mission statements seem like remote abstractions, a leader can mobilize his team with timely metaphors. A good metaphor makes noticeable what was previously imperceptible. Because of that potentiality it is an excellent device for revealing the emerging characteristics of the context in which we operate. Once new conditions are thus symbolized, the opportunities and challenges that they represent can be addressed. Whereas previously we assumed enduring commitments in marriage, career and product loyalty, our current cultural climate eschews long-term commitment and rewards improvisational mindsets. Metaphorically we are no longer pilgrims journeying towards a fixed destination but rather more like travelers fording a stream obscured by fog. An effective metaphor is a stepping stone that allows one to move forward with some confidence. A leader who can coin metaphors that express the salient features of one's working conditions builds a team capable of concerted action.

Keywords: metaphor, paradigm, vision and mission statements, confusion, direction

1 Introduction

In this paper I intend to offer a provisional answer to a question posed in the original call for papers: "Do certain 21st century challenges change the nature of leadership?" I will suggest that the answer is "yes": the twenty-first century presents us with a cultural "sea change". Bauman (2000) responds to that change by naming our era *liquid modernity*. Implicit within his metaphorical characterization is the notion that previous candidates for ground—religion,

ideology, scientism—have been problematized. Instead we must learn how to navigate through a dynamic, shifting environment—a fluid or liquid environment. How does one move forward with confidence when the world doesn't remain stable enough to map out the various possibilities that would get us from "here" to "there"? I will propose that metaphors can serve as provisional organizing frameworks during our transitional era.

2 Perpetual Transitions: Permanent Liminality?

I begin by relating Bauman's notion of liquid modernity to the anthropological concept of *liminality*. Anthropologists employ this term to name individuals in *transition*—for example, the transition from child to adult status. Liminality refers to the disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals—when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet completed the transition to their new one. In some ways they are formless. I wish to apply this anthropological concept to our age—a liminal age, the age of liquid modernity. The old forms and institutions are dis-integrating and the new ones have yet to be formed, recognized, and named. I'm defining institutions as stable, valued, recurring patterns of collective organization. As structures of social order, they govern the behavior of individuals within a given community. Bauman (2000) points out that institutions are increasingly unable to perform that function because they don't have time to solidify. Look no further than marriage as an institution in transition: common law and gay marriages are contesting the traditional conception of marriage as a legally binding contract between a man and a woman. It is only one of many institutions in flux. Taken as a whole, these institutional changes disclose that normativity is in flux. Consider body piercings, tattoos, legalization of marijuana, sex change—all compelling evidence that the norms that orient us have changed dramatically.

2.1 Subliminality

There is another slightly different meaning associated with the term liminality: think of the term *subliminal*. Here ‘liminality’ refers to experiences that are being registered but not recognized consciously. There is considerable evidence that observers’ responses may be affected by stimuli they claim not to have seen. For example, when smokers who wanted to quit were exposed to the subliminal message—“mommy and I are one person”—the rate of success improved considerably (Silverman, 1982). No such effects were observed in the control group. A similar outcome was revealed in a hypnosis experiment (Orne, 1962). The participants were given a post-hypnotic suggestion that they would not be able to see a chair positioned in the room. They never bumped into that chair and, in fact, demonstrated avoidant behavior. When asked why they changed their direction (to avoid bumping into the chair) they would confabulate an ‘explanation’—“I caught sight of the painting and wanted to have a closer look.”

2.2 Perceptual Awareness and Verbal Consciousness

I take exception to the usual interpretations applied to those results: the person was unconscious of their true motives and their verbal rationalizations are designed to “paper over” these blind spots. However, with both the subliminal and the hypnosis experiments the participants’ behavior clearly indicated that they *perceived* the relevant stimuli. To call such behavior “unconsciously motivated” seems like theoretical obfuscation. I prefer an alternate interpretation: these participants were consciously aware of the chair, but lacked a verbal symbol for it (because the post-hypnotic suggestion “erased” the concept and term “chair”). Because the operators addressed a *verbal question* to their subjects, the participants produced *verbal responses* from their available vocabulary—a vocabulary which did not include “chair”. *Their behavior* and *their explanations* existed on two separate planes. Their behavior was non-verbal and responsive to the situation, whereas their explanations were designed to achieve closure by matching a *confabulated*, but plausible, motive with the enacted behavior.

I use these results to suggest that as we move through our postmodern age of disorientation, we manage somehow—but often we don't quite *know* how we manage. We might find a way to carry on, yet we are unable to *explicitly conceptualize* why we do, what we do. I suggest that in order to navigate our circumstances effectively we rely more on a *perceptual* reading of the situation, and less on conceptual, verbally mediated understandings. In a meeting, for example, we subliminally respond to body language, facial expressions, and paralinguistic cues as much as we do to the explicit content. Those non-verbal behaviors qualify how we are to interpret the verbal content. We know who is invested in what position; we know when someone made a politically incorrect statement by the non-verbal responses that follow.

To summarize, I am claiming that we are living through a liminal age—an age of transition—in which the old forms have broken down. As a result, I suggest, we have to *feel* our way into, and through, our circumstances via our perceptions.

3 Free Floating: No Foundation, No Ground

In this section I offer further support for these claims. Earlier I suggested that previous candidates for ground have been problematized. Grand narratives and paradigmatic understandings may not be as reliable in a liminal age as they once were. I want to suggest that even “objectivity” cannot provide the firm ground that we've needed to proceed with confidence. How could that be? I turn to an anthropologist for some clues. According to Szokolczai (2009, p.154), liminal individuals are often not able to act rationally “*because the structure on which ‘objective’ rationality was based [has] disappeared.*” This quotation suggests that objectivity is dependent on something for its existence. I suggest that a structure that supports the emergence of “objectivity” would be a *stable context with firm boundaries*. However, post-structuralist authors such as Derrida, Barthes, Lacan and Foucault have undermined the structures of modern categorical thought. It seems that much of what was formerly considered to be natural, and therefore objective, has

been revealed to be social convention, not natural law. Tradition, custom and convention are revealed to be contingent, even arbitrary, rather than natural and immutable.

By way of contrast I return to a time when that ground was assumed rather than contested. In traditional and early modern times, a relatively stable context (slow rate of change) eventually produced its corresponding social imaginary. According to Manfred Steger and Paul James (2013), social imaginaries are deep-seated modes of understanding that provide *largely pre-reflective parameters* that guide individual behavior. (Just as the participants in the hypnosis experiment prereflectively avoided the chair.) We only become aware of a guiding social imaginary when a parameter is violated—for example, when standing in line and someone “jumps” the queue. Our outrage signals that an assumption has been challenged. Initially, therefore, our behavior is generated by our prereflective understandings. At a later stage of social development, relations can be codified in an explicit, formal body of knowledge. Sociology, psychology, political science, etc. are attempts to explicate and systematize what was formerly implicit and prereflective. That is, formal knowledge codifies and represents patterns of behavioral responses developed within a stable, enduring context. *That stable context is the structure that produces “objectivity”*. However, once that ground disappears, then the abstractions or codified knowledge that were derived from it lose their utility. Relying on that codified knowledge would be equivalent to navigating Seattle with a map produced in 1983.

Here is another example—closer to home—when watching pundits explain the economic meltdown of 2008, I noticed that they were employing concepts that were developed in a previous context. Their “explanations” were coherent—internally consistent—but seemed disconnected from the reality that they were purporting to explain. The film *The Big Short* (released in 2015) conveyed the sense that most of the players in the financial sector were navigating on the basis of outdated assumptions, whereas a few individuals were able to see and respond to the *emergent* conditions. Emergent

conditions, by definition, haven't endured long enough to be represented with formal systems of knowledge. Instead we find ourselves in a cybernetic process of linking our perceptions to a strange mixture of effective and ineffective behavioral responses. By doing so we begin to accumulate a fund of practical wisdom or "know-how". That prereflective "know-how" can then be given its initial conceptual *form* through metaphor. Metaphors are the means whereby we begin to *consciously* take notice of the emergent features of our circumstances.

4 Leadership as Concerted Action

"Certain 21st century challenges change the nature of leadership"—leadership defined as that which orients members to a common purpose. The phenomenon of magnetism can serve as a metaphor for illuminating this point. A magnet is a length of metal in which all the molecules orient to the same vector. Organizing in such a fashion combines their individual force fields to produce a strong, overall magnetic field. In a similar manner, a clearly articulated vision that *resonates* for team members produces *concerted* effort and better results. We can also see this in the emergent trend for human resource departments to hire people whose personal style already lines up with the company image and culture. That alignment between individual and corporate aesthetic facilitates coherent action.

In short, I am claiming that the 21st century is producing conditions that are difficult to conceptualize. I argue that those conditions must first be lived through before they can be conceptualized. That is, "know-how" precedes "know-what". However, before we can develop a formal system for describing these new social relations, we can find provisional frameworks through the use of metaphors. That is, between the ineffable lived experience and the formal knowledge systems they eventually produce lies a halfway house called metaphor.

5 A Master Metaphor

Let us flesh out this abstract discussion with a concrete metaphor. Bauman claims that our greatest fear is that *no one is in control*. He coined the following metaphor to fill in and express that fear: we are all passengers in a jumbo jet...some of us are sleeping, others, watching movies, still others are playing with their tablets, or conversing with fellow passengers. After some time, a few passengers begin to notice that the P.A. announcements are repetitious. In fact, they seem to be recordings rather than live communication. Being somewhat concerned, a few of the passengers make their way to the pilot's cabin to investigate. Once there, they discover an empty cockpit. The plane is on auto-pilot with a destination for an airport that has yet to be built.

If you are anything like me, when you read this metaphor you will feel existentially engaged. That is the case because it expresses or gives a form to our prereflective experience—that is, it expresses an *existential* truth. It connects us to, while also making sense of, our implicit experience. Read Bauman's metaphor back into the events of the “great recession”. The pre-recorded messages are equivalent to the “explanatory” utterances of the pundits on CNN, BBC or FOX news. The “autopilot” consists of the systemic forces that lie beyond the control of any human agent. They are the “invisible” economic, technological, and cultural forces that produce the parameters by which our social imaginaries are shaped. Those forces condition our choices without our awareness. The airport that is on the drawing board, but yet to be built, is the future that we are hurtling towards. Bauman's metaphor is not particularly pleasant, yet I believe that it makes a positive contribution: it gives form to a widely shared experience. And because it is *widely* shared, it can operate as a common point of departure for concerted action.

5.1 The Changing Nature of our Quest: From Pilgrim to Traveler

What are some of the metaphors that might show the way forward? Bauman fleshes out the abstract concept of liquid modernity with the following

mythic metaphors: if pilgrimage was the metaphor for our life's journey during modernity, then "stroller, vagabond, tourist or player" is a more appropriate metaphor for those of us living in liquid modernity. A pilgrim has a fixed destination, a pre-determined end point to their journey, be it Mecca or Lourdes. The traveler or vagabond does not. At any point the traveler can decide to turn in a different direction, not because of the end point it suggests but merely because it might offer better immediate possibilities. The traveler scans for possibilities, unexpected opportunities, whereas the pilgrim aims at preconceived actualities—a geographical endpoint. Bauman further notes that this shift was a reaction to, and a further acceleration of liquid modernity. Individuals have learned that to have fixed expectations often produces frustration and disappointment. Instead one must be "light on one's feet", ready to change direction as circumstances do. That is to say that the meanings or maps with which we formerly journeyed need to be replaced by navigational aids that are responsive to local and changing conditions.

5.2 Metaphors as Direction Finders

I will conclude this paper with some observations drawn from my psychotherapeutic practice. My examples come from my work with individuals; however, I suggest that metaphors can also be employed as organizing frameworks for organizations. Many of my clients present as frustrated, willful individuals. That is, they've employed their will to accomplish much, but now the world refuses to yield the desired results. These clients are still attached to their predetermined outcome and they are hoping that the therapist will show them the path; they want to remain pilgrims, but they must learn to become travelers. I offer such clients a metaphor:

Imagine that you are fording a stream in the fog. In the mist you can only make out the first rock. If you have the resolve to take that first step, you may be delighted to discover a second rock emerging from the fog. That is, each step reveals the next step and only the next step.

What does my metaphor embody? It suggests that to move forward, one must move into the unknown. One must give up the pseudo-comfort of viewing the present through the lens of the past.

Having made the journey with clients many times, I've come to realize that each rock across that stream is a metaphor that elucidates their particular circumstance at that moment in time. That metaphor acts as a provisional point of stability before the next move. Imagine a trail map that is missing the red dot that indicates "you are here". Without that dot the map is useless. A fresh metaphor acts like that red dot. That is, it gives conceptual form to one's intuitive experience.

I believe that we exist on one plane and think on another. We exist on a prereflective, intuitive level that registers our *current* circumstances. This is the plane of experience. And we *think* on another level: a reflective, conceptual level consisting of clear and distinct ideas. Those clear and distinct concepts are usually distillations of past experience expressed as generalities and abstractions. One is tempted to trust clear ideas over and above murky intuitions, hunches, gut feelings, etc. When those prereflective "knowings" are not symbolized and brought into the reflective mind, then one's conceptual map will be disconnected from the reality that it supposedly represents. Frustration and disappointment will result. On the other hand, when the client and I co-create an appropriate metaphor, we do so by first attending to their prereflective experience. The metaphor arises from that experience and gives it a form that represents one's circumstances to their reflective mind. It enables their reflective mind to consciously apprehend their circumstances and evaluate whether their behavior is moving them closer to, or further away, from their objectives. A good metaphor makes "visible" the interaction between one's circumstances and one's purpose.

6 Ant Colonies and Distributed Leadership

If you've ever seen an ant colony, you might find yourself thinking that they are either organized by some central planner or that they share a collective

mind. Their coordinated behavior invites this kind of interpretation. Edelman (2006), however, suggests that the *commonly shared environment* is responsible for the coordinated pattern witnessed in ant colonies. Individual ant behavior is patterned after previous ants' responses to the *local conditions* they had encountered. In aggregate those responses produce organized ant colonies. *If anything organizes (or constrains) the collective's behavior it would be the environmental conditions.*

How might this bear on the question of leadership in the twenty-first century? Understanding leadership from a distributed perspective means seeing leadership activities as a *situated* and *social process* at the *intersection* of leaders, followers, and the situation—seeing leadership less as central authority than as a distributed and collective response to salient circumstances. This assumes that most members of the team have a contribution to make—both toward the description of the challenge faced by the organization and the various means for addressing that challenge. This is the approach I employ when I teach. It is not “my point of view versus your point of view”. Rather it is your point of view *plus* mine. In this manner many more aspects of the situation can be collected and expressed. The phrase “point of view” is instructive because its original denotation is perceptual and not conceptual. That is, attention is focused on the particularities of the situation, thereby emphasizing prereflective engagement. My pedagogical approach is to demonstrate or model the counselling skill that I am teaching. As a result, students *perceive* embodied intelligence at play in my demonstration. A debriefing takes place afterwards in which students share their perceptions and interpretative concepts are developed. It is important that their perceptions have a common source: the demonstration they just witnessed—or, in Edelman's vocabulary they are responding to *local conditions*. That common event becomes the “ground” for our discussion. Interpretations that resonate with other students are picked up and elaborated. Interpretations that don't, drop out of the conversation. In this manner, and over multiple such experiences, a set of common understandings, a reliable framework, is elaborated through successive iterations. This developing framework is gradually internalized

by the participants, and students become part of a collective whose I.Q. is higher than any one individual's.

While the last section is normally announced with the heading "conclusion", you will note that I have not provided one. Conclusions imply a resolution of an environmental challenge and a return to a steady state. Such an implication is misleading in this time of liquid modernity.

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