

AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF GARETH MORGAN'S THEORY – METAPHORS OF THE ORGANIZATION

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Abstract. *This paper is an overview over Gareth Morgan's theory of metaphors of the organization and the idea of using the metaphor as a valuable tool to better understand the organizational dynamics and structure. I will now briefly point out some issues in connection to the importance of metaphors in the process of organizing.*

Key-words: *metaphor, organization, employers, employees.*

Introduction

One of the most famous organizational theorists, Gareth Morgan who is professor of organizational behaviour/ industrial relations at the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto wrote in 1986 an extremely valuable book entitled "Images of Organizations" in which he first suggested the idea of metaphors and their position in organizational existence. Gareth Morgan makes a great contribution to our understanding of organizations by putting forward the idea that it is essential to see organizations using various images or metaphors, as a means to that aim. Morgan observes that effective managers and leaders have the ability to tackle complex situations with different ways of thinking. Gareth Morgan advanced the idea that metaphors provide us with specific lenses or frames for perceiving the world.

Morgan presents eight major metaphors that might serve as different lenses to enhance our views and understanding of organizational existence. He distinguishes two dominant metaphors which are now in use, that of the "organization as machine" and the "organization as organism" and suggested that reducing our scope to these few metaphors narrows our understanding and consequently our potential insights into the structures of organizations. Morgan explains that conventional thinking about management and organization and their dependence on the primarily mechanical and biological metaphors tick us to specific ways of acting and thinking. He asks the reader to get involved into further dialogue in connection with the function and utility of metaphor as an organizational tool. In addition, metaphors substantially contribute to organization theory, as Morgan (1986) clearly demonstrated in *Images of Organization*, because they improve our ability to develop various interpretations.

In order to have an in-depth insight into the issue of metaphors related to the organization I will expand upon the eight metaphors for an organization stated by Gareth Morgan in his book entitled "Images of Organization": *machines, organisms, brains, cultural systems, political systems, psychic prisons, instruments of domination and flux and transformation*. All these metaphors introduce us to most recent ways of perceiving our organizations, ourselves, and others we work with. Further on, I will take a closer look at each of Morgan's metaphor presented above and its perspective on leadership and change.

1. Organization as Machine

People who regard organizations as machines want a deep and intense sense of control and order. They aspire to accurately partitioned roles and look for compatible people to fit those roles. They expect logic and reason to always be successful. **This metaphor works under the same circumstances as machines do, particularly when there is a clear assignment, a safe, balanced and constant environment, repeatable results and an emphasis on accuracy. This metaphor does**

not function when the circumstances change and when workers long for a greater meaning and purpose and human involvement. As far as leadership is concerned, we can easily notice that under this paradigm *the leaders* of the organization are those *who think* and it is their duty to offer the accurate requirements for each specific role and replace people when there is low achievement of the objectives and *the employees* are the ones *who do* that. Furthermore, if we take into account the organizational change we observe that people who hold this opinion consider that change means shutting down, replacing a cog, and easily restart production; this definitely disregards how people really feel and think about changes.

2. Organization as Organism

People who view organizations as organisms are focused on the environment of the organization and how to completely intermingle with that environment. They regard changes to that environment as power and factors to react to. **This metaphor works under the same circumstances when there is a transparent and discrete change in the environment that jeopardizes the organization's continuity** (e.g. a new law is enacted). **This metaphor does not function when there are everlasting changes and when uncertainty is predominant**, for instance when it is not clear what is vital to do in response to seismic changes. As far as the leadership is concerned, we can easily notice that under this paradigm, leaders of the organization are supposed to anticipate the changes and fix and develop a step-by-step procedure of action in response (this works under the same circumstances as traditional strategy does, in a world where changes are discrete and easy to anticipate). In addition, if we take into account the organizational change we observe that traditional patterns of change management fall here. The point is that you can make a change and then come back to a state of normality and act in accordance with the change vs. the adopting of change as a perpetual state of being.

3. Organization as Brain

People who see organizations as brains are preoccupied with the organized wisdom and the collective intelligence of the organization. Moreover, the employees are regarded as sensors and management layers as sense-making works in the attempt of following the development of a *learning organization*. This metaphor works under the same circumstances when the environment is abundant with unknowns but almost stable so that what has been learned remains relevant for the long-term (e.g. a group of medical researchers trying to find a cure for a contagious disease). **This metaphor does not function when the change is new**, so the knowledge of the past does not help at all in anticipating and responding to the future. As far as the leadership is concerned, we can easily observe that under this paradigm, the leaders are expected to set up and inoculate the ability for *double-loop learning* which is an educational concept and process that means teaching people to think more profoundly in connection to their own beliefs and assumptions. It was established in the 1980s by Chris Argyris, a well-known organizational trainer and continuously developed over the next ten years into a very efficient tool, helping teams on one hand to develop feedback loops that help them measure and determine their efficiency and on the other to develop feedback loops that help them investigate how they describe effectiveness itself. (Argyris, C. and D. A. Schon, 1978, pp: 2-3) Now if we take into consideration the organizational change, this metaphor assumes that past knowledge always anticipates forthcoming behavior with the implication that changes can be thought, organized and planned for with the help of plenty experience and pattern identification.

4. Organization as Cultural System

Under some circumstances organizations are regarded by people as cultural systems which are focused on the common rules, beliefs and rituals of an organization. Usually, they are thinking of the organization as a society in miniature and are concerned with the entire experience of being a worker of the organization. This metaphor works under the same circumstances when competition for talent is intense and the workers crave for shared identity in their work.

This metaphor does not function when cultures evolve into being “cult-like” (Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries, 2008) that means when coming in and going out of the culture provoke trauma; also when external changes are not taken into consideration in favour of group union; when there is a pressure for a uniform culture to remove the sub-cultures and to get rid of the talent which is not considered “culture fits” (Geert Duysters, J. M. U. and E. Meije, 2010). As far as the leadership is concerned, we can easily observe that under this paradigm the leaders are supposed to be the representation of their cultures. **In addition if we take into account the organizational change we notice that** cultural systems are natural systems which support tradition and refuse the change. These organizations also try hard to adjust to the changes which endanger their most important beliefs and values.

5. Organization as Political System

People who perceive organizations as political systems are predominantly interested in gaining and using power and a lot of influence. They see employees as followers to recruit in large numbers as the time passes by. Fellow leaders are seen as partners or rivals, and superiors are regarded as the ones who influence and control. This metaphor works under the same circumstances when there are various and incompatible interests and as well as when self-interests completely ignore rationality. **This metaphor does not function when** a rival/opponent or a change of any type appears as a big threat so that only the collective cooperation of the organization could cope with it. As far as the leadership is concerned, we can easily notice that under this paradigm, the leaders are expected to fight for influence, attention and dominance. This causes a single-minded preoccupation with the way leaders are perceived when they perform during a meeting even over their long-term performance. Now if we take into consideration the organizational change, this metaphor assumes that the leader who belongs to a political system is a leader who has the ability to anticipate and conduct the change as well. Unfortunately history is full of examples of leaders who could influence a political system and yet fail to respond to social transformations and developments.

6. Organization as Psychic Prison

Organizations are regarded as a psychic prison by people who want to extend our ability to observe, question, and change our organizations. They are scared of the fact that their organizations are captured in a fixed way of thinking, that they embrace conformist ideals and, in general, oppose and definitely refuse the change. This metaphor works under the same circumstances when past success, social rules, and unconscious prejudice have mislead the organization into a state of satisfaction and/or perpetual discrimination. **It does not function when** the need to accept and adopt new viewpoints is more important than the commercial realities of the organization. As far as the leadership is concerned, we can easily observe that under this paradigm, the leaders are asked to question their own prejudices, self-consciousness and biases to create more global, fair and impartial environments. **If we take into account the organizational change**, this metaphor stimulates organizations to evolve in front of governmental and social changes. Obviously this is a very difficult task when an organization is large and diverse enough to embrace a significant set of perspectives and opinions.

7. Organization as Instrument of Domination

In the organizations which are seen as an instrument of domination, the people are most of the times very unpleasant to work with or for. They see workers as being objects to be fully dominated and subordinated. They also tend to regard the natural resources accessible to the company as theirs to take advantage of. It works under some circumstances when this is the most down-to-earth point of view of the organizational life. **This metaphor does not function when** this perspective can be adopted by influencers who draw a tenebrous and shortsighted view of any kind of effort focused on a capitalist end claims Gareth Morgan (1986). As far as the leadership is concerned under this paradigm, leaders are expected to ignore or even change the will and freedom

of their subordinates. Now if we take into consideration the organizational change, this metaphor does not succeed to respond to significant external change because it puts on the first place the personal desire and needs of a leader. If a leader does not believe in the change, then the organization will not change at all.

8. Organization as Flux and Transformation

Organizations can be perceived in terms of flux and transformation by people who have taken into account ambiguity, confusion, complexity, as well as chaos with respect to the changes their organization is undergoing. One can think of this metaphor as an improvement of Organism instead of thinking that simply the environment undergoes some transformation and therefore the organization must respond in this way. This metaphor expresses the fact that both the organization and the environment have an effect on one another and both must react to change. It works under the some circumstances when there is uninterrupted and complex change, as well as when cause and effect do not make clear sense anymore. **It does not function when** the organization itself demands only work as simply as a machine, and when the external chaos leads to the leaders' give up and abandon the responsibility for change. Under this paradigm, in terms of leadership, the leaders are asked to experiment with small, light changes and then organize resources to further prosperous experiments while stopping failures. Contrary to the organism viewpoint, the changes happening inside an organization influence the changes in the environment, too. **If we take into account the organizational change**, it is obvious that this metaphor supports the idea of a test and learns mentality, even over rushing to bring into existence a set of planned changes supported by pattern identification claims Morgan (1986).

Conclusions

By analyzing and synthesizing of all these metaphors previously discussed, I have tried to come up with a deep insight into their philosophy, their epistemology, their fundamental concepts, and their power of explanation including their situational strong and weak points. The power of these metaphors consists in the fact that they help us consider other aspects of organization we have never thought of but their weakness is, by itself, the partial problem. If the managers/leaders can examine their organizations through these images but cannot discover the solution methods, then, on one hand, these metaphors help us profoundly understand the organization and on the other hand, they also extend to the organizational problems.

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