

## THROUGH THEIR OWN WORDS

### TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF LEADERSHIP THROUGH METAPHORS

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This paper 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, sport, art, or machine. The multitude of leadership metaphors used by authors and leaders alike appears determined by a complex interplay of personal, situational, and cultural factors. However, analysis of leadership interviews indicates that these metaphors center on 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 follower, 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. Leadership metaphors carry implicit suggestions about values—what is good, what should be done, and how—and may also allow for new insights into the ethics of leadership.

## 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. This collection is also often 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.

Since the nineteenth century, a number of different approaches to leadership have been developed, each placing different emphasis on what constitutes good leadership. For example, trait theories (Galton, 1869; James, 1880) attempt 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 trait theories, situational leadership theories explain that specific contexts give rise to specific kinds of leadership and to specific persons who embody leadership. Similarly, behavioral theories of leadership focus on the 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 exchanges 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 expanded the body of knowledge about leadership significantly. What leadership is all about is still little understood (Kakabadse, *et al.*, 1998).

In this paper, we neither aim to add another definition of leadership nor attempt to explain why certain elements involved in the phenomenon of leadership should be emphasized at the expense of others. Our modest goal is to shed light on the concept of leadership from an unusual perspective. This perspective emphasizes how leaders and writers experience and express their ideas about leadership. We pay 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 through metaphors.

## APPROACHING LEADERSHIP THROUGH METAPHORS

Metaphors are based on correspondence between two different concepts. Understanding and expressing one concept in terms of the other, metaphors cross-reference a source domain (such as friendship or sports) and a target domain (such as leadership) by a simultaneous activation of both domains. While highlighting specific aspects of the target domain, each metaphor necessarily hides other aspects (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), thereby providing a filter for examining the concept in 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. 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, In Press), moral politics (Lakoff, 1996), sexual experience (Wagner, Elejabarrieta & Lahnsteiner, 1995; Weatherall & Walton, 1999), and social dilemma (Allison, Beggan & Midgley, 1996).

This paper suggests that cognitive and discursive insights into metaphors may contribute to a better and more concrete grasp of leadership and the actions of leaders. Metaphors provide us with a more differentiated appreciation of different conceptions of leadership. Indeed, people talk about and enact very different things when referring to leadership. Examining metaphors may help leaders reflect on 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.

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The linguistic examination of leadership focuses on the subjective experiences of leaders and on the role of metaphors in those experiences. 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 a leader’s thinking and form a foundation for his or her actions. Leadership metaphors create leadership reality by defining such important aspects as the leader’s role and the context in which leadership takes place.

We can approach leadership metaphors from two theoretical perspectives: The cognitive approach and discourse theory. The cognitive approach emphasizes 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, statements like “shooting down the arguments of an opponent” and “defending one’s strategic goals” seem natural. The full impact 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 according to military strategies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The internal logic of “leadership is war” generates a broad range of notions about leadership; it is conducted on a battlefield where attacks and counterattacks take place, where the goal is to defeat an enemy, and where one’s own defeat may carry the ultimate risk of 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 in that they suggest which rules are valid in the context of leadership and provide guidelines for how to act within that context.

While cognitive linguistics investigates culturally shared repertoires of metaphors without specific contexts, discourse theory sees metaphors as sources 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 focus on cognitive repertoires at

a conceptual level, discourse analysts emphasize the importance of discursive practice and the functions performed by the use of those repertoires.

A discursive understanding of leadership metaphors emphasizes how leaders and authors writing about leadership mobilize metaphors 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). Thus, metaphors not only describe and illustrate a target domain such as leadership, but 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. Rather, one should consider the basis for the selection of one metaphor over another and what kinds of discursive business such choices may perform. The discursive view thus sees metaphors as both sense-making devices that are triggered by events and as actively employed tools that manage one's interests in social interaction.

## 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 an abstract and complex phenomenon such as leadership. How leadership metaphors are employed ranges from such obvious descriptions of leadership as a martial art (Mindell, 2000) or as an "engine" (Tichy, 1997) to more subtle uses, such as that of former political adviser Dick Morris, who 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 randomly invoked. Rather, they center on experientially significant nuclei of meaning and express 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 frequent leadership metaphors. These examples suggest that, while a wide variety of metaphors exist in leadership literature, many of them revolve around defined themes that play a central part in various conceptualizations of leadership. Awareness of these metaphorical themes helps one to better understand some of the common notions 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.

### War Metaphors

The literature on leadership is abundant with metaphors of war and fighting. For example, the subtitle of a recent book about U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, promising "leadership wisdom of a battle-hardened maverick," explicitly connects leadership with war. A powerful metaphor links the Secretary's personal management style with his position as head of the Pentagon (Krames, 2002). Other authors refer to the need for "iron rule" when leading (Ledeen, 1999), and point to Attila the Hun (Roberts, 1991) and officials in the United States Marine Corps (Carrison & Walsh, 1998) as role models. A "fieldbook" analysis of Jack Welch's leadership style, which purports to be a "battle plan" for a "revolution," activates a range of war metaphors of leadership as engagement in military conflict (Slater, 1999). Readers who fail despite such battle-hardened advice may later take solace in "The Wounded Leader" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

## Game and Sport Metaphors

Another group of leadership metaphors is drawn from the world of game and sport. 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 combine a number of game metaphors in telling the story of business executives who “remain handicapped by the muscle memory of their old game” and suggest that leaders “trust their swing.” Another book title argues that leaders should “first, break all the rules” (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). William Boetcker links leadership to the “great game of life” (Goodman, 1997). Game and sport 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 emphasize the importance of practice to achieve leadership mastery (in sport metaphors).

## Art Metaphors

Warren Bennis (2002) recently equated leadership with the art of acting and performing. Repeatedly, it has been suggested that exercising leadership is similar to conducting an orchestra—producing, as it does, “an expressive and unified combination of tones” (Bailey, 1997), and requiring that the leader “turn his back on the crowd” (Crook, 1997). Cameron (1997) stated 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.” His words not only link leadership once more to metaphors of playing music but also contrast the metaphor of arts to the machine metaphor of a mechanical production process (Cameron, 1997: 494).

## Machine Metaphors

Cameron's choice of a machine metaphor is hardly exceptional. Understandings about leadership are frequently expressed through such metaphors, built on engineering and industrial production concepts and depicting leaders as being—or running—machinery. Tichy & Cohen, for example, call their book *The Leadership Engine* (1997). They see an organization as a “machine” composed of connected “parts” that requires “lubrication,” “fuel,” and constant “maintenance.” In turn, their characterizations prompted a reviewer to call the book a “‘super’ hardware store” for one's empty “toolbox” (Morris, 2002).

## Religious/Spiritual Metaphors

Religious and spiritual metaphors link leadership to the super-human and holy. Authors inspired by these metaphors write about the “temptations” and “obsessions” of successful leaders and link them to “fables” telling superficially simple stories which, upon closer inspection, reveal more general wisdom (Lencioni, 1998; Lencioni, 2000). Others employ metaphors of magic (Pearson & Seivert, 1995) and fairy tales (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001).

Bob Galvin's contention that the job of leaders is “to spread hope” employs another spiritual metaphor (Crainer, 1998: 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 implies that a leader is not an ordinary human being but rather someone extraordinary and super-human (Crainer, 1998: 183). These metaphors are reminiscent of Greek mythology, and of the troubling consequences of blurring the division between the gods and humans.

## LEADERSHIP METAPHORS IN ACTION

Moving beyond the cursory examples of leadership metaphors given above, we now turn to a detailed example. Our text is an interview with John Harvey-Jones—industrialist, management guru, and author who served as chairperson of British-based Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) from 1982-1987 (Harvey-Jones, 1988, 1993). The excerpts from this interview (Aziz Corporation, 2001) demonstrate the pivotal role that metaphors play in leaders' experiential conceptions of leadership. The excerpts also show the complex and adaptable nature of leadership metaphors and how such metaphors complement each other.

**“The plants in a leader’s garden may also be poisonous; employees trying to please their bosses too often carry ‘the seeds of disaster.’”**

At the beginning of the interview, Harvey-Jones explicitly refers to his background in the military. Thus, not surprisingly, the interview is rife with war metaphors. Military services “place leadership absolutely *at the front* of everything,” Harvey-Jones notes. War and military metaphors are again evident when he says that “there are *no bad troops, only bad leaders.*” Harvey-Jones recalls that, early in his leadership of ICI, he 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.” [Emphasis added in all excerpts above and below.]

War metaphors overlap with medical and body metaphors in the language of a leader who faces the “*bloody truth.*” The 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, employees are mostly conceptualized by the use of a container metaphor. Leadership means “*getting* extraordinary performance *out* of ordinary people.” Employees always should “*have* something *in reserve.*” And, for a leader, “what you *put into it* is what you get back.” Such a statement also exemplifies a fairness and equilibrium metaphor in Harvey-Jones’s conception of followers. Employees who “*lose their balance*” end up having “*nothing more they can* really give.” It is little wonder then that it is also important for business expansions “*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.*”

Harvey-Jones also uses gardening metaphors to describe the leader’s interactions with followers. He explains that the leader is “*helping people to grow*” and is “*developing and growing* the self-esteem” of others. Of course, the plants in a leader’s garden may also be poisonous; employees trying to please their bosses too often carry “the *seeds* of disaster.”

Game and sport metaphors allow differentiation 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; it is a “holistic *game.*” Executives’ compensation is “sort of a *competitive game.*”

The previous examples from a short interview demonstrate the breadth and complexity of leadership metaphors used by a single leader. The excerpts show that it is difficult to reduce leaders and their leadership to only one type of leadership metaphor. In their actions and accounts, leaders use and are characterized by a multitude of metaphors. The concept of leadership itself is complex, and leaders’ actions

and interventions are multi-determined. Thus, individual conceptualizations of leadership arise in a complex and dense interplay of metaphors.

Harvey-Jones's language also demonstrates that leadership metaphors are not sharply demarcated. Instead, experiential representations and expressions of leadership often relate multiple metaphors simultaneously. This is evident, for example, in the overlap of war and body metaphors cited above. In the interview, another example of metaphorical overlap emerges between an art metaphor and a construction metaphor when Harvey-Jones says that central to his leadership is the importance 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. It begins with a mechanic or engineer's focused assembly of building blocks (construction metaphor) and continues with the playing of a more artistic fiddler (art metaphor).

The interview also demonstrates that leadership metaphors should not be understood as static and merely individual phenomena that exist independent of their environment. Rather, they arise in the dynamic interplay of leaders with their environments and may be triggered by environmental stimuli. Such dynamics are evident 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 to do [sic] to do it?

Here the interviewer asks what a leader should do in situations when there is not much time and the leader is "up to [his or her] neck in alligators." He employs a metaphor of dangerous and hostile animals in a struggle in which the leader does not have time to proceed methodically but instead fights to carry on. Harvey-Jones responds:

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 integrates it creatively into a metaphor of disentanglement. "*Unravelling*" the alligators leads to a drained swamp in the metaphorical mix of dangerous beasts and disentangling wool. Later in the interview, this same metaphor of leadership reappears when "a company is *in a mess*," or when Harvey-Jones explains a competitor's leadership problem with the words, "[T]hey got their wotnots *in a twist*."

Finally, the interview shows that leadership metaphors are gendered. For example, the war and military metaphors so evident in accounts of leadership reflect male experience more than female experience. The interviewer uses gendered metaphors when he relates money to "business *virility*." Harvey-Jones's war metaphors include men but not women; he explains, "Every one of us *old guys* has bitten the dust at one time or another by over-expansion." He also remarks that £500,000 should be enough annual compensation for a male leader "to *keep the little woman happy*." Moreover, the "*pretty nurse* put[ting] the gloves on" in Health Services actually administered 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 about leadership demonstrate the dynamic and inter-related nature of leadership metaphors. Paying attention to leadership metaphors illuminates aspects of the discourse which otherwise would remain concealed.

## THE MANY LAYERS OF METAPHORICAL MESSAGES

The previous sections illustrate that it is possible to identify leadership metaphors and to cluster them around such recurring themes as war, game, and machine. This methodology helps to systematize the experiential meanings of leadership. The exploration of leadership metaphors in an interview demonstrates that identifying such metaphors is a qualitative endeavor focused on meanings and messages; it is one of degrees and not one of counting discrete occurrences and absolutes.

It is important to keep in mind that metaphor analysis does not clearly identify, for example, how an individual unconsciously conceptualizes leadership; nor does such analysis allow simple access to implicit theories about leadership. Rather, metaphors should be understood as determined by a multitude of cultural, situational, and personal factors. Leadership metaphors may not only bring to light underlying structures of thinking about leadership but may also fulfill important discursive and communicative functions in the here-and-now of the situation in which they are used.

Metaphors may be selected deliberately without much individual reflection. They may reveal an individual's implicit or explicit desire to speak to a specific audience with whom the metaphors may resonate particularly well. The selection of metaphors is also influenced by the situation in which those metaphors are used; different situations may evoke different leadership metaphors in the same individual. Finally, metaphors are culturally rooted. Some metaphors may come more naturally than others—not because of individual preference or situational context, but because of the metaphors society prefers. In other words, we may not just speak a metaphor; the metaphor—culturally rooted and induced—may speak through us.

Hence, when authors use war metaphors to describe Donald Rumsfeld's leadership style, they reveal more than their own notion of leadership. They may also reveal their perceptions as to the likely audience for a book about the leadership style of a Secretary of Defense. Our cultural understanding of leadership in general and the leadership of a Secretary of Defense in particular may implicitly influence the selection of metaphors. Moreover, perhaps reflecting a Zeitgeist phenomenon in the aftermath of September 11, war metaphors may have become more frequently used to describe leadership.

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 the work of archaeologists piecing together various artifacts to reconstruct how previous generations lived. Over time, however, one may gain valuable insights into an individual's conception of leadership—a situational understanding of both the concept and its cultural underpinnings.

## THE SHAPE OF LEADERSHIP—METAPHOR ANALYSIS AT WORK

Identifying the metaphors used to conceptualize leadership is only one part of what metaphor analysis can do to deepen our understanding of leadership. Metaphor analysis offers a more important and challenging opportunity to understand the entailments of particular metaphors. After labeling leadership metaphors, one can examine the implications of their use. Employing leadership metaphors implies certain conceptions of leadership; therefore, examining them can highlight 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.

Using one of the metaphor clusters we have identified—war and battle—as an example, one may explore what the metaphor suggests and what roles are ascribed to leader and follower. One may ask, What is the nature of the relationship between the leader and the group? 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 notion of “blood, sweat, and tears” that emerges. The leader is seen as the commanding officer whose orders must be obeyed. Roles in a battle are clearly defined and seldom change over time. The war metaphor implies a hierarchical understanding of leadership in which leaders—not their subordinates—enjoy a substantial level of autonomy but also bear the sole responsibility for decision-making. Like foot soldiers, subordinates 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 who question commanders run the risk of becoming traitors punished under martial law.

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Clearly, examining such implications for the leader-group relationship dynamic is an important step in the process of uncovering and attributing metaphorical meaning. We can gain still further insight into the meaning of leadership metaphors by looking at the central role of information in a given metaphor—specifically, how it is passed on and in what form. In war and battle metaphors, information fulfills the specific role of sustaining the existing hierarchy. Information of fact travels upward in the chain of command; 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 to sport metaphors, for example, in which 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 predefined roles as goalie or offensive player, sports allow more readily for autonomous decisions so as to further the team’s overall goal. In sports, information flows are much less hierarchical; facts, suggestions, and demands are regularly mixed. Unlike in the military, team members often determine who acts as their leader. Choosing the metaphor of war and battle over another metaphor—that of sport, for example—gives voice and emphasis to these underlying dimensions.

Another relevant metaphorical dimension is that of vision and goals, which are important aspects of the leadership phenomenon. Therefore, in addition to exploring the role of information and communication and the relationship between those who lead and those who are led, one might also look at what specific 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 with each other. Comparing entailment notions embedded in different metaphors reveals congruence as well as tensions and discrepancies in how leadership is understood and enacted.

**TABLE 1** MAPPING THE SHAPE OF LEADERSHIP

		<b>WAR</b>
<b>LEADERSHIP DIMENSION</b>	<b>METAPHOR FOCUS</b> (highlighting)	Winning or losing; danger; need to survive; incompatibility of goals
	<b>HIDING</b>	Cooperation; shared goals
	<b>ROLE OF LEADER</b>	To order, command
	<b>ROLE OF GROUP</b>	To obey
	<b>ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF ENVIRONMENT</b>	Hostile; overcoming obstacles
	<b>LEADER-GROUP RELATIONSHIP</b>	Hierarchical; autocratic
	<b>INFORMATION DYNAMICS</b> (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
	<b>DECISION-MAKING</b> (e.g., democratic vs. autocratic; degree of autonomy of leader and of those led)	Leader: low autonomy; Follower: very low autonomy
	<b>GOALS</b> (e.g., importance and role of goals; how are they determined)	To win, often at all costs; to defeat the enemy
	<b>AFFECTIVE DIMENSION</b>	Self-defense, fear; mistrust; hostility, aggression
	<b>CHANGE DYNAMICS</b> (how is transformation and change brought about)	Victory; force and power
	<b>LEADERSHIP CONCEPTION</b> (e.g., adaptive to change vs. rigid and fixed; process-oriented vs. static)	Fixed

<b>PLAY</b>	<b>MACHINE</b>	<b>RELIGIOUS/ SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE</b>
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
Serious and unpleasant aspects; conflict among the team	Chance; environmental factors	Technical and practical aspects of leadership
Primus inter pares; facilitator	Mechanic; to operate and control	Messiah; guru; inspirator; enlightener
To perform	To function	To believe and to follow
What is outside the game is often of little importance; To provide an impartial arena	Little importance	Leadership often has implications for the environment; to create a better world
Flat and not hierarchical; friendship; democratic or consultative	Clear split of roles	Strong bond based on values, emotions, beliefs
Free and uninhibited flow	Vertical, top-down, engineered information flows	Importance of faith, spiritual traditions
Consultative and democratic	Autocratic decision-making according to pre-set rules	Focus on enlightened leader
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
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
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, <i>e.g.</i> , by new technology	Person of leader who represents higher principle; conviction and faith of followers
Some openness to change	Fixed; no change possible within existing system	Benevolent and knowing leader acting from above

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? What 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—for example, between leader and led—does the metaphor suggest? What kind of decision-making process 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 adaptive and dynamic concept of leadership? How open is the metaphor to change, and how is change brought about?

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

Reflecting on how key dimensions of leadership manifest themselves in various metaphorical categories may also help us to understand new metaphors that relate to already examined categories. For example, understanding that leadership described as “rising above the trenches” relates to the war metaphor may reveal a wealth of possible information about the underlying leadership conception of the person using the metaphor.

It is important to keep in mind that the descriptions in Table One are not final but a first attempt to describe possible implications of various metaphorical conceptions of leadership. As we have already noted, the meaning of metaphors is dynamic, influenced by the interplay of personal, situational, and cultural factors. Metaphors are multi-determined and may have varying meanings that depend on numerous factors. Thus, it is important to understand that Table One suggests possibilities rather than empirically established findings. A closer and more detailed analysis may require adapting the grid model. But it is a start.

## LESSONS TO LEARN FROM LEADERSHIP METAPHORS

Leaders can use metaphors explicitly and deliberately to influence others, give shape to the world, and even manipulate listeners. Paying attention to metaphors and to their implications helps us recognize such influences more quickly and react to them in more informed and reflective ways.

More importantly, metaphors are often used implicitly, without the user’s awareness. The language used by those leading and by those describing leadership is full of metaphors. Metaphor analysis offers an approach to grasping how those who engage in leadership understand it themselves. 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 open a window into experiential approaches to leadership, as leaders explicitly or implicitly define their leadership through metaphors. Moreover, metaphor analysis may provide insight into why some leaders are more successful than others. For example, a rich metaphorical vocabulary that enables the use of the most appropriate metaphors in any given situation may signify a leader who is flexible and can adjust his or her leadership in appropriate ways. Another indication of good leadership may be a good match between the metaphors of an organization or a group and the metaphors its leader uses. Rather than trying to link leaders to only one type of metaphor, reflecting on leadership in terms of a multitude of metaphors can help avoid the pitfall of conceptualizing leadership too narrowly. Behn (1992) emphasizes that more than one language of leadership may exist. Similarly, there need not be only one “right” metaphor of leadership; certain metaphors may suit certain leadership situations, personalities, styles, and goals. As with other languages, it may be that “multilingual” leaders (and followers) fare better than those who “speak only one language.”

**“ Whether deliberate or unconscious,  
the choice of metaphors always carries  
ethical messages and implications.”**

Another 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 should not), what is good (and what is not), how something should be done (and how it should not). 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 disbelievers in the name of God. Whether deliberate or unconscious, the choice of metaphors always carries ethical messages and implications. Metaphor users and their audiences alike fare better the more each is aware of such implications. Metaphor analysis can help create such awareness.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Metaphor analysis provides an exciting perspective on conceptualizations of leadership. Its explanatory success in other fields of complex social and discursive phenomena make this type of analysis appear well equipped for providing a wealth of insight for Leadership Studies.

However, further substantial research is required for a better understanding of the prevailing categories of leadership metaphors—whether used explicitly to describe leadership, or implicitly to provide guidelines for leadership behavior in action. Uncovering and interpreting metaphorical meaning is a qualitative research enterprise; it is a time-consuming and tedious task. 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 by leaders and leadership scholars. Such analysis may lead to answers to questions such as the following:

- Do individuals and societies change the metaphors used to describe leadership over time? If so, how? What kinds of leadership metaphors are prevalent when, and why? Does this indicate an evolution of leadership conceptions?
- Are leaders more successful if their metaphors are well aligned with their audience? Do leaders need to speak their own metaphors or those of their audience in order to maximize their success? To what extent is this dependent on the situational context?

- Do different societies use different metaphors or mixes of metaphors? 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 that different metaphors generate different understandings and conceptualizations of leadership?
- Is there a gender gap? Can leadership be gendered? Can metaphor analysis help to decipher gendering?

Metaphor analysis may make a small but significant contribution to offering insights and tentative answers.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership—what leaders say and do, as well as how others describe what leaders do—is expressed regularly through metaphors. This paper proposes that metaphors provide a stimulating way to understand leadership and what people really mean when discussing leadership. Such metaphors are inexplicit and unconsciously chosen. Especially telling and meaningful for a deeper understanding of leadership are the implicit images and metaphors found in leaders’ everyday expressions of their actions, goals, and attitudes.

Expressing socially shared meanings of leadership, leadership metaphors—such as leadership as war, game, sport, art, machine, or spiritual experience—center on 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 a 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, and 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 the metaphors appropriate to different leadership situations. Finally, 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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