

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Seeing change: the power to think in new ways

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Introduction to the January 2014 Advances in PM Series Article

Professional managers become experts at 'reading' situations and identifying suitable responses. Indeed, expertise often implies that the recognition of situations and the identification of corrective action can occur at an almost subconscious level. Experts read situations through deep engagement, which encompasses a particular perspective, or viewpoint, that enables the expert to see in a particular way.

In a landmark book, published over thirty ago, Gareth Morgan asserted that effective managers and leaders benefit from the ability to apply different models of thinking and seeing, that enable them to approach difficult situations from new angles. The availability of alternative readings of a situation can offer a wider and more varied range of potential solutions and larger repertoires of action possibilities, thereby enriching the ability to respond, adjust and adapt.

In contrast, less effective managers and problem solvers seem to interpret situations from a fixed point of view. As a result they miss out on the possibility of developing more dynamic interpretations and hit blocks that they cannot get around. Consequently, their actions and behaviours become fixed, rigid and inflexible.

Morgan's important thesis was that all theories of organisation and management are based on implicit images or metaphors that lead managers and practitioners to see, experience, understand and manage in distinctive, yet partial ways.

Voltaire opined that an idea is an image that paints itself into his brain. Cognitive scientists talk about thinking as the ability to mentally represent aspects of the world, and then to operate on these mental representations rather than on the world itself. Yet, what we see, predict and understand ultimately depends on the images and structure that we use to integrate, interpret and respond to and on the reinforcing systems of beliefs and values that we employ.

¹The *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the currently monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the *Gower Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>.

Metaphors impact thought, language, systems and knowledge. Aristotle recognised the role of metaphors in the production of knowledge, asserting that 'A good metaphor implies an intuitive perspective of the similarity of dissimilars'.

Morgan's idea is that metaphors are a basic structural form of experience through which humans engage, organise and understand their world. For indeed the use of metaphors pervades how one understands and reacts to the world. While a metaphor is a way of seeing, it is inevitably also a way of not seeing, of ignoring aspects that do not match the picture, of dismissing detail that does not fit the picture, and of justifying the use of the same old thinking tools and perspectives.

To Morgan's thinking theory is a metaphor, which implies that theory delivers a particular way of thinking, seeing and engaging. It also implies that mismatches and incongruities are likely to be missed or unconsciously ignored.

Skilled managers and problem solvers must therefore become capable in shifting metaphors and alternating perspectives to stimulate fresh insights and meaningful opportunities often through the development of competing and complementary perspectives that need to be reconciled. Progress thus becomes associated with the capability to shift, reconcile and differentiate in meaningful ways. In terms of a discipline, the development of new ways of knowing, experiencing and engaging can be stimulated from the adoption of new perspectives, metaphors and perspectives.

Metaphors encourage thinking and acting in different ways. New metaphors can open up new thinking and transform the processes of thinking, deliberation and judgement. Moreover, they can create and enable a new reality and a new opportunity space.

The greatest risk perhaps is of sticking to the old and familiar ways of seeing and thereby rejecting the new and exciting.

Technology has transformed society over the last couple of decades. Individuals have experienced new ways of engaging, co-producing, sharing, networking, working, socialising, and participating in activities. We increasingly live in an age where cows and fridges send texts to their owners, where people make intimate connections online, and where the greatest works are co-created by crowds that will never share the same office.

With new business models, new sources of competition, new ways of co-operating and communicating, new ways of searching and finding, and sweeping changes in how people interact and work, is it time to create a brand new theory of project management and working in organisations? Or perhaps all we need is a new set of metaphors for engaging with and dealing with change?

Many practitioners are increasingly struggling with the need for new perspectives and models. This month's contribution by Philip Weiss is derived from his book *Hyperthinking: Creating a new mindset for the age of networks* recently published by Gower. Philip makes a strong case for embracing change instead of fearing it. The approach he advocates is to view the mindset of individuals as the single most important skill required to help

organisations, and individuals, thrive in the age of perpetual change, digital communications and networks.

The mindset perspective that underpins and justified the book, is akin to the idea of deriving a fresh metaphor, and Philip is agitating for a change of metaphor to a more dynamic and responsive perspective. Philip's ideas embrace fresh perspectives, learning, seeking new knowledge, making connections, and acting and collaborating in new ways. In other words he is concerned with the acceptance of change, and the development of adaptation and responsiveness to a rapidly changing world.

The contribution of the book is in coaxing a new and fresh perspective that extends beyond the current metaphor. To survive and succeed we increasingly need to become more adapt in challenging our metaphors and seeing outside our narrow perspective.

The problem with metaphors is that the image often outlasts the reality it is meant to represent. Simplifications are powerful because they abstract certain features and exclude others. The meaning that we assign to ourselves, to others, to our artefacts and others, confined what we see, and in doing so defines how we can act. When these are treated as permanent facts, they become entrenched and are difficult to shift.

Heraclitus reminded us that 'there is nothing permanent except change'. Disraeli recognised that change was inevitable; a constant. Francis Bacon lamented that 'things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly', while Stephen Hawking noted that 'intelligence is the ability to adapt to change'.

As we continue to experience times of rapid change the abilities to see afresh, to challenge current thinking, and to experiment with new perspectives will become key to survival and success. Leading and managing change will thus rely on the ability to consciously and subconsciously engage, challenge and replace our modes and models of thinking.

References:

Morgan, Gareth (2006), *Images of Organization*, Fourth edition, Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.

Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

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