

*In memory of my parents
Idris and Rachel Morgan*

IMAGES OF ORGANIZATION

Updated Edition of the International Bestseller

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1

Introduction

Effective managers and professionals in all walks of life have to become skilled in the art of “reading” the situations they are attempting to organize or manage.

This skill usually develops as an intuitive process, learned through experience and natural ability. Although at times a person may actually declare that he or she needs to “read what’s happening in a particular situation” or to “get a handle on a particular problem,” the process of reading and rereading often occurs at an almost subconscious level. For this reason it is often believed that effective managers and problem solvers are born rather than made and have a kind of magical power to understand and transform the situations they encounter.

If we take a closer look at the processes used, however, we find that this kind of mystique and power is often based on an ability to develop deep appreciation of the situations being addressed. Skilled leaders and managers develop the knack of reading situations with various scenarios in mind and of forging actions that seem appropriate to the understandings thus obtained.

They have a capacity to remain open and flexible, suspending immediate judgments whenever possible, until a more comprehensive view of the situation emerges. They are aware that new insights often arise as one approaches situations from "new angles" and that a wide and varied reading can create a wide and varied range of action possibilities. Less effective managers and problem solvers, however, seem to interpret everything from a fixed standpoint. As a result, they frequently hit blocks they cannot get around; their actions and behaviors are often rigid and inflexible.

This book explores and develops the art of reading and understanding organizational life. It is based on a very simple premise: that all theories of organization and management are based on implicit images or metaphors that lead us to see, understand, and manage organizations in distinctive yet partial ways.

Metaphor is often regarded just as a device for embellishing discourse, but its significance is much greater than this. The use of metaphor implies *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing* that pervade how we understand our world generally. For example, research in a wide variety of fields has demonstrated that metaphor exerts a formative influence on science, on our language, and on how we think, as well as on how we express ourselves on a day-to-day basis.

We use metaphor whenever we attempt to understand one element of experience in terms of another. Thus, metaphor proceeds through implicit or explicit assertions that A is (or is like) B. When we say "the man is a lion," we use the image of a lion to draw attention to the lionlike aspects of the man. The metaphor frames our understanding of the man in a distinctive yet partial way.

One of the interesting aspects of metaphor is that it always produces this kind of one-sided insight. In highlighting certain interpretations it tends to force others into a background role. Thus, in drawing attention to the lionlike bravery, strength, or ferocity of the man, the metaphor glosses over the fact that the same person may well also be a pig, a devil, a saint, a bore, or a recluse.

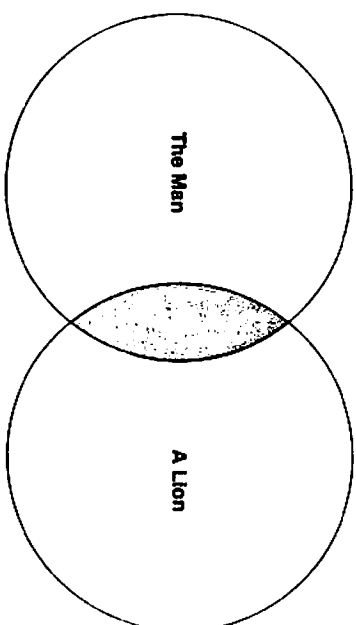
Another interesting feature rests in the fact that metaphor *always* creates distortions (Exhibit 1.1). Metaphor uses evocative images to create what may be described as "constructive falsehoods," which, if taken literally, or to an extreme, become absurd.

"The man is a lion."

He is brave, strong, and ferocious.

But he is *not* covered in fur and does not have four legs, sharp teeth, and a tail!

Metaphor invites us to see the similarities



But ignore the differences

Metaphor stretches imagination in a way that can create powerful insights, but at the risk of distortion.

Exhibit 1.1 The Nature of Metaphor

When we approach metaphor in this way we see that our simple premise that *all theory is metaphor* has far-reaching consequences. We have to accept that any theory or perspective that we bring to the study of organization and management, while capable of creating valuable insights, is also incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading.

To illustrate, consider the popular idea that "the organization is a machine." The metaphor may create valuable insights about how an organization is structured to achieve predetermined results. But the metaphor is incomplete. For example, it ignores the human aspects. The metaphor is biased. For example, it elevates the importance of the rational and structural dimensions. The metaphor is misleading. For example, the organization is *not* a machine and can never really be designed, structured, and controlled as a set of inanimate parts.

Metaphor is inherently paradoxical. It can create powerful insights that also become distortions, as the way of seeing created through a metaphor becomes a way of *not* seeing.

Yet when we recognize this we can begin to mobilize the true power of metaphor and its role in management. In recognizing theory as metaphor, we quickly appreciate that no single theory will ever give us a perfect or all-purpose point of view. We realize that the challenge is to become skilled in the art of using metaphor: to find fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations that we want to organize and manage.

The following chapters illustrate how this can be done by exploring the implications of different metaphors for thinking about the nature of organization. Some of the metaphors tap familiar ways of thinking; others develop insights and perspectives that will be rather new. Collectively, they demonstrate how we can use metaphor to generate a range of complementary and competing insights and learn to build on the strengths of different points of view.

Thus, Chapter 2 examines the image of organizations as machines and illustrates how this style of thought underpins the development of bureaucratic organization. When managers think of organizations as machines they tend to manage and design them as machines made up of interlocking parts that each play a clearly defined role in the functioning of the whole. At times, this can prove highly effective; at others, it can have many unfortunate results. One of the most basic problems of modern management is that the mechanical way of thinking is so ingrained in our everyday conceptions of organization that it is often very difficult to organize in any other way. In demonstrating this, the chapter helps us become more open to other ways of thinking.

Chapter 3 examines the idea that organizations are like organisms. This popular metaphor focuses attention on understanding and managing organizational "needs" and environmental relations. We come to see different types of organization as belonging to different species, of which the bureaucratic type is just one. We see that different species are suited to different environments. We are encouraged to understand how organizations are born, grow, develop, decline, and die and how they can adapt to changing circumstances. We are also encouraged to consider relations between species and the evolutionary patterns found in the broader ecology. As in the case of the mechanical metaphor, this kind of imagery leads us to see and understand organizations from a unique perspective that has already contributed a great deal to the theory of modern management.

In Chapter 4, we pursue the implications of yet another metaphor. What if we view organizations as brains? What if we attempt to design them as brains? The metaphor draws attention to the importance of information processing, learning, and intelligence and provides a frame of reference for understanding and assessing modern organizations in these terms. It also provides a set of principles for creating "learning organizations."

Chapter 5 explores the idea that organizations are cultures. This focus, which has received increasing attention over the past few years from writers on corporate culture, gives us yet another way of managing and designing organizations: by focusing on the values, ideas, beliefs, norms, rituals, and other patterns of shared meaning that guide organizational life.

In Chapter 6 we use a political metaphor to focus on the different sets of interests, conflicts, and power plays that shape organizational activities. The chapter explores organizations as systems of government and the detailed factors shaping the politics of organizational life.

In Chapter 7 the focus shifts to a more abstract metaphor: the idea that organizations are "psychic prisons" where people become trapped by their own thoughts, ideas, and beliefs or by the unconscious mind. Could it be that our favored modes of organizing manifest an unconscious preoccupation with control? A form of repressed sexuality? A fear of death? The image of a psychic prison invites us to examine organizational life to see if, and in what ways, we have become trapped by conscious and unconscious processes of our own creation. It offers many important insights about the psychodynamic aspects of organization and favored styles of management.

Chapter 8 investigates another image. This time we are invited to understand organization as flux and transformation by focusing on the logics of change shaping social life. The chapter examines four such "logics." In effect, they offer four different metaphors for studying change. One emphasizes how organizations are self-producing systems that create themselves in their own image. The second draws on insights from the study of chaos and complexity, viewing organizational life through images of competing "attractor patterns." The third views organization as the product of circular flows of positive and negative feedback. The fourth explores how the features of modern organization are the product of a dialectical logic whereby every phenomenon generates its opposite. The insights help us to understand and manage organizational change and to appreciate some of the forces shaping the nature of organization at a societal level.

Chapter 9 explores the idea that organizations are instruments of domination. Here the focus is on the potentially exploitative aspects of corporate life. The chapter shows how organizations often use their employees, their host communities, and the world economy to achieve their own ends. An extension of the political metaphor examined in Chapter 6, the chapter helps us understand aspects of modern organization that have radicalized labor-management relations and the negative impacts of global corporations. This metaphor is particularly useful for understanding organizations from the perspective of exploited groups and for understanding how actions that are rational from one viewpoint can prove exploitative from another.

As you read these different chapters you are going to *experience* the core message of this book. Each chapter invites you to engage in a mode of thinking that generates important insights while having major

limitations. You are likely to be attracted to certain metaphors and be impatient with others. Or you may find competing metaphors equally compelling or attractive. As you pursue a favored perspective you are going to find the insights of others eliminated from view.

In this way the book invites you to explore and deal with the paradox of metaphor. So, absorb and enjoy the process. Gain comfort in dealing with competing viewpoints, for this is one of the key competencies that needs to be developed as a basis for effective management.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 develop this theme, showing how we can use and integrate the insights of different metaphors from a managerial perspective. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on the use of metaphor as a tool for improving our ability to see, understand, and interpret key aspects of organizational life. Chapter 12 sketches the broader implications for managing in a turbulent world.

Each chapter is accompanied by a set of bibliographic notes. They appear toward the end of the book and have been designed to provide comprehensive references and discuss specific points and arguments in greater depth, without disrupting the flow of the text.

The book thus stands as a treatise on metaphorical thinking that contributes to both the theory and the practice of management. The metaphors discussed have been selected to illustrate a broad range of ideas and perspectives. But they by no means exhaust the possibilities. As you read, you may find yourself disagreeing with the importance of the metaphors that have been chosen and wish to add ones of your own. That is the way it should be, for the aim is to open dialogue and extend horizons rather than to achieve closure around an all-embracing perspective.

In this respect, *Images of Organization* is very different from most management books. It has a clear point of view: that metaphor is central to the way we "read," understand, and shape organizational life. But at no point will you find that view being brought down to advocacy of a single perspective. There are no right or wrong theories in management in an absolute sense, for every theory illuminates and hides.

The book offers a means of coping with this paradox. It offers a *way of thinking* that is crucial for understanding, managing, and designing organizations in a changing world.

PART II

SOME IMAGES OF ORGANIZATION

The following chapters demonstrate how metaphor can be used to develop theories of organization and management. Some focus on metaphors that have already been well explored. Others open newer territory. Collectively, they show how we can use metaphor to generate a range of complementary and competing insights about the nature of organizations and how they can be designed and managed.
