

Patterns

Pattern-making

Summary of pervasive organisational metaphors

- Metaphors are patterns, the patterns we use to think about organisations
- The metaphors often become 'taken for granted', tacit assumptions
- In reviewing the metaphors you also get a potted history of management theory over the last 100 years!

Source: Gareth Morgan: images of organization, 2nd ed. 1996

Organisations as

Machines

‘scientific management’

Domination

organisations means of
social domination in aid
of profit

Organisms

open systems,
contingency and ecology
theories

Brains

learning organisations and
cybernetics

Organisations as

Cultures

shared perceptions,
routines and values

Political systems

power dynamics and
game

Unconsciously driven

understanding
subconscious
dynamics

Flux and transformation

interpenetrating
closed systems and
patterns -- chaos and
complexity theory

Machines

‘Scientific management’

Pros

- Works well where machines work well and where human members are compliant – straightforward task, stable environment, repeatedly produce same product, precision important

Cons

- Inappropriate in complex modern work settings
- Too rigid and mindless
- Cannot cope with the unanticipated
- Dehumanising

Domination

Critique of organisations as means of social domination in the service of profit

Pros

- Emphasises values
- Allows us to recognise and deal with actual exploitation in the workplace

Cons

- Promotes 'us and them'
- Removes personal responsibility
- In asserting equivalence between domination and organisation ignores non-dominating forms of organisation

Organisms

Systems, contingency and ecology theories

Pros

- A wide range of metaphors from the natural world to open our minds
- Understanding of process as well as goals or tasks
- No one right way -- always a range of options in how we organise
- Understanding of environmental and interorganisational relations -- 'ecology'

Cons

- See organisations in too concrete a way
- Assumes functional unity – a state of organisational harmony that is rare in practice – 'political' activity is seen as dysfunctional
- Danger of metaphor becoming ideology – a normative guide shaping practice

Brains

Learning organisations and cybernetics

Pros

- Contributions to organisational learning, innovation and evolution
- Challenges basic assumptions about leadership, control, clear goals, hierarchy, organisational design and 'top-down' systems
- Centrality of paradox

Cons

- Self-referential – brains looking at brains
- Ignoring conflicts between self-organisation and organisational control
- Requires a degree of openness and self criticism that is not universal
- Too rational -- can ignore unconscious resistance to learning
- Strong normative bias of the image

Cultures

Rooted in fascination with Japanese success -- shared perceptions, routines and values

Pros

- Account of non-rational organisational processes
- Directs attention to the symbolic aspects of organisational life
- A new depth of understanding of the leadership role

Cons

- Influencing culture requires subtlety and ethics
- Danger of subtle or not-so-subtle attempts at manipulation which may create
- Resistance to change
- Complexity – culture is self-organising, always evolving
- Requires considerable self-awareness
- Can underplay the power dimension

Political systems

Power dynamics

Pros

- Politics an inevitable but rarely acknowledged feature of organisational life
- Analysis of power dynamics describes the inherent contradictions -- organisations simultaneously systems for competition and cooperation
- Explodes the myth of functional integration by highlighting the disintegrative tensions arising from diverse interests, and so
- Can lead to more realistic management strategies
- Understanding of tension between personal and organisational goals
- Understanding of socio-political implications of different kinds of organisation

Cons

- Encourages paranoia, conspiracy theory and mistrust
- May overstate the power and importance of individuals and understate system dynamics

Unconsciously driven

Understanding unconscious dynamics

Pros

- Powerful tools for exploring hidden meaning
- Understanding previously unconscious patterns that trap people opens new opportunities for coping and changing
- Opportunity to integrate the rational and non-rational
- This way of understanding enables use of other ways – you cannot create a learning organisation without understanding the obstacles to learning
- Powerful in integrating opposing cultural and political forces
- Awareness of no easy answers
- Draws attention to the ethics of organisation

Cons

- No easy answers
- Can undervalue material realities, ideological factors and cognitive traps
- Change in consciousness may not be enough to effect major change

Flux and transformation

Chaos and complexity theory

Pros

- Understanding nature, source and logic of change
- Autopoiesis -- how we see and manage change ultimately a product of how we see and think about ourselves
- Inter-relatedness – only survival *with* not survival *against*, is possible
- Organisation and environment are part of the *same* broad pattern – in evolution it is *pattern* that evolves
- Deeper appreciation of patterns where continuity resides eg 'attractor' patterns from chaos theory
- Appreciation of how small 'nudges' at the 'edge of chaos' can produce larger changes

Flux and transformation cont.

- Understanding and tolerating paradoxes and contradictions
- Change self-organises, an emergent phenomenon which cannot be controlled, only influenced
- Acceptance that we can never control but only influence and affect change

Cons

- Powerless power
- Change is rule-bound – the order in the chaos
- Challenge of finding the rules that can predict the emergence of a pattern in advance
- The aspiration to predict the future a further attempt to stay ‘in control’

Some implications

- Almost all descriptions of organisations are metaphor
- Any specific metaphor both aids and limits our understanding
- Any understanding of our organisation will be limited and partial at best, but it can be enough to guide action
- There is no metaphor that is good at all times and in all places