

# Exploring metaphor use and its insight into sense making with executive coaching clients

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## Abstract

The difficulty coaches face in relating to and understanding how clients perceive and interpret situations is that the process for clients making sense of situations is unconscious. This presents a challenge, as there isn't a direct or obvious route to access a client's unconscious. Understanding clients' use of metaphor offers a potential route to access this unconscious process and gain insight into clients' sense making. The research adopted a critical realism paradigm and used a thematic analysis methodology with semi-structured interviews of eight executive leaders. The findings suggest that metaphor can offer insight into participants' character and values, and coaches and leaders can use an approach of working with metaphor as a potential route to reveal and understand individuals' unconscious sense making.

**Key Words:** coaching, metaphor, sense making, coaching psychology.

## Introduction

The difficulty that coaches face in relating to and understanding how clients perceive and interpret situations is that the process for clients making sense of situations is unconscious. This presents a challenge, as there isn't a direct or obvious way to access a client's unconscious. However, as clients' use of metaphor potentially originates from their unconscious sense making framework, metaphor offers a possible route. Exploring insight through clients' metaphor use, as it is an unconscious process, avoids difficulties such as misunderstandings from interpretation of clients' language. In addition, because the process of metaphor use accesses the unconscious it has a better chance of producing a deeper and richer connection between the coach and the client. Therefore being attentive to, and working with, metaphor potentially offers coaches a connection with clients' unconscious and a deeper emotional connection with clients.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980 p5) define metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". This prosaic definition though literally accurate does, as the authors suggest, completely understate the importance of metaphor in our everyday lives. The use of metaphor is ubiquitous, suffusing in our language and has a fundamental, exotic and fascinating role in our relationships, communications and conceptual system of understanding. Marshak (1993) described metaphor as a key medium for understanding cognitive structures and Kozak (1992) holds a similar view that we attribute meaning to experience through a process that is essentially metaphoric. From psychotherapy Seiden (2004) lends additional support to this suggestion and saliently points out that as well as being a useful tool, most of our psychoanalytical concepts for making sense of our sense making processes, for example the ego and the id and our relationship with these, are themselves metaphors. This strongly suggests the ubiquity of metaphor could potentially offer an accessible degree of insight into personal sense making. We might all be, as Kopp (1995) beautifully

observes, “poets who speak in metaphors about the content of our unconscious” (p115) and ultimately reveal insight into our personal process of sense making.

The perceived gap in the literature that this research seeks to address is offering a connection between individual descriptions of metaphor use and the acknowledged potential for metaphor to provide insight into sense making.

## **Literature Review**

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) seminal book ‘Metaphors We Live By’ defines metaphor simply as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p5). In the earliest writings about metaphor, Aristotle thought metaphors have the qualities of the exotic and the fascinating and metaphor, once you recognise its many forms, is suffusive and ever present (Roberts 2004). Drake & Lanahan (2007) offer metaphor as ubiquitous, with on average people using four metaphors a minute. Lawley & Tompkins (2000) suggest it is “hard to put together an everyday sentence that does not contain a ‘hidden’ or ‘embedded’ metaphor” (p11).

Proposing a strong argument to explain this prevalence, Lakoff and Johnson (1980 p3) suggest our whole conceptual system in terms of how we think and act may be fundamentally metaphoric in nature. Agreeing with this, Marshak (1993) describes metaphor as a key medium for understanding cognitive structures and “the bridge between the literal and the symbolic, between cognition and affect and between the conscious and unconscious” (p44). Continuing the argument everyday English is metaphorical; Reddy (1993) in his classic essay “The Conduit Metaphor” argues the locus of metaphor is thought rather than language and that it is indispensable to our conceptual system of sense making. Reddy (1993) described the conduit metaphor as ideas or objects put into a container of words by a speaker and then sent along a conduit to a listener who unpacks the container and attempts to make meaning of them. This provided the first glimpse of the enormity of conceptual metaphor usage. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) developed this glimpse into Contemporary Metaphor Theory (CMT), which suggests much of our everyday thought involves the use of contemporary metaphors. For example, ‘up’ is used to describe when things are generally better; ‘things are looking up’ and by expressing time as passing motion for example ‘a lifetime is a day’.

Another important conceptual way of understanding metaphor is considering the mind and metaphors to be embodied. Siegelman (1990) starting with the body as a container being our primary experience, expresses no surprise that our embodied experiences are the basic currency for metaphors of far less tangible experiences. Kozak (1992) connecting this embodiment with metaphor’s sense making capability describes working with metaphor as “the process of making conscious the fundamental and embodied nature of imagination” (p138).

The most interesting, poetic and insightful personal metaphors combine and superimpose novelty, generic orientation and image, for example Dante’s poetic, ‘knowing as seeing’ on ‘life’s journey’ from Divine Comedy: “In the middle of life’s road. I found myself in a dark wood” (Lakoff & Turner 1989 p9). Metaphor appears fundamental to structuring thoughts based on our experiences, giving verbal expression to some of our strongest embodied emotions and in how we communicate our thoughts and experiences to others.

### ***Metaphor and The Coaching and Mentoring Relationship***

Many authors use metaphor to describe the nature of the coaching relationship, which in essence is being a ‘critical friend’ to discuss and ‘bounce around’ ideas with in a ‘safe space’, (Hindmarsh 2008, Passmore 2010). There are a variety of metaphors used to describe the mentoring relationship. Scanlon (2009) noted the prevalence of four metaphorical categorisations on the mentor: ‘Navigator’,

'Sage', 'Teacher' and 'Friend' with the 'Teacher' metaphor being the most persistent. Lawley & Tomkins (2000) advocate coaches to use 'clean language' in working with metaphor in order not to impose the coach's map on the client's territory.

The most insightful research into metaphor use in the coaching relationship is deHaan et al (2010), who sought to explore clients' descriptions of critical moments to develop a model of executive coaching. deHann et al's (2010) study observed that 47 clients used a combined total of 252 metaphors in describing their 59 critical moments. The authors concluded from this that using metaphors had "a richness that our earlier coding (*by content*) could not convey" (p615). In a study of clients' use of metaphor to describe self and their interpretation of the coaching space Britten (2014) concludes 'coaches might benefit from paying careful attention to clients' metaphors' (p72).

### ***Metaphor and Individual Sense Making***

In psychotherapy, metaphor is considered a useful tool as it is an ideal vehicle to bridge both the unconscious and the conscious and affect and cognition (Siegelman 1990). Analogous to dreams, metaphor potentially provides a passageway to the unconscious enabling connection between the known and what we can only guess at allowing a temporary immersion into another's experience (Siegelman 1990). In similarity with the conceptual way of understanding metaphor as embodied, Kopp (1995) suggests "metaphor is gesture expressed in words" (p96). Kozak (1992) has a similar perspective suggesting we attribute meaning to experience through a process that is essentially metaphoric. In addition, the psychological defences an individual uses have links with metaphor use and have the potential to provide insight into sense making (Cramer 2006, Vailant 1992).

### ***Metaphor Use and Sense Making In Coaching***

Robinson (2010) considers a reflective use of literary techniques including metaphor in coaching and observes that "my experience is that a deeper consideration of literary language devices may be employed within the coaching context to enable sense-making" (p903). Being more alert to metaphor might enable the coach to ask better questions, flashback and flash-forward possibilities, leading to a richer relationship with a greater and deeper level of interpretation.

### ***Metaphor in Transformative Sense Making***

Metaphor is a potential catalyst in transformation. Mezirow (2000), the father of transformative learning theory, writes of how metaphor can create new and revised personal meaning. Similarly, Fletcher (2007) considers the power of metaphor's imagery and visualisation in constructing future possible selves as a possible way of transformation. How metaphor might deliver its catalysing power is considered by Quinn (1997) who suggests metaphor can give access to clients' taken for granted assumptions and Gray (2007) who explored developing critical reflection through reflective coaching tools. Gray (2007) concludes that metaphors encourage reflection and, by using metaphor to examine personal beliefs, they encourage reflexivity.

Marshak (2004) argues, "how people talk about things, the words, phrases and images such as metaphor are a primary means whereby the internal cognitive (*sense making*) structures are created, reinforced, modified and revealed" (p25). Marshak further argues it may be possible to "implicitly or explicitly challenge, reinforce and/or modify these structures even if they remain non-conscious" (p25). Sfard (1998) however notes metaphor's limitation, describing the use of metaphor as a 'double edged sword'. It is both the enabler of imagination in the basic conception of new ideas and thought but also the constrainer of imagination within the boundaries of previous experience. An alternative view building on Sfard's observation could be that metaphor is part of an individual's learned language in the same way different cultures use specific idioms. Metaphor's insight would then be into the breadth of an individual's experience and its transformational power limited to that previous experience.

### ***Metaphor and Sense Making in Organisations***

There has been extensive research into using metaphor to make sense of how organisations operate. Morgan (1986) built upon the orthodox metaphors of organisations either as machines or as organisms. Brink (1993) succinctly expresses the potential for cultural insight observing, “metaphors often contain painful truths that individuals would never divulge face to face to superiors” (p371). Barner (2008) observed metaphors “play a critical role in helping individuals translate what are often confusing and potentially overwhelming change events” (p124-5) and once formed not only reflect change but can shape it.

Gray (2007) concludes metaphors are useful to aid alignment, understand motivation and provide salient cues in conversations, and refers to Tsoukas’s (1991) observation that metaphors also *prescribe* how situations ought to be viewed as well as describing them; concurring “storytelling is thereby an important management skill” (Gray 2007 p498). Marshak et al (2000) conclude that “knowing which metaphor a person is using, whether they are aware of it or not, helps enormously in understanding how they see the situation” (p49).

### ***Summary of the Literature***

The literature highlights the prevalence of metaphor in communication and its fundamental role in our thoughts and conceptual understanding. Research from therapy suggests how metaphor may potentially provide insight into an individual’s unconscious, their emotions and their taken for granted assumptions. Organisational research suggests it is helpful for executives to have awareness of the metaphors individuals use and that metaphor has potential as a tool to generate insight and to shape future personal and organisational changes. Less present in the literature is how insight from metaphor can practically inform individual sense making and how such insight may connect with emotions and shared experience.

So this study seeks to explore the potential gap for research that could offer coaches a practical way to connect clients’ propensity to use metaphor and the additional insight into character, values and sense making this might offer. There also appears to be opportunity for research that seeks to connect the literature from these realms of metaphor use and potentially offer a synthesising and practical model for coaches to consider and possibly use with their clients.

### **Methodology**

The proposed paradigm for this study is critical realism. I share Bhaksar’s (2013) view of science as an activity inevitably mediated though not determined by language and social structures that are capable of generating events. Therefore I agree with Easton (2010) that science and the creation of knowledge is a social practice.

Critical realism assumes the world is differentiated and social reality operates at three levels: the empirical level of perceptual experience; the actual level of the events and processes; and the third, deep level, relating to the structures and mechanisms generating events and effecting experience (Fleetwood 2013). The first two levels naturally correspond well with metaphor and the third deep level, often operating out of awareness, also accords well with the exploration of insight into meaning making. Bhaskar (1989) describes the manner in which critical realists delve from the surface into the causal powers at this deep level as ‘retroduction’, a ‘movement of thought’ involving the production of knowledge via building a model “using cognitive materials under control of something like a logic of analogy and metaphor which if the model were to exist and act as suggested would account for the phenomenon” (p12). Lastly as knowledge in critical realism consists of provisional and fallible descriptions of structures and powers (Gorski 2013) and researchers bring their own preconceptions

any quest for understanding is unavoidably interpretive, imperfect and evolving. This fits well with this study where the researcher is inherently trying to understand how another person is making sense of the world by describing one thing in terms of another.

Many methodologies are congruent with critical realism. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al 2009) was a potential option to explore how individuals used metaphor and what this meant to them personally. However, I was also seeking to explore the potential of metaphor to inform understanding of participants' meaning making and its contribution to coaching relationships. This suggested the selected methodology may benefit from being more than a purely idiographic endeavour. Thematic analysis offered a methodology that could combine understanding metaphor sufficiently for each individual research participant with the potential to consider thematic commonalities across the population.

Overall the inherent flexibility of thematic analysis in its capability to detect the most salient patterns, whilst also permitting a rich description of the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006), fitted well with this research. Joffe's (2012 p209) belief that "thematic analysis should highlight the most salient constellations of meaning present in the data including affective, cognitive and symbolic dimensions" was deemed appropriate as it allowed for a study that explored the depth and similarity of individual feeling, thinking and action influenced by metaphor.

In addition, allowing themes to 'speak' as a route to understanding latent, possibly tacit content (Joffe 2012) also resonates with critical realism's third deep level of stratification and the search for meaning from use of metaphor. Willig (2013 p65) suggests that, despite its apparent simplicity, thematic analysis "aspires to produce insights which make sense of social psychological phenomena" and was selected for this study as being relevant to both critical realism and a study about metaphor.

Fereday & Muir Cochrane (2006), recognising research doesn't exist in an epistemological vacuum, propose a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive thematic analysis, combining a priori template driven codes (King 2004, 2012, Crabtree and Miller 1999) with data driven codes (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2012, 2013, Boyatis 1998) suggesting this complements the research question by both reflecting 'a priori' possibilities and allowing themes to emerge individually from the data.

This research embraced this hybrid approach to thematic analysis and also included 'a priori' possibilities from the literature by establishing a template and drawing from the 'template analysis' approach (King 2004, 2012, Crabtree and Miller 1999). The research took a balanced approach to template analysis with the template being informed from theory though developed after initial exploration of the data (Waring and Wainwright 2008). In addition, care was taken to afford sufficient opportunity for 'a posteriori' themes to emerge from the text. The upper part of Figure 1 illustrates my approach which combined the use of a template with a priori thoughts from the literature and identified emerging codes and themes from the data.



**Figure 1: Outcome of the analysis and a thematic presentation of the findings**

The research took place in the private sector with eight executives, one female and seven males, who had been coached, in an age range of 40 – 60, and who hold or have held leadership positions in organisations. The rationale for these selection criteria was there was a high probability that individuals in this population already understood the concepts of organisational metaphor and storytelling and had a rich organisational career experience to draw on for examples of critical incidents that they could describe using metaphors.

In exploring metaphor, semi-structured interviews supported the desire to share the psychological and social world of the participant (Smith 2008) and as Siegelman (1990) referred to earlier “allows temporary immersion into another’s experience”. The semi-structured interview prompts asked participants, with an explicit invitation to use metaphor, to describe their individual career and its critical moments, their key challenges and their salient experiences of conflict. Participants were also asked to describe any resonant organisational metaphors they had experienced as employees and leaders. Non-verbal responses such as body language and gesture were actively observed and recorded where informative and relevant. Recognising that individuals may often have a resonant personal metaphor, for example “Officer on Deck” as a metaphor serving as a reminder of



expectations for an executive leader, there was a prompt to enquire into capturing any personally valuable metaphors. In accordance with the critical realist paradigm interviews evolved as the study progressed, often uncovering new perspectives to consider.

I was conscious of my own role as a researcher having both my own enabling and disabling prejudices and a specific interest in, and proclivity to use, metaphor. I am also currently an executive leader and a coach. Therefore I potentially possessed advantages in my access to the target population and empathy in eliciting data, although I also had the capacity to influence the overall process. My interest in and enthusiasm for metaphor might also have been contagious and influenced participants' view of the role and use of metaphor in their lives. In addition to using an interview guide to create a semi structured interview, I adopted two guiding principles. The first principle was to ensure that I understood the participant's interpretation of their metaphor use rather than my own interpretation of either the metaphor itself or indeed my own interpretation of the participant's use of it. The second principle was to always ask participants 'how the metaphor helped them'. This helped to identify the metaphors which were personal to participants from the common usage metaphors that may have been offered in response to my enthusiasm.

## **Analysis and Findings**

I interpreted tentative themes into the four key conceptual areas of sense making which are shown in the lower part of figure 1. These areas reflected an interpretive progression of seeking to understand how individuals used metaphor in their communication, through influencing themselves and then influencing others, culminating in how metaphor use might offer insight into the conceptual framework of their sense making.

### ***Metaphor Use in Interpersonal Communication***

How participants expressed their experience offered strong insight and clues into their character, values and basic sense making. This was equally true whether the participant used vivid and expressive metaphors or more subtle plainer ones. I offer an example of a metaphor that was expressive with a passion and intensity that quickly provided insight into the participant's sense making:

*So, I'd probably describe my career as an adventure in that sense, ... in my head when I say adventure I get a picture of Livingston carving his way through Africa and I probably... that's not what it's like, unless Livingston had days of absolute tedium and boredom when he was just walking across savannah after savannah not seeing anything new and just hoping the lion wouldn't eat him.*

*Sometimes is a more fun way to think about things in the picture as more cartoony.....it's like Dora the Explorer and therefore feels less serious.*

There are multiple contexts implicit in this metaphor with 'Livingston' and 'Dora the Explorer' representing the aspirational risk taking of real adventure and the fun aspect of the unknown set alongside the more mundane majority of the experience suggesting frustration with boredom and constraints. In addition to the more explicit and elaborate metaphors used, all of the participants used metaphors that were consistent with Contemporary Metaphor Theory (CMT). As well as offering supporting clues into participants' sense making, the implicit conceptual metaphors suggested possible fundamental influences in participants' sense making, some examples of which are shown in Table 1.

Participant	Contemporary Metaphor Use
John	Journeys, options
Jason	Fun, encouraging risk
Alan	Options, imagination
Chris	Galvanising, forging
Andy	Fine margins, boundaries, calibration
Kate	Energy, caring
Tony	Idioms, gestures as words, emotions
Steve	Balance, emotion and rationality

**Table 1: Examples of insights into sense making from contemporary metaphor use**

Vailant (1992) observed in his psychotherapy research that metaphor could often reveal defences used by individuals. The interviews suggested the use of metaphor to aid ‘rationalisation’ was common across almost all of the participants. Humour and metaphor were used by one participant to diffuse situations and to express desire not to take himself too seriously, for example,

*So, if clown and magician are a couple of the archetypes or what have you, what are the other ones there? Who are the other players? Maybe there is a mask thing, because I used to be very comfortable with fancy dress.*

In addition, projection explicitly arose in the discussion with Emma about her ‘mirror moments’ metaphor inspiring an observation that perhaps many metaphors and executive leaders’ metaphor in particular include elements of projection.

### **Reflection and Reflexivity**

In each of the participant interviews there was a desire to find a vehicle to reflect on and help make sense of experiences and to learn from these experiences. Three ways of using metaphor were prominent: using metaphor to understand ones thoughts, using metaphor to manage one’s expectations and behaviour, and using metaphor to explore personal image.

There was significant use of metaphor by the majority of participants to reflect on their experiences and to learn from them. For example, John’s attempt to make sense of his challenging situation with his new boss.

*...the metaphor I used did help me make sense of a situation, it helped me to influence the behaviours I used or the tactics I had. ...that’s why probably I will make an effort to and have tried consciously at some stages, and probably do subconsciously in others, to understand what is motivating the other person.*

Marshak et al (2000) contend that people create metaphors in two ways, consciously to express experience and unconsciously to structure and interpret experience. The interviews highlighted a new third way of creating metaphor that does not appear to be present in the literature. Some participants appeared to be using metaphor to help them manage and rationalise their expectations.



Jason's metaphor of adventure as well as being both elaborate and poetic, highlights nuances of the felt experience with Jason expressing both frustration at tedious aspects of his career and a real excitement about new experiences.

*...the adventurer has control over themselves but they don't have control over the context and the environment. The adventurer can think, I want to do this, I want to go there, but ... if Livingston hit Victoria Falls, he is suddenly going to go, "(#####!), I can't go that way", and no matter how much I want to go that way and how much I'm in control of choosing whether I go that way, I know going that way is not going to prove successful.*

The metaphor's 'Victoria falls' obstacle highlights Jason's frustration at things he would like to do that are outside of his control. Jason's use of this metaphor seems to help him conceptualise and rationalise this frustration, enabling him to continue to focus on the positive sense of fun, adventure and ability to take risks in his control.

Andy uses the following metaphor of a ladder in a very practical way, to plan and conceptualise his progress towards his career goals. The embodied act of climbing is obvious though more subtle is the suggestion of safety alongside progress in breaking it down, taking small steps and not making unnecessary mistakes. The 'ladder' projects purpose as a key driver for Andy and crucially the 'ladder' also provides Andy through its visualisation of progress, a way to manage emotions, primarily frustration by seeking to control the controllable.

Steve offered the personal metaphor of a 'swan' to describe how he wants to be perceived in the working environment. Interestingly, in addition to this being an aspirational perception, this is also a conscious choice to increase his ability to make a strong impression at critical moments.

*Part of it actually is so that it has a lot more impact if I really lose it over stuff. They are going to take it seriously because that's not how I'd naturally be.*

Steve's deliberate portrayal of this 'swan' self also manages his expectation of the impact of behaving differently.

All participants' interviews contained metaphors that are often used to characterise aspects of our behaviours. In addition, six of the eight participants were able to easily identify personal metaphors that had resonance for them. Alan expressed his clear view of the guiding role he thought he was best at with this richly described personal metaphor.

*I rapidly realised that actually what I could do was be the 2IC (second in command) rather than the Commanding Officer and rapidly people would learn that part of my role was to basically protect their rear. So, I might be the officer on deck for a particular time, but actually I know everything that goes on in that particular regiment and nothing gets passed without having to go through me.*

Jason readily offered personal metaphors and there was a conscious intention to present himself in a particular way, suggesting strongly held values.

*I like to present myself as a paradox, I guess. So, like a platypus. There are lots of different parts to you and none of them seem to fit together, but yet when you put them together, it seems to work. I really like it as a metaphor for me in terms of lots of different parts that are all different expressions of the same me.*

Tony described how, encouraged by his coach avoiding asking the direct question of ‘how do you feel’, he has constructed and used metaphorical images to help him to focus and reflect on what is important in how he plans to live his life. Tony’s visual metaphors are strikingly powerful and illustrate metaphor’s ability to bridge between affect and cognition and tentatively to the symbolic of the unknown and the unconscious.

### ***Understanding and Influencing Others***

One participant’s description of the power of visual metaphor use at a global leadership event shows how metaphor can be used effectively to influence the perception of organisational cultures and to prescribe how leaders want organisations to develop.

*I can remember the content of that keynote speech by recalling his three metaphors. His three metaphors were actually three pictures he showed on screen. One of a Sherpa, one of a hedgehog and one of a high-speed train.*

The speaker at this event could have alternatively said we need to remember what we are good at, empower our people and have pace. Though I strongly doubt that the impact and lasting effect of doing so would have been comparable to the use of these images as Tony’s following comment suggests “I can still remember what he said and I’m still inspired by them”.

Several participants consciously used metaphor to help individuals evolve their perspectives about progression and development. Steve who is a leader in an investment business believes the use of a ‘risk and return’ metaphor when discussing careers has enabled him to better engage his employees.

*We are talking every single day about risk and return and getting them to think about their careers as an asset and thinking about the same attributes as being quite powerful. The person who is prepared to take a decent degree of risk should get a good return out of it.*

Often when things are going less well in business it is challenging to be able to identify exactly why. Metaphor’s strong imagery and emotional hooks can help to explain intangible events in a familiar way. Alan offered an example of using metaphor in this way to encourage people to examine their perspectives about behaviours in a project. It is one of the most integrated and resonant uses of metaphor I encountered.

*I’ve used an ‘infestation of Muppets’ to describe a previous project culture. Partly, the Muppets were created as children’s entertainment and they are an eclectic bunch of individuals who I find very amusing, but actually they’ve got the organisational capability of a bunch of hyenas on heat. They are just running around everywhere and doing their own thing and all making protestations that their way is the right way.*

As Alan explains below, the metaphor hints at a potentially painful unspoken truth about the situation and implicitly invites recipients to provide their own deeper interpretation of what is being suggested.

*The Muppet Show, in truth, the production of it is brilliant because it’s all heavily organised, but it actually... it’s so well organised they can create this thing with disorganised chaos, and that for me was what I had mind there. I went for something that was high visual that everybody would know, and to a degree ... they know it’s derogatory, but they can bring their own conclusions.*

This example capably demonstrates metaphor's ability to highlight some things and obscure others. It is also a salient reminder to listen carefully to not overlook the subtle meaning that may be within a compelling metaphor.

In addition to participants' descriptions that described influencing individuals' conceptualisation of change into a collectively understood concept, participants also used metaphor to help employees understand and better cope with change. Jason described using metaphor to help employees understand the significance of culture in organisational change.

*I'm using the picture of a goldfish bowl to explain the importance of a thing you can't see. In a goldfish bowl, the thing you can't see is the water. In the context of change, it's the context, the organisational context, the environment and everything that's sustaining the things within it, that's the important part.*

Emma used several metaphors to help people cope with change, and found her unravelling a 'plate of spaghetti' metaphor particularly successful in helping people stay motivated.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I will explore this conceptual area of sense making through three key themes: using metaphor to conceptualise thoughts; using metaphor to understand experience; and using metaphor to express internal values. To an extent the discussion of the key themes in this conceptual area is inductive, informed from the other conceptual areas, which are both more observable and more easily described by participants.

Seven of the eight participants gave examples of using metaphor to help them structure their thinking and conceptualise their thoughts with the eighth participant using metaphor's close cousin similes in a comparable way. Tony's expression of how metaphor helped him to conceptualise and express his thoughts provided a very clear emotional connection between imagery, words and feelings.

*I don't recall the world in prosaic passages of prose; I recall my world in pictures, in images, in intuitive and emotive patterns. So, to convey what those emotive patterns were like to another soul, I try to use imagery in order to enrich the description.*

Jason similarly described how metaphor helps his thinking with the intrinsic intention of sharing experience and his explicit sense of making things fun.

*I think it helps me, think about it in a fun way. It helps me understand it, because I can picture the sense of, this is what it feels like and it gives me grounds for a shared experience, even if we haven't shared my career.*

Chris's view of personal metaphors provided a nice balance in the participant population with his following perspective.

*I've never seen the world like that [metaphor], I use similes a lot and I would use examples of situations to test whether someone has thought about all the options.*

It is interesting that Chris in his leadership and coaching is also describing one thing in terms of another. However Chris uses examples of different situations in the same context or similes. Similes compare rather than equate two things and acknowledge the limitations and imperfections

of the comparison more than metaphor does. Given Chris's very strong 'moral compass' it is possible that similes rather than metaphors work better for Chris as they hedge against the risks of misunderstanding and unfair comparison.

All participants gave examples of metaphor that helped them to express their emotions. Emma's metaphors were vividly embodied with energy and emotions as this example illustrates:

*That was a really positive challenge because I found that that gave me a lot of energy. I found it really invigorating. It was a bucket of ice-cold water, but in a really good way, on a hot day or something to make you go, "Ooh!" It was good. In fact, I've got goose bumps now.*

Participants' metaphor use in their inter-personal communication offered clues and suggestions about their character and values. In addition, some of these clues revealed strongly held internal values that have fundamental importance to their sense making. A strong explicit example of this is Chris's description of the importance of an individual's moral compass.

### ***Proposed Synthesis of Metaphor Use for Sense Making***

The findings confirmed that all participants understood and used metaphor both intrinsically in communications and specifically to express emotions and to influence the perceptions of others. Whilst not suggesting the generalisation that all clients will explicitly use or be comfortable with metaphor, the findings suggest coaches who explore working with metaphor are likely to observe and potentially derive insight from the metaphors in many aspects of their clients' everyday language and their clients' descriptions of critical moments.

To assist coaches in their observation and categorisation of clients' metaphor use I propose the model of individuals' potential use of metaphor shown in figure 2. This is a synthesis of participants' key themes of metaphor use into four conceptual areas of sense making based on my findings.

	<b>Internal</b>	<b>External</b>
<b>Unconscious</b>	<p><b><u>Conceptual Framework</u></b></p> <p>Using metaphor in individual sense making of experiences</p> <p>Using metaphor to understand one's felt experience of emotions</p> <p><i>Kozak (1992), Lakoff &amp; Johnson (1980)</i> <i>Marshak (2013) 2<sup>nd</sup> Contention</i></p>	<p><b><u>Interpersonal Communication</u></b></p> <p>Using metaphor as part of natural speech to help others to understand</p> <p>Using metaphor as a natural part of speech to connect &amp; express emotion (a gesture in words)</p> <p><i>Siegelman (1990), Kozak (1992) [rapport]</i> <i>Kopp (1995), Marshak (2013) 1st contention</i></p>
<b>Conscious</b>	<p><b><u>Reflection &amp; Reflexivity</u></b></p> <p>Deliberate exploration of metaphor to make sense of own experience 'searching for a personal metaphor'</p> <p>Deliberate use of metaphor including images to transform oneself</p> <p><i>Fletcher (2007), Lyddon et al (2001)</i> <i>Mezirow (2000), Gray (2007), Rabu (2013)</i></p>	<p><b><u>Understanding and Influence</u></b></p> <p>Deliberate selection and use of metaphor to aid other's understanding</p> <p>Deliberate selection and use of metaphor to influence other's thinking and behaviour</p> <p><i>Tsoukas (1991), Marshak (1993, 2000)</i> <i>Barner (2008, 2011), Drake &amp; Lanahan (2007)</i></p>

**Figure 2: Proposed synthesis of the uses of metaphor for sense making**

The proposed model considers four conceptual areas of sense making consistent with my findings. It organises these four areas into who the metaphor is being used with, either oneself or others, and

whether there is primarily conscious or unconscious use of metaphor. Unconscious use of metaphor can either be internal offering insight into one's conceptual sense making framework and processes or external as part of everyday interpersonal communication with others. Conscious use of metaphor can be internal using metaphor with oneself to reflect on experiences, explore new perspectives and examine values; or external to assist understanding and influencing of others.

The proposed model can be used to consider the clues and characteristics in each of the four conceptual areas to explore the insight these might offer into participants' sense making. Using one of my participants to illustrate this; Jason displayed a consistent theme of exploring emotions and having a conceptual sense making of understanding using paradoxes. For example, earlier in this article Jason describes his personal sense of self using the paradox of the platypus. In addition, in Jason's metaphor of 'Livingstone forging through Africa', his sense of adventure and exploring new things is described alongside "days of absolute tedium" and his frustration at the presence of constraints, 'Victoria Falls' beyond his control. In another metaphor, Jason describes influencing people by being an 'Evil Jester' who in practice isn't actually evil, more possessing a sense of devilment in a well-meaning way to encourage other people to take risks helping them to develop and to experience new things. Another example from my participants was John who had a consistent theme of choices and positioning to both understand his own experiences and to understand how others might perceive situations. John's interpersonal communication was replete with the contemporary metaphors of options and orientation, and his descriptions of how he understood and influenced others had a focus of charting then navigating and guiding situations. John's internal reflection was informative too, using the metaphor of 'Judo' to position himself to use an opponent's strength on his behalf. Interestingly humour was ever present in John's descriptions and metaphors. Humour was used to engage others, diffuse situations and potentially as a defence mechanism to avoid situations or descriptions being taken too seriously, as his 'magician and clown' metaphor described earlier illustrates. Understanding situations as positioning, tactics and options felt prominent in John's conceptual framework of sense making. In addition, John's use of humour suggested a strong aversion to having his options reduced and also that humour might be important to him in managing a desire for an 'enigmatic fluidity' in his own sense of identity and how others might perceive him.

The findings supported Marshak's (2013) contentions that people create metaphors in two ways, to express and to interpret experience. In addition, the findings highlighted a third way of creating metaphor to help individuals to manage expectations and also to rationalise the same expectations, which does not appear to be present in the literature. This sense of a new way of using metaphor to manage expectations appears to be internal and unconscious and about participants understanding their felt experience of emotions through metaphor and its influence on their sense making.

In addition, the ways participants used metaphor appeared to have a number of different axes of focus. Firstly, the participants' use of metaphor in sense making appeared to follow two different emphases. One grouping of participants emphasised making an emotional connection with 'hearts and minds', while another grouping emphasised critical reflection and management of emotions and transformation. With the 'hearts and minds' grouping the locus of metaphor use was orientated externally to connect with others, for example Tony's overt description of his "use of *metaphorical* imagery in order to enrich the description" to connect with other people. For the other group the locus of metaphor use was internal, for example Emma's description of reflecting on a challenge and having metaphorical 'goose bumps'. Secondly, there was a polarisation in participants' use of metaphor between an emphasis on informing practical actions and behaviours and an emphasis on a more abstract conceptual way to explore possibilities. Examples of this polarisation are Jason's use of his 'Livingstone forging through Africa' metaphor as a way of exploring his thoughts and feelings compared with Steve's 'swan' metaphor which has a practical focus aimed at increasing his ability to



make a strong impression at critical moments. Thirdly, and more intangibly, I felt there was a difference in participants' 'locus of observation' in their metaphorical descriptions between describing the behaviour itself or the outcome of the behaviour. Lastly there was a potential distinction in how participants used metaphor to reflect on their identity. This was either to explore possible future selves, for example a 'what if' development of Jason's 'platypus' metaphor or as a reinforcing guide for their current identity, for example the 'second in command' metaphor Alan uses as his lodestar.

## **Conclusion**

The findings suggest individuals have significantly different propensities to use metaphor both in their unconscious interpersonal communication and consciously in their reflection. The findings indicated that all participants understood and used metaphor, and that metaphor appears ubiquitous and suffusing of inter-personal communication. In addition, insight from contemporary metaphor use was intrinsically present in all participants' descriptions, and the suggestion that metaphor is fundamentally embodied was also supported by all participants' metaphor use. Of particular note in the research was the discovery of a third way of creating metaphor to help individuals to manage expectations and also to rationalise the same expectations, which does not appear to be present in the literature. Overall the clues into participants' character and the insight from their use of metaphor do appear to support an approach of coaches and leaders working with metaphor as a potential route to understand individuals' unconscious sense making.

Using the proposed model (Figure 2) of the uses of metaphor for insight into sense making and the examples from participants' metaphor use, there is an overall congruence between participants' use of metaphor and insight from the four conceptual areas of sense making. Perhaps unexpectedly, I found few examples of participants adapting or tailoring their metaphor use to consciously influence others compared with a universal conscious use of metaphor to reflect on their own experiences. The examples of metaphor use to influence others invariably used metaphorical examples that participants had previously found valuable for their own sense making. Whilst there was uniformly often a conscious decision to use metaphor with others there was significantly less consistency in participants' conscious selection of the individual metaphor used. Based on my own experience I had again expected the selection of individual metaphors to be more conscious.

By offering access to an individual's sense making metaphor potentially avoids misunderstandings from interpretation of language and offers an increased probability of a richer and deeper emotional connection with others.

### ***Implications for Coaching and Mentoring***

In addition to the potential benefit for coaches of metaphor offering a possible route to access individuals' unconscious sense making there are other advantages of coaches working with metaphor. Compared with the challenge of attentively listening to the language throughout a session, and potentially as a consequence not also being present and attentive to the client's content, metaphor helpfully packages insight, emotion and attempts to share meaning. Coaches potentially could use metaphor to draw aspects of clients' unconscious sense making into their conscious awareness thereby facilitating an increase in self-awareness and also an opportunity to explore taken for granted assumptions. More deeply coaches could explore potential differences between clients' metaphor use in their unconscious interpersonal communication and their conscious choice of using metaphors to support and influence themselves, their identity and others.

### ***Implications for Research***

Whether metaphor use or its insight into individual's sense making is a relatively fixed schema or whether it changes in response to situations, circumstances and even the generation one belongs to



would be an interesting question for future study. Further research to explore the apparently different foci that are potentially influencing participants' use of metaphor and their sense making could also potentially add greater understanding. Finally there is the potential for future research that explores whether executive leaders and coaches could build deeper connections with clients and employees by adopting the other person's metaphor in their communication and influencing.

### ***Concluding Comments***

For coaches metaphor appears to offer a route to materially enhance their understanding of clients. Metaphor helpfully appears to offer insight into clients' character and values and as it potentially accesses clients' unconscious sense making processes, it offers unfettered insight into how clients perceive and interpret their experiences. In addition, metaphor appears to offer significant potential for reflecting and learning from experiences and exploring one's identity. For executives, and their coaches, use of metaphor offers a way to enable the empathy to connect with and influence others to help them to understand, develop and cope with change.

Whether metaphor is the royal road to the unconscious or a glimpse into the hallway through the letterbox is uncertain however it offers a potential and practical route to access insight about the unconscious sense making processes of others.

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