

Chapter 107

Metaphor Use in Knowledge Management

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management is about the management of knowledge. Therefore many texts on knowledge management (KM) start with trying to explain or define what knowledge is (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000; McKenzie & Van Winkelen, 2004). As the history of epistemology shows, this debate is over 2000 years old. Some claim the debate is crucial for knowledge management, and they make a clear distinction between data, information and knowledge (Butler,

2006). Others state that it is “not essential to the fundamental mission of knowledge management” (Schwartz, 2006, p. 10). This article argues that for KM it is not important how knowledge is defined but how it is conceptualized.

The way we think and talk about knowledge when practicing knowledge management is determined by the conceptual structure we have in our brain for the idea of knowledge. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1999), we argue that this conceptual structure is formed by metaphor. The metaphors we choose for knowledge in our KM endeavors determine what we identify in organizations as knowledge related problems and what we see as solutions. For example, many knowledge management approaches advice companies to “acquire” knowledge, make an “inventory” of it, “store” it, and “distribute” it. What is important

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to see is that knowledge is not literally acquired and stored. After all, you cannot see it and you cannot grab it and put it in a container. A knowledge inventory is not literally an inventory like the inventory of a warehouse. And distributing knowledge is not literally distributing it like you would distribute food or supplies. These words are all used metaphorically and they make sense to us because they are based on the Knowledge As A Resource metaphor. Resource metaphors are very common in human thought. We use the Time As A Resource metaphor often, for example when we say ‘I got plenty of time’, ‘that took three hours’, ‘he wasted my time’ or ‘this will save time’.

The choice of knowledge metaphor is often not a conscious decision. Metaphors are part of the conceptual systems in, what Lakoff and Johnson refer to as, our ‘cognitive unconscious’. “Most of our thought is unconscious, not in the Freudian sense of being repressed, but in the sense that it operates beneath a level of cognitive awareness, inaccessible to consciousness and operating too quickly to be focused on” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p.10). However, for KM practitioners and scholars it is important to become aware of the metaphors they use for knowledge because these knowledge metaphors are like a search light highlighting certain aspects of organizational reality and hiding others. When we are aware of our knowledge metaphors we can begin to deliberately vary the metaphors in order to broaden our view, see new things, and discover new solutions.

This article first describes the role of metaphor in human conceptualization and then provides an overview of knowledge metaphors found in KM literature. It concludes with suggestions for future use of metaphor in KM practice and research.

BACKGROUND

Metaphors play an important role in theorizing about organizations (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Some authors argue that metaphors should be

avoided in organizational theory (Bourgeois & Pinder, 1983; Tinker, 1986). Others see metaphors as valuable creative tools for developing new theories and insights (Weick, 1989). Morgan (1997) has shown that many theories about organizations can be “reordered” (Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant, 2003) into a particular metaphorical view of organizations, showing the metaphorical bases of organizational theorizing. Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999) go even further, presenting evidence from cognitive science indicating that metaphors are inescapable because they are the basis for abstract reasoning. Metaphors are conceptual by nature and feed and structure abstract thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). For example, as such the concept of “knowledge” is empty. It is by unconsciously applying the metaphor of Knowledge As Resource that it makes sense to talk about knowledge as being “valuable”, “scarce”, or as something that can be shared, stored or distributed, or that can be put in a “warehouse”. These attributes (valuable, scarce), verbs (to share, to store or to distribute), and nouns (knowledge warehouse) aren’t used literally, yet they make sense because the underlying conceptual metaphor of Knowledge As Resource is familiar to us. At the same time we use other metaphors to conceptualise knowledge, such as Knowledge As An Organism. This metaphor enables us to conceptualize knowledge as something that can “grow” or needs to be “nourished”.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) introduce the idea of *primary metaphors* that help to conceptualise subjective experiences using mental imagery from the sensor and motor functions of our body. For example, we use the sensorimotor experience of affection as warmth (the warm body of our affectionate mother in our childhood) as the source domain when we conceptualise the subjective experience of a relationship (the target domain) as a “warm” relationship. Lakoff and Johnson claim that we do not first decide what characteristic of a phenomenon to highlight and then pick our metaphor, but that the metaphor allows

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