

# Metaphors Are Mindfunnels

## Finding Neo

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**R**eading Mark Johnson and George Lakoff's book *Metaphors We Live By* felt like the scene from *The Matrix* where Neo meets Morpheus for the first time. After just a few pages, we were suddenly and vigorously aware of previously hidden layers of reality. They had always been quietly present, but now they were glaringly obvious—and frankly, they made our heads hurt. To borrow a phrase from that movie, Lakoff and Johnson's book freed our minds, and as Neo discovers, getting one's mind freed can be an uncomfortable experience.

The basic concept behind *Metaphors We Live By* is that metaphors are the fundamental construct of human thought. This concept was not entirely new to us, but we quickly discovered that the scope and scale of humanity's reliance on metaphor is shockingly large. The book explains that metaphors do not simply make things more interesting or easier to understand—metaphors actually *are* understanding, and it is almost impossible to think in non-metaphorical terms.

After showing that virtually all our thoughts and understandings are based in subtle, often hidden metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson go on to explain, "The primary function

of metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience."

The key word here is "partial." No metaphor is a complete and comprehensive representation of reality.

Lakoff and Johnson then show that not only do metaphors provide partial understanding, but "a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor ... *a metaphorical concept can hide an aspect of our experience*" [emphasis added]. That's a pretty big deal, and it's why we wrote this article.

**"Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world? Welcome to the real world."**

**Morpheus, from *The Matrix***

### Metaphors: All Around Us

In *The Matrix*, Morpheus explains the situation this way: "The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work ... when you go to church ... when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your

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eyes to blind you from the truth ... That you are a slave ... Like everyone else, you were born into bondage. Into a prison that you cannot taste or see or touch. A prison for your mind.”

The metaphors we live by may not be as sinister as the Matrix’s mindprison, but they are just as ubiquitous, subtle, and powerful. As we continued to read the book, we developed a metaphor of our own: Metaphors are mind-funnels. That is to say, metaphors limit, filter, obscure, or even alter the informational inputs we receive from the world around us. We therefore understand our environment differently depending on the metaphors we use. This matters profoundly because the way we understand our environment affects the way we behave.

The challenge, therefore, is to recognize our mental metaphors, understanding them for what they are—subjective, incomplete descriptions that reveal some aspects of the world and obscure others. The metaphorical nature of our understanding means we might be able to expand our understanding and improve our actions by using multiple metaphors to illuminate different facets of reality. That is to say, smart use of metaphors can help us see through the Matrix.

The simplest metaphors are perhaps the most difficult to recognize and the most difficult to change because they are so fundamental to the way we see the world. For example, the common orientation metaphor more is up drives our perception that a larger number is higher than a smaller number. We talk about the stock market rising, gas prices going up, or an increase in our production numbers—all without being conscious that we are thinking and talking in metaphor. Nine is actually not higher than seven in a physical sense. It is simply a larger quantity, and physical height has nothing to do with it. We talk about it as being higher only because of our more-is-up mental metaphor.

As Lakoff and Johnson explain, it is sometimes “difficult to see that there is anything hidden by the metaphor or even to see that there is a metaphor here at all. This is so much the conventional way of thinking about language that it is sometimes hard to imagine that it might not fit reality.” That explanation almost perfectly parallels Morpheus’ description of the hidden, ubiquitous nature of the Matrix.

It turns out even a simple orientation metaphor reveals some things while hiding others. *More is up* emphasizes a particular aspect of having more (height), while concealing other aspects of increased quantity, such as weight, inertia, or complexity. It would be perfectly logical to use a *more is heavy* metaphor and talk about nine being weightier than seven instead of higher than seven, or the stock market getting heavier by 10 points instead of

going up by 10. This example is relatively innocuous, but other apparently simple metaphors can have significant implications.

We have all heard the old chestnut about how every problem looks like a nail when your only tool is a hammer—a metaphorical example of the influence of metaphor. But even perceiving a situation as a problem in the first place is an example of unconscious metaphorical thinking, using the *situation is problem* metaphor. When we see a problem, we naturally seek a resolution. But if we perceive the situation as something other than a problem, we will understand it differently and respond to it differently.

The *situation is symptom* metaphor would lead us to seek underlying causes instead of seeking the solutions required by the “situation is problem” framework. Similarly, the *situation is opportunity* metaphor leads to quite a different type of behavior. Other possible metaphors include *situation is obstacle*, *situation is non-problem*, *situation is data point*, *situation is educational opportunity*, or *situation is battle*. In each case, the metaphor reveals some aspects while concealing others. In each case, the metaphor drives our understanding and our behavior in response.

## Metaphors and Behavior

When simple metaphors are combined into complex metaphors, the implications and ramifications broaden and deepen. For program managers, multi-layered organizational metaphors are particularly important. Organizational metaphors are powerful because they affect so many different interactions and patterns of behavior. An organizational metaphor determines how we interact with the people in the organization; how we represent the organization to the outside world; and how we understand what the organization needs, does, and provides. Now we arrive at the real challenge, the real danger, of failing to see through the Matrix.

Lakoff and Johnson write, “A metaphor may ... be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.”

Metaphors are powerful mindfunnels indeed!

The *organization is machine* metaphor, for example, logically leads to a series of additional metaphors, such as *employee is cog* and *objective is optimization*. This particular mindfunnel leads us to “run” our organization like a machine, and so see even its most human behavior as machinelike.

When we view our organization as a machine, we logically value efficient production and aim to minimize friction within the organization. Accordingly, we take actions de-

signed to increase efficiency. A machine requires input, guidance, and a way to overcome unnecessary friction as it produces some output. If our driving metaphor is *organization as machine*, that's what we give it.

In *The Matrix*, the machines have taken over and turned humans into living batteries, slaves to their own creations. The film's "human is battery" metaphor can be viewed as simply taking the "organization is machine" metaphor to its logical conclusion. All too many organizations do precisely that, feeding off their "human resources" (metaphorically speaking, of course).

In contrast, the *organization is team* metaphor leads to a different set of sub-metaphors, such as *employee is teammate* and *experience is practice*. Unlike machines, teams are coached instead of run. A team requires communication, training, and encouragement; it values cooperation, sportsmanship, and intrinsic motivation. You can quickly see how these two different metaphors lead to divergent behaviors and outcomes.

On a larger scale, organizational metaphors describe the soul of an organization—which is itself a metaphorical phrase, based on the *organization is a person* metaphor. As previously mentioned, even thinking about metaphor requires metaphor, which can be quite disorienting.

The word organization itself has metaphorical roots. In biology, an organ is a distinct entity that performs a specific function in the body. So we talk about *organ-izing* a group of people, i.e. turning the group into an organ with a distinct structure and function. Thus, the concept of an organizational metaphor is itself built upon a nearly invisible *group is organization* metaphor. But a group does not have to be viewed as an organization. There are other metaphors we could use, other mindfunnels to peer through.

Like all metaphors, *group is organization* illuminates a portion of the reality about that group and hides other

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aspects. When we think of a program office as an organization, we unconsciously make certain assumptions about its function, structure, and priorities. However, we could just as easily justify using *group is republic* for a program office, instead of viewing it as a machine or a team or even an organization. In that construct, we no longer think in terms of teammates, cogs, or functions. Instead, we find ourselves surrounded with citizens who have rights, roles, and responsibilities, and who perhaps might even vote. The oft-repeated phrase "this office is not a democracy" would be completely out of place in a program office viewed through the group is republic metaphor.

### **Increasing Understanding**

We don't presume to dictate which metaphor(s) program managers should use for any given situation or group. Instead, we are content to simply make people aware of the fact that humans think in metaphors, and point out that metaphors are mindfunnels, which illuminate some aspects of reality and conceal others.

A metaphor can be useful or counter-productive, good or bad, and even among the good ones, some are better than others. While we can't offer up a particular metaphor as the best one for all circumstances, we can identify some attributes of a useful, effective metaphor.

A good metaphor improves our understanding of the environment and leads to constructive, productive, positive action. It reveals more than it hides—or it reveals the critical aspects while obscuring the less important aspects. Further, creative metaphors can help foster innovative solutions that might otherwise be hidden by standard metaphors.

The metaphor need not correlate to physical reality to be useful. Gordon MacKenzie's "organization is hairball" metaphor (from his book *Orbiting The Giant Hairball*) is wonderful and enlightening, even if applied to an organization composed entirely of bald people. We further suggest that multiple, even conflicting metaphors, might be interesting and useful. Mixed metaphors can be funny ("This office is like a well-oiled sports team") or insightful (there are many in David Whyte's book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*)—and both types have value.

Ultimately, the problem is not which metaphors we live by, but rather our blissful ignorance of the fact that they exist in the first place. Once we are aware of them, it is probably wiser to approach them using the *metaphor is tool* metaphor, instead of blindly embracing them and inadvertently accepting the "metaphor is fascist control state" (i.e., the Matrix) instead. For when we see metaphors as tools, we recognize that some are more suited for certain situations than others, just as we would use a hammer and a saw for two different tasks.

**“I’m trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You’re the one that has to walk through it.”**



sible, albeit very difficult. It will of course require the introduction of little red pills. Watch the movie if you don’t know what that means.

### **The Pill of Awareness**

Finally, we are reminded of a scene in *The Matrix* where a newly awakened Neo asks Morpheus, “Why do my eyes hurt?” Morpheus gives the disconcerting reply, “You’ve never used them before.”

Discovering these metaphors made our collective eyes and brains hurt in ways we’d not expected, for the same uncomfortable reason. We were awakened to the fact that the world is not what we thought it was, and we used our eyes for the first time. We realized our previous understanding of reality was largely illusory, and crucial aspects of the real world had been concealed by the mindfunnels we use. In our attempts to discover and uncover existing metaphors, we found ourselves echoing another line from *The Matrix*, where Neo is talking to himself, saying “Okey dokey ... free my mind. Right, no problem, free my mind, free my mind, no problem, right.” Seeing through the Matrix, recognizing our own mindfunnels—these are not easy tasks, but they are essential if we want to see the truth.

We leave our readers with the following questions: Do you want to see the Matrix? Are you The One? Do you have the courage and creativity to investigate, identify, and evaluate the metaphors you and your group are immersed in, thereby seeing what has been concealed? Can you see the metaphors at all? Do you even want to? What can you do to remove, reload, or revolve any metaphors that enslave your team? How do we get that little red pill?

Our metaphorical mindfunnels need constant reloading—perhaps even frequent revolutions. But changing a metaphor is difficult, and anyone who tries to use a metaphor that differs from the prevailing cultural metaphor is unlikely to get a positive result right away. After acknowledging the difficulty inherent in changing metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson point out that “people in power get to impose their metaphors.” He goes on to explain, “Much of cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones.” So, changing metaphors, even on a large scale, is indeed pos-

As Morpheus said to Neo when he offered the red pill of awareness, “I’m trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You’re the one that has to walk through it.”

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