Talking About Culture Is Hard. This Unusual Method Makes It Easier.

Here’s how we use metaphor to unlock positive dialogue and change around organizational behavior.

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A Note From The Editor

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As professional designers of organizations, we know that talking about culture and organizational change is hard. Organizational dynamics are covert and seemingly invisible. One tool we use to help our clients uncover the truth and unlock change is figurative language, such as metaphors, analogies and similes.

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Figurative language has the power to take dynamics that are difficult – or risky – to describe, and immediately offer an intuitive comparison. It helps move conversations from the theoretical and vague to the specific and actionable. If your organization aspires to be more nimble, collaborative and flexible, the skill of naming and negotiating behavioral codes is essential.

Here are four tools we use as external practitioners that you

can use within your own organization.

1. Be a parrot.

Imagine you're a parrot sitting in a cage inside the organization. What repeated or unique-to-the-organization phrases do you hear? We can use these phrases to both navigate and acknowledge a complex situation with only a simple reference.

For example, when Mollie started at IDEO, she experienced immediate culture shock. While she was pleasantly surprised at how strong IDEO's friendly and creative culture was, she also felt like she had no point of reference for how to behave. None of her previous jobs functioned anything like IDEO. How was she supposed to know when to speak up in meetings with senior partners or how to respond to a reply-all email chain? Then she attended IDEO 101, IDEO's immersive introduction to its culture and design process. IDEO founder David Kelley gave the new IDEOers an analogy. He explained that starting at IDEO is like traveling in Japan. As a foreigner, you know you're probably breaking many cultural rules, but none of the locals will tell you, because the Japanese are generally very polite. By providing this metaphor, Kelley later made it safe for Mollie to ask her colleagues, "Am I having a Japan moment here?" Everyone could have a laugh and acknowledge the cultural dynamic without trying to change it.

One of the biggest determinants of professional success is one's ability to understand the informal logic of the organization — the unspoken rules. Asking for and seeking out figurative language helps you make sense of a new culture and speeds the transition from being an outsider to being an insider.

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2. Look to nature.

When we're feeling stuck coming up with metaphorical examples, we often look to nature. Nature provides a rich selection of organizational metaphors because the whole system has often been studied and documented in a way that's rare with human organizations.

One of IDEO's teams recently went to the zoo to find metaphors to define a client's organizational culture. The zookeeper explained that certain species of animals are more collaborative than others. Chimpanzees, for example, are aggressive and don't like to share, since they come from an environment where food is scarce. Bonobos, however, are more collaborative: They willingly share their toys and food with other bonobos, since they come from an environment where they do not have to compete for food. The team used this metaphor to start a conversation about what would need to be true about the way the organization distributes resources in order to move from a chimp culture to a bonobos culture.

No time for a field trip? IDEO developed a downloadable Nature Card Deck that has metaphors from nature.

Image Credit: IDEO

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3. Use "more like, less like."

Is your organization more like a machine or a plant? In one case, IDEO worked with a government security agency whose executives knew their front line security officers needed to

act with greater calm and human perception. The agency wanted the officers to be less intimidating and aggressive, and more focused and perceptive. But, instead of telling the officers, "You are currently acting *wrong*, and we need you to act *right*," which could come across as negative, the agency wanted to take a more nuanced approach.

IDEO suggested that the agency use figurative language, and came up with a series of similes to describe this desired shift. One simile was, "Be more like a park ranger, less like a bouncer." Another simile was, "Be more like a Pointer, less like a Rottweiler." The beauty of these similes is that they are each only one phrase long, but they contain a multitude of descriptions and dimensions within each word. These similes also offer a shared language moving forward, since they are easy for people in the organization to adopt. For example, after the training, an officer could remind a fellow officer to "be more like a park ranger."

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4. Borrow from other worlds.

How can metaphors help you explore different scenarios for your organization's future? A few years ago, IDEO worked with a foundation to launch a new social venture, but the client team was getting stuck. IDEO Associate Partner Diana Rhoten explained, "The clients were so constrained by how they currently operated, they couldn't envision a new way of organizing in the future even though they agreed that they needed it. We asked: How do we get the clients out of their own way?"

Image Credit: IDEO

The IDEO team decided to borrow metaphors from a fictional world as a method for helping the client imagine alternative futures. One of the clients had described one of the foundation's previous successful projects as "like Batman's bat signal." This inspired IDEO to use Batman characters as metaphors to articulate several different roles the foundation could play in the future. For example, Batman was "the Operator," and his superpowers were implementing and executing. Bruce Wayne was "the Funder," and his superpowers were influencing and investing. The foundation's team ended up picking a combination of roles: Batman, Henry Ducard ("the Trainer"), and Alfred Pennyworth ("the Facilitator"). Borrowing from the world of comic books helped the foundation team step outside of their current realities and constraints that they couldn't shake, and step into prioritizing the future roles and responsibilities. In October 2015, the foundation launched the new venture.

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