



# Metaphor

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# Metaphor

(see also analogies, brainstorming)

## What is it?

Tool to help in creative problem solving.

## Why and when used?

In creative problem-solving and brainstorming sessions, used to help move away from the obvious and to encourage 'out of the box' thinking.

## How does it work?

A metaphor is a direct link between two apparently unrelated things which creates a picture in our minds which helps us see something differently. For example:

- 'A camel is the ship of the desert'
- 'Time is money'
- 'We need to turn the tanker of this organization around'

Literature makes extensive use of the technique; Shakespeare's plays would be much drier without the powerful metaphors he uses to bring things to life. For example when Macbeth talks about '*sleep knitting up the raveled sleeve of care*' he creates a powerful image of the restorative power of sleep. And the famous speech by Jacques in 'As you like it' uses the image of theatre to help focus on the ways in which life plays out:

*'All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances'*

We have the ability to make this kind of link without feeling surprised by it – and it is the way our dreams work, creating the strangest of combinations which we can believe in. Neuroscientists believe it arises from making unexpected connections between neurons – and it offers a powerful resource for stimulating the imagination to find new insights.

## Using metaphor

Used as a creativity technique metaphor can open new perspectives and give new directions for developing ideas. It's a powerful tool for helping people 'think outside the box', forcing their neural

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processes in new directions. Importantly metaphors aren't logical; they jump the tracks in our thinking processes. (By the way both of those images – 'outside the box' and 'jumping the tracks' are metaphors, helping explain something through a picture)

For example let's think about trying to find ideas to improve the speed and flow of processes in a service or manufacturing business. There are many logical ways to do this but in a brainstorming session it is also useful to get wild ideas which stimulate thinking in new directions. Metaphor is one way of doing this.

The process is as follows:

First define the problem, representing it in as many different ways as possible. So in our 'improving flow' example we could look at ways of reducing delays and queues, eliminating or cutting down barriers, or changing the layout and sequence of operations.

Then generate some metaphors for that problem; examples might be:

- Bottlenecks
- Trying to fit a quart into a pint pot
- Cutting through the problems like a knife through butter
- A ship gliding through the ocean
- Avoiding crashing into the rocks

Having generated a series of these pictures we can use them as starting points for ideas about how to relate these back to the problem we began with. For example, the idea of a bottleneck is a vivid image of too much trying to move through too narrow a gap – so could we try widening the gap? Or run the stream of things through two or more gaps, instead of everything going through the same one? Or slow down the pressure so things can flow through smoothly?

If we take the 'crashing into the rocks' metaphor then how might we steer the ship to avoid them? Could we plan ahead so that our course takes us safely past them? Could we put a flashing light on the rocks so we know where they are and can take avoiding action? Could we send out a demolition team to destroy the rocks?

The solution ideas which come from the metaphors may not in themselves be practical ideas but they often give us new directions along which to think. (Interestingly the concept of 'lean thinking' which has revolutionized manufacturing and service operations is an innovation born out of a powerful emphasis on this flow metaphor. And the name itself – 'lean' comes from the metaphor of a piece of meat with little fat (=waste) on it.....)

For more on this and other creativity tools see

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<http://www.mindtools.com/>

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### **Activity**

Choose a problem to work on – for example:

1. How to cut costs in a business
2. How to improve customer service
3. How to convince people to adopt a new idea
4. How to 'pitch' a new business idea to some venture capitalists
5. How to increase flexibility in the organization

or pick one of your own.

Now try to generate a list of metaphors for the problem. For example, cutting costs might trigger the metaphor of losing weight whilst the organizational flexibility challenge might generate a metaphor around elephants learning to dance.

Then try and use the metaphors to trigger new insights and ideas for solving your chose problem.

### **Activity**

Use the analogies technique to generate ideas around solving the following problems:

- (1). Improving the customer experience in a restaurant. (for example in nature mother birds actually feed their young nestlings, putting the food into their mouths. Perhaps the waiters could feed the diners....!)
- (2). Ideas to improve the organization you work in – for example what would it mean if this organization were like a cheetah? How could it become more agile, able to accelerate fast and turn quickly?
- (3). New product ideas for the car industry (for example in nature birds like starlings can fly very close together in formation without crashing into each other....)
- (4). New service ideas in a hospital
- (5). New ideas for improving flow in a factory or service operation – for example reducing the time spent queuing at airports

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Or try and work of a problem of your own choice and use analogies to generate some new thinking about that.