

Nonprofits and Metaphors: Using Language to Create Better Outcomes

by Scott Anderson

AS STAKEHOLDERS IN THE nonprofit community, we should carefully consider the metaphors we use to describe the current economic environment. According to language researchers, metaphors are not just phrases that make our language more interesting but also mechanisms that shape how we think. The metaphors we use, then, can exert tremendous influence on others' perception of the world. In turn, these perceptions frame goals and beliefs about possibilities, which translate into action or the failure to act.

So what are the prevailing metaphors used to describe the current financial crisis? Ask just about any nonprofit stakeholder to describe how the economy has affected nonprofits, and you'll likely hear some variation—overflowing with figurative language—of the following response: “We’re in the midst of the *perfect storm*, and we need to *tighten our belts* to maintain our *fiscal health* and *avoid the precipice* that awaits many nonprofits.” These metaphors appear frequently in industry articles, research reports, and conversations among stakeholders in the nonprofit world. As descriptive devices, these metaphors seem appropriate and effective to convey nonprofits’ current economic situation. But they also depict nonprofits in a dire situation from which

they may not recover and offer few solutions to the challenges nonprofits face.

As a result, the key problem with such metaphors is that they can generate unintended outcomes that fail to address nonprofits’ plight or that entrench nonprofits’ vulnerabilities. They can encourage a picture of powerlessness against which nonprofits are too weak to prevail.

So at one level, the purpose of this article is to generate awareness and conversation about the various metaphors we use to describe the current economy and their respective implications. This article unpacks some of these metaphors and their potential to undermine positive approaches to present challenges. Finally, “Hopeful Metaphors for the Financial Downturn” on page 60 proposes new metaphors that can promote proactive approaches to our economic plight. At a deeper level, this article strives to promote metaphors that encourage fundamental change within organizations that most need it.

Cultivating Change, not Complacency

Part of the problem with our current metaphors is that they can discourage nonprofits from taking action and can engender inertia. According to *Chronicle of Philanthropy* writer Ian Wilhelm, for example, many nonprofit experts believe

“charities and foundations are too complacent in the face of the [current] economic upheaval and only a few have embraced the radical thinking that is needed to maintain, and potentially strengthen, the nonprofit world.” The notion that the current economy will tolerate complacency by assuming that the conditions are simply a passing phase is possible—anything is possible—but it is not probable. The rules of the nonprofit game have fundamentally changed—the third sector now involves new levels of accountability, transparency, and creative collaboration as well as limited resources and mounting demand—and only those players able to play by these new rules will be allowed to continue. For other organizations, it may simply be “game over.” And the prospect of nonprofits closing worries me, because our communities *need* nonprofits. With this article, my greater intention is to challenge complacency where needed and encourage “radical thinking” that can strengthen the nonprofit world. I propose that a powerful way to accomplish this goal is through well-crafted, shared metaphors that can catalyze necessary change.

The most effective way to change a system is to change how people perceive their world. As Meadows states, “People who manage to intervene in systems

at the level of paradigm hit a leverage point that totally transforms systems.” Following Meadows’s lead, I would add that people who manage to intervene in paradigms at the level of metaphors likewise hit a leverage point capable of transforming paradigms. What is at stake with metaphors, then, is not a claim to who can sound the most creative; instead it is about who has the ability to claim meaning and thereby make sense of what is going on in the world and how to respond. Change a metaphor, change a paradigm, change a system.

The system considered in this article is the nonprofit community at large. The specific paradigms being challenged are the metaphors many of us have adopted in our communication—in verbal and written texts with employees, volunteers, donors, and others—about the current economic environment. And the advocated transformation of the system is a modification of our

metaphors to affirming frameworks that encourage engagement, empowerment, and “aha” moments of organizational enlightenment.

The Inadequacy of Current Metaphors

What are the implications of the metaphors used to describe the financial crisis? This is where I’m troubled. Specifically, I worry about the potential impact of these metaphors on our ability to identify and implement the solutions nonprofits need *now* to prepare for the months and years ahead. We may wield a mighty sword of figurative speech now without recognizing the attendant consequences of every swing later.

I have come to the conclusion that my discomfort with current metaphors can be distilled into three main categories: (1) the literal implications of these metaphorical representations, (2) the levels of realistic empowerment they imply, and (3) a general sense of “doomed-ness”

versus a sense of growth and hope. These categories will be explained in terms of some common metaphorical themes present in many nonprofit communications.

Let’s consider these categories in light of the metaphors used to capture the financial crisis. While we’ve used the metaphors of a storm, lean body weight, and physical health to describe the current economic environment, for example, we have not considered the impact of the metaphors or the action that nonprofits might take based on the mental models that underlie these metaphors.

In other words, a storm, cutting back food intake, or an illness is likely to implicitly promote a logical, expected response that results in a particular solution. Framing the economic environment as a storm, for example, might prompt nonprofits to respond by hunkering down and finding temporary solutions as they wait for the storm to pass. The

PHILANTHROPY IN/SIGHT™

The New Data Visualization Platform for Global Philanthropy



Visualize grantmaking impact around the world or in your community.

Philanthropy In/Sight is the indispensable mapping tool for grantmakers, policymakers, and researchers who want to see the impact of philanthropy around the world. Combining the Foundation Center’s wealth of data on grantmakers and grants with familiar Google maps, *Philanthropy In/Sight* is a powerful tool for transparency—and for enhancing the reach of your grantmaking to tackle critical issues in a changing world.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

philanthropyinsight.org

“Wow...one of the coolest philanthropy products I’ve ever seen.”
—Tactical Philanthropy



With *Philanthropy In/Sight*, every picture tells a story:

- ◆ Create U.S. or world maps to see funding relationships and giving patterns like never before
- ◆ Overlay dozens of demographic and thematic indicators drawn from the American Human Development Project, the American Community Survey, and other sources
- ◆ See where philanthropy has made a difference...or where the need for funding is greatest

To request a free trial, e-mail insight@foundationcenter.org or call (800) 424-9836.

Hopeful Metaphors for the Financial Downturn

Ultimately the critique of our financial crisis metaphors as presented in the article above advocates new, more hopeful metaphors that can replace those we have deemed inadequate.

In an effort to identify appropriate substitutes, we asked members of nonprofit leadership to propose metaphors that they believe are more appropriate for our economic times. The results were as revealing of the executive's personality and world view as it was attached to these times.

"Swing for the fences!" and "Knock one out of the park!"

—The energetic and forthright Robert Ottenhoff, GuideStar

Then Ottenhoff elaborated on these alternatives:

David Brooks of the *New York Times* wrote about the sociologist Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. Just before World War II, he emigrated to the United States and began teaching at Harvard, converting his lectures into English. But he had a problem. According to Brooks, "He noticed that his students weren't grasping his points. His language was not the problem, it was the allusions. He used literary and other allusions when he wanted to talk about ethics, community, mysticism and emotion. But none of the students seemed to get it. Then, after a few years, he switched to sports analogies. Suddenly, everything clicked.

'The world in which the American student who comes to me at about twenty years of age really has confidence in is the world of sport,' he would write. 'This world encompasses all of his virtues and experiences, affection and interests; therefore, I have built my entire sociology around the experiences an American has in athletics and games.'"

In the same article, Brooks quotes Professor Michael Allen Gillespie of Duke University, who says that "American sport teaches that effort leads to victory, a useful lesson in a work-oriented society. Sport also helps Americans navigate the tension between team loyalty and individual glory." Gillespie appreciates the way sports culture has influenced American students too. "It discourages whining, and rewards self-discipline. It teaches self-control and its own form of justice, which has a more powerful effect than anything taught in the classroom."

So the code is unbroken. We've been describing our work in earnest and serious ways, when the world was thinking sports. Nonprofits don't talk the sports lingo well enough.

It's ironic, since so much of what we talk about is really "inside baseball" and so arcane no one can understand what we're talking about. Maybe we need more talk of home runs out of the ballpark when we have a successful program—or asking for patience when we're only hitting singles.

Could we say our programs are in "the red zone" when we're at a critical moment? Successfully completing a phase of a project could be "moving the chains." Nearing the end of a program could be "first and goal." How many times have you heard someone described as "not a team player"? And when was the last time you heard of an executive director "taking one for the team"? Development directors get it. They're always talking about more shots, more goals. And how many times have you thrown a Hail Mary pass to a funder? Maybe even tried swinging for the fences with the audacity of hope?

The indomitable Sister Margaret Leonard of Project Hope, a community center in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Boston, imagines us as living in a time in which we could leap away from the realm of the ordinary and familiar.

A quantum leap is explicitly discontinuous change, and it requires a fundamental change in energy. The opportunity of this economic crisis is the challenge to reinvent or transform ourselves while embodying in perhaps new structural ways our core mission and guiding principles. To make a truly dramatic leap as an organization or movement, we have to fundamentally believe in our collective ability to rise: constituents, staff, and board. The language of physics is about energy and motion, chaos, purpose, and potential.

The very danger of this time is the springboard for imagination and action. A quantum leap is a change from one state of being to another, so it might be frightening but nurturing [to hear] the calls of both hope and action. The capacity to rise implies the intention to leap. Our primary responsibility is to rise and leap, not to stand still and fret.

And Ivey Allen from the Foundation for the Mid South, which is notable for its out-of-the-box work with community organizations in Mississippi and Louisiana, says, "Seize the moment!"

Obstacles and challenges are before us daily, but so are the opportunities for doing things differently. The ultimate concern and our guiding light should be "How do we best

serve people and communities?" Sometimes things have to be stripped away so you can see more clearly. Change is not supposed to be comfortable; it does not happen overnight. But we all have to be willing to try new paths when old ones have begun to take us places we do not want to go.

And the ever-fascinating Fran Barrett of Community Resource Exchange contributed "Fran's Many Metaphors":

1. "Fundraising these days is like a never-ending game of musical chairs, with fewer spaces each round: only the agile and quick survive."
2. "We had a civil-rights movement, a women's movement, an environmental movement; each raised public awareness and led to better public policy. We need a nonprofit movement."
3. "Today, fundraising is like a young woman of limited means trying to get a bridal gown at Filene's Basement's annual sale: more or less madness, but a determined shopper may just get a great bargain."¹

In sum: no matter which metaphor you use, watch your language!

Endnotes

1. Editors' note: I am the mother of a woman of limited means who got a \$1,000 dress at the real Filene's Basement for \$79. She altered it quite alarmingly; paired it with high, white boots; and it was a wedding and a bride to remember.

metaphor of lean body weight might suggest that an organization needs to cut back its use of resources and continue to tighten its belt, but only until a future day that will assuredly bring more food to the organizational cupboards in potentially gluttonous proportions.

The key concern is that *the response suggested by the metaphor may not be the effective response required by reality*. If organizations make decisions based on these metaphors, they may simply hope that things will improve. As a result, nonprofits may be passive and expect that they will ultimately return to business as usual. But this is the most harmful course for a faltering nonprofit in 2010. This course may contribute to the “complacency” Wilhelm referenced earlier. When nonprofit stakeholders use these metaphors without considering the implications of these metaphors, they pick up one end of a powerful semantic stick without recognizing that they have picked up the other end as well. The result is that they hold a potentially powerful tool but render it useless, if not dangerous.

Realistic Empowerment

My next concern involves empowerment, or the lack thereof. Consider how the precipice, storm, body weight, and illness metaphors can promote powerlessness and passivity. Comparing the economic downturn with the edge of a precipice has been used to predict a future in which many nonprofit organizations will not have the money to sustain themselves and will go out of business. The perfect-storm metaphor generally invokes the combined challenges of serving more people with reduced funds and increased accountability. And the physical illness metaphor connotes an external threat that has invaded an internal body (in this case, the economy threatening the viability of an

organization). Each scenario attributes control to external forces: an entity being pushed over the edge of a cliff; an inability to control nature’s rains, and illness as an unwelcome intruder. Cast as they are, each challenge can make individuals feel powerless.

In reality, however, organizations *can* do something. Despite what these metaphors suggest, nonprofits are not powerless and at the mercy of external forces. Nonprofits have undertaken myriad tactics—including creative collaboration, volunteer forces, and novel fundraising strategies—as part of a “new way” of conducting business. To be clear, though, I don’t advocate a Pollyanna perspective, but I also reject a perceived helplessness. What I want to pursue is realistic empowerment: where we can change, we must. One way to change is by challenging the realm of what is possible through the metaphors we use.

Doom versus Hope

The final source of my concern with the current metaphors to describe the financial crisis is an impending sense of doom. There’s not much hope in approaching a devastating storm, a famine, or a cliff’s edge. Among the most necessary characteristics in difficult times, hope is near the top of the list, and these metaphors offer it sparingly, if at all.

Behavioral psychologists have proposed that motivation to act is related to how much an outcome is valued as well as the likelihood of achieving the particular outcome. When an outcome is valued but attaining it seems unlikely, motivation to act is low. By promoting metaphors with a gloom-and-doom undertone, motivation among nonprofits to make necessary change is undermined. This returns full circle to Wilhelm’s original claim that “many charities and foundations are too complacent in the face of the [current] economic upheaval and

only a few have embraced the radical thinking that is needed to maintain, and potentially strengthen, the nonprofit world.” It may well be that motivation to act has been sucked dry; we’ve collectively used demotivating metaphors, and now the impact of those images has simply played out as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Empowering Metaphors

At this point, it makes sense to offer affirming, empowering, and hopeful metaphors. Unfortunately, however, I don’t have the answer as to which metaphors are the best substitutes (for more on substitute metaphors, see “Hopeful Metaphors for the Financial Downturn” on page 60). I can identify the elements that would make for good metaphors—affirming, empowering, hopeful, vivid, memorable, culturally shared, cognitively understood, and experientially known—but I have not yet found the magic metaphor wand that would create my ideal solution.

And I’m OK with that. Right now we don’t need a magic wand, but rather collective, careful, and creative attention to the metaphors we use. Then we need to walk the walk, and talk the talk and share our metaphors with one another. By drawing attention to the metaphors we use, perhaps we can collectively devise better ways of conveying our ideas and solutions. If we can join together to change the paradigm of what these economic difficulties mean, we can collectively change how we respond to the current challenges and, ultimately, create change within the nonprofit system. Instead of relegating ourselves to game over, it’s time to step up and say, “Game on!”

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 170109.