

# **SIMPLIFY**



**Applying Metaphors  
to Business Problems**

**By Larry Raymond**

# About the Author

**Larry Raymond** is a leading expert on the use of metaphors in business. He's the founder of the Metaphor Language Research Center LLC, based in Boulder, Colorado, USA and co-founder of The River Leadership Resources, a non-profit based in Geneva, Switzerland. He's held executive positions at IBM, Lotus Development, Digital Equipment and Union Carbide.

In addition to researching ways to simplify, Larry consults to businesses, international agencies and governments on improving operations and developing leaders.

Larry holds both USA and Irish citizenship, lived in Switzerland for ten years and in Denmark for two, worked in more than 50 countries and published *Reinventing Communication* in 1994, the landmark book in use of visual metaphors for increasing business effectiveness.

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A metaphor **compares one thing to another and suggests a likeness**. If you compare a complex business issue to something simple you know well, **your metaphor becomes a language for conversation and problem-solving**.

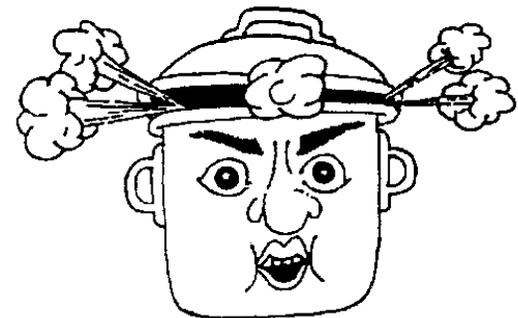
Suppose you compare your issue to a village and draw a map. You might show work groups as buildings, roads as connections and fires as problems. By naming the issue's parts and relationships with symbols, you've built a vocabulary to describe your mental map to others. Familiar, physical symbols make the issue quickly understandable. **It's now "Mind Sized"**.

Making it Mind-Sized is critical to your success:

*If you're leading others but can't describe the problem situation for them in logical and emotionally clear terms, you won't inspire the passion and determined action to solve it.*

Frustration is everywhere and heads boil over when leaders exhort people to action on fuzzy issues!

*(Such as, "Work smarter not harder!")*



# ***Beyond making it Mind-Sized,*** *metaphors and symbols* **engage** ***imagination*** and lead to:

- ▶ Original thinking
- ▶ Speedy conclusions
- ▶ Cooperation on the path forward

Even though you may not have heard, they've been used hundreds of times and are always effective.



## So, why not read on and learn to use them ?

You might steal a base on your competitors  
(to use a metaphor)

**and... your company will stand out  
from the crowd!**

# THE “SIMPLIFY” RECIPE:

## Metaphors and Symbols



# When I talk about metaphors in business, I mean **visual** metaphors.

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**It's a lot easier to simplify with a visual image—** it makes sure the picture in your head is the same as the one in your colleague's.

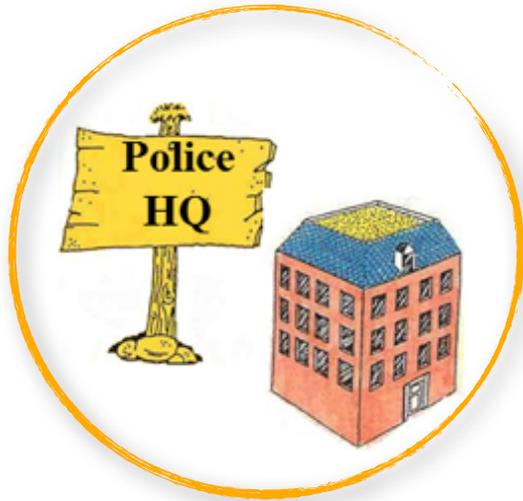
**(You then save time by dividing the words used by 1,000!)**



Let's continue with the example of a **village as a metaphor for a process or activity.**

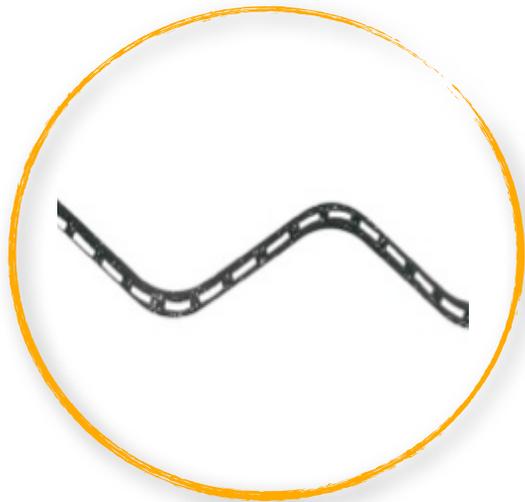
# The village metaphor has a big vocabulary

**A building** is a place **where work gets done**. A department or group. You write what the building represents on a signpost.



**If there's a fire**, there's a problem in the building,

**A road** connects buildings.  
It shows a relationship—*the better the road, the better the relationship.*



**A tree,** might fall onto a road,  
and *disrupt the flow of information.* It takes work to remove it.

# You can build a map of your issue using these and dozens of other symbols you would find in a village.



You map it like you would map any process or strategy, but **you'll find metaphors are more nuanced and evocative than flow charts.** Since you always need several people to decide anything, **building metaphoric maps is generally a group exercise.**

# Here's the **sequence:** **Building** a Village Map

## ▶ Step 1

Show stakeholders



## ▶ Step 2

Show connections



## ▶ Step 3

Show Problems or Strengths



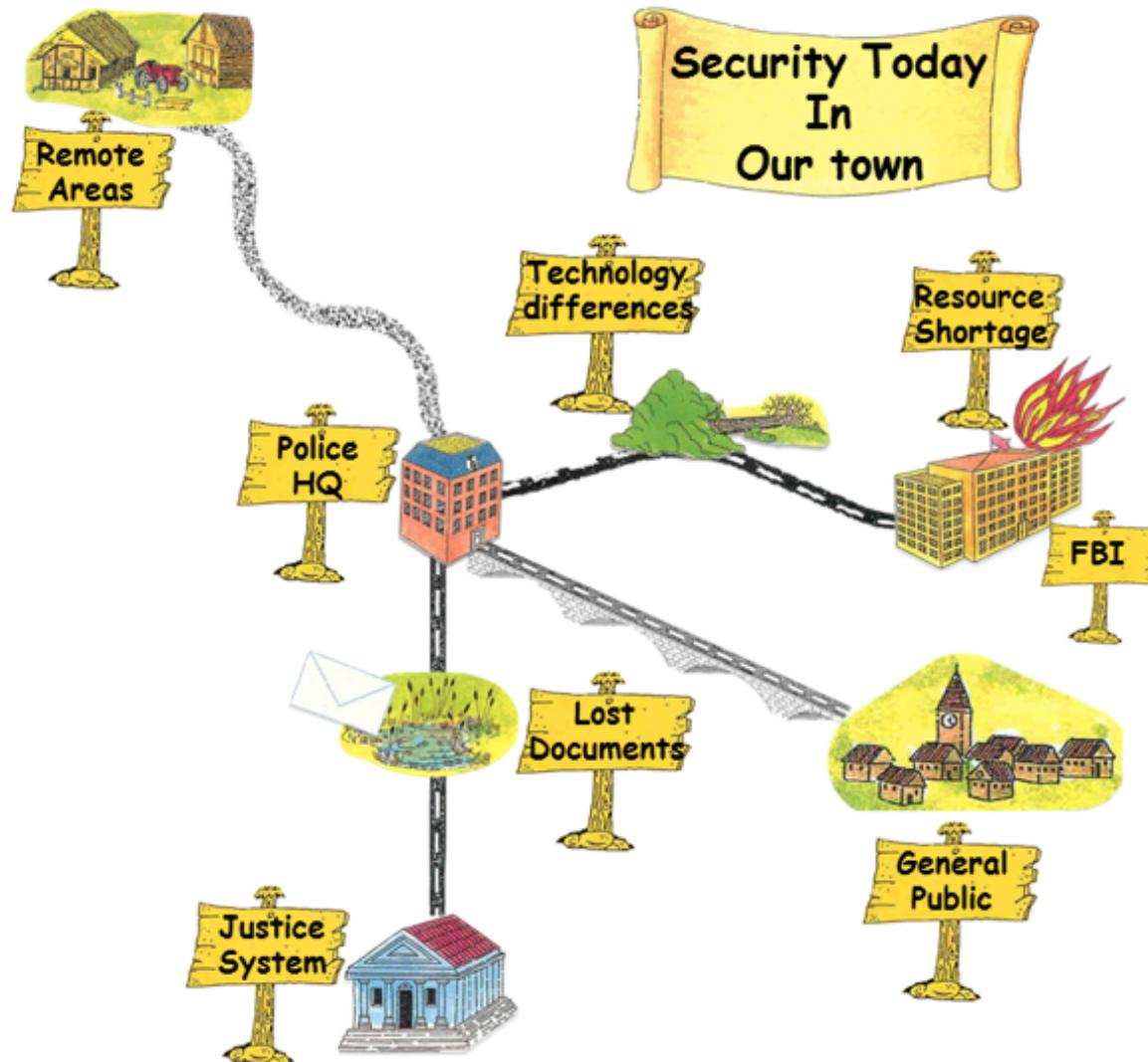
## ▶ Step 4

Write down key points in words

MAJOR PROBLEMS  
1. Police systems  
can't access FBI files  
2. FBI can't invest

# Your map tells your story

and might look something like this simple example:



- ▶ The town center is well served by police
- ▶ Remote areas are at risk due to distance
- ▶ Police have good relations with court, but poor file management
- ▶ Our old technology hinders support from FBI. They can't spare resources

# The metaphor pulls out the **WHOLE** story

Groups of people build metaphoric maps of situations.

By doing it **together**, they **talk** about what's going on, **agree** what symbols best represent the various parts of the issue they're working on.

**By building their map**, they show the big picture and include a stakeholder analysis, a relationship analysis, a process flow and its weaknesses. They may also use lots of other symbols to elaborate the story, such as:

... and many more symbols of what may go on in a village, or an organization.

**Old ideas** that are locking them in



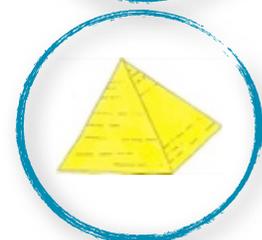
**Uncontrollable** phenomena that may totally change the landscape



**Man-made barriers** that need not exist.



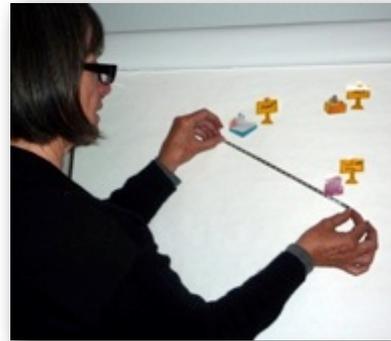
**Timeless values** that guide operations in the village...



# It's best to split up if the group is **more than 5 people.**

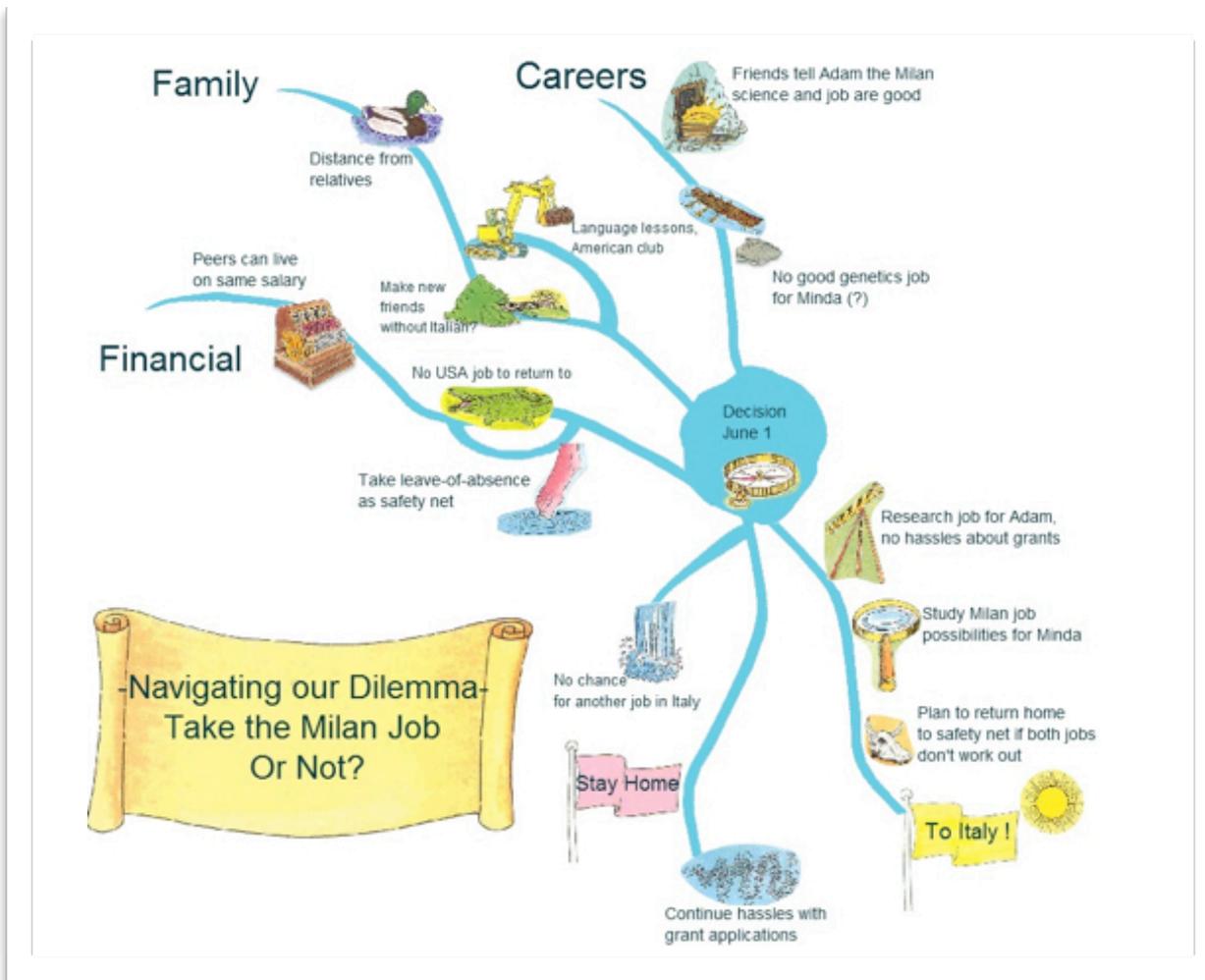
That way everyone can get around the map and **personally engage.**

They use **stickers** that symbolize **aspects of a village**



...and **after** maps are created,  
one person presents the map to  
the other groups.

# A river is a good metaphor for showing the flow of time, sequence of actions, goals, obstacles and potentially un-wanted consequences:



This river map shows a family's **decision process**.

**Situation:** Two scientists, one with a cool job offer in Italy

**Decision Factors:** Careers, Family and Finances

**Goals:** Fun long term assignment for Adam and, he avoids having to apply for grants each year

**Concerns:**

Finding a good job in her field for Minda

Make the finances work

What to do if Adam's Milan job doesn't work?

**A ZOO** is a useful metaphor for surfacing the attitudes that drive behaviors. Here are a few “in your face” symbol examples that don’t require a dictionary to understand. These images aren’t what count. It’s the perception and discussion of “Why pick these symbols, among the dozens you could have chosen?”



# TWO EXAMPLES



example

# 1 Metaphor Mapping for International Coordination

Marie Leyvraz is project manager for a new international system to be used in 45 countries. **She has an indirect staff of six** and works with a national lead and deputy in each country. **She needs to turn them into active, passionate drivers of program implementation.** Each country lead in turn must gain the complete support of at least 12 local directors and key staff members.

**- Marie has a real coordination challenge!** - *Over 500 people in 45 countries must understand, tailor and implement her system.* They have to be convinced to **put aside concerns** about how it affects their own jobs, define some details and how it will operate in their countries. They also will have to do a lot of work to **adapt and document dozens of processes in each country.** Not to mention make the program work, **measure its results and fix the root cause** of any problems that surface in the new operation.

**All country leads work in a second language.** They will need to drive both superiors and peers. Helping the national leads overcome those imposing barriers is a critical success factor for Marie and her director. **While seeking tools that might help, they decided to try Metaphor Mapping.** Marie planned four steps to verify it was up to the task before making part of the program.

**The first step** was to experiment with a Mapping exercise for her core team and a few others to get a sense if it would work on the large scale problems she faced.

In a two day workshop session, Marie, her director and eight others discussed the program's operation at a high level, built maps of how it was working in its current, initial phase and how they wanted it to ideally work.



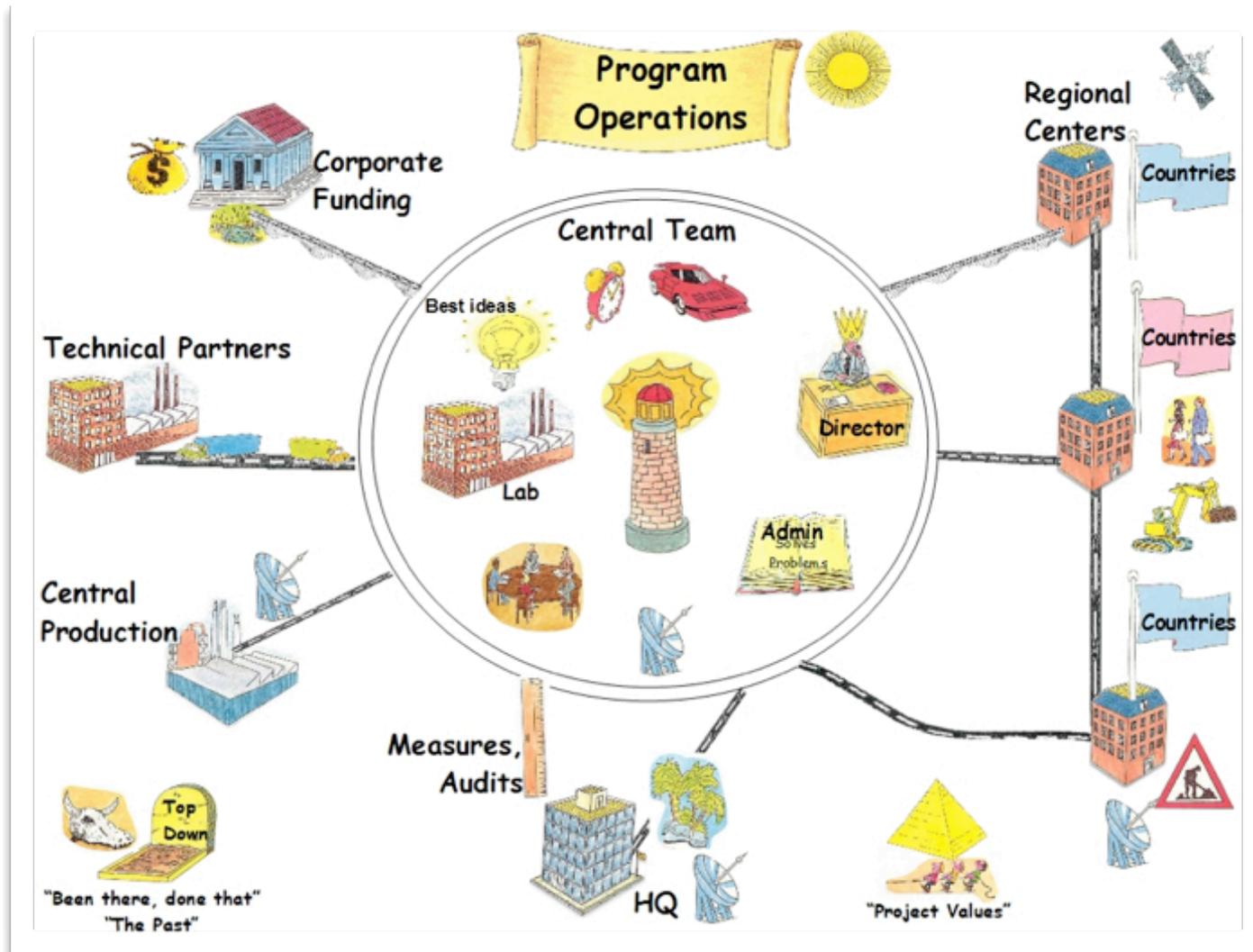
**They found:**

*“The symbolic stickers were fun to work with and gave us a good overall picture.”*

“We didn’t have to be too creative in this session since we already generally knew how we wanted the program to work, but it surprisingly made us think about some things we hadn't considered.”

*“We saw right away it would get the national leaders on their feet and working together.”*

The map below gives an idea of the **program's ideal operation**



# The second step was the critical test:

Apply Metaphor Mapping in a thirteen country regional workshop.

## Marie needed to:

- ▶ **Ensure** each national lead and deputy have a **deep understanding** of the program and **contribute insights** on how it would best work;
- ▶ **Set** a broad *implementation strategy*, **adaptable to the specifics** of each country;
- ▶ **New insights** for the Central Team on the type of **support services** they should offer to countries through regional centers.

# Workshop Results -

**Rave reviews** from participants  
**A sense of unity** was in the air.

*“I had a professor once who showed me the power of using metaphors to help everyone see something the same way. **This is even better because you make the metaphor yourself.**”*

*“This was good. **We know what we have to put in place now.** I got some good ideas from the others.”*

*“**I enjoyed working with the others,** and it will be fun to go home and show my daughter what I did at the meeting.”*

# The third step will take place in the next two months.

Marie's team will provide in-country workshop support to two of the countries that requested it. **Their goals are to map the coordination process and build their teams.**

Following those sessions, **the fourth step** will be to start the program roll out to all regions and support in-country workshops as requested.

Marie: "I knew from our first trial workshop that Metaphor Mapping had potential to **make our meetings more exciting** and to **change the paradigm** from us lecturing the countries to the countries telling us what were the practicalities of implementing our program..... but **this session still surprised me.** Perhaps it was because one of my colleagues from another department attended the introduction and left just before the workshop started. He told me he couldn't imagine taking the risk of bringing thirteen countries together and trying to get them to work through all this. That made me really uneasy. But, as soon as I returned to the meeting room, **I could see it was just the greatest.** Everyone talking in their small groups. When they left after two days, it was with a lot of enthusiasm. **We made tremendous progress.**"

**Her boss:** *Several national leaders phoned and told me they liked Marie's approach and would give us full support. Each one said, in effect, 'That was the best meeting we've ever attended.' It's attitude that counts and we're clearly off to a good start."*

## example **2** Managing **Culture Change** in a Manufacturing Company

Culture usually interests organizations only when there's **a new boss**, they're **performing poorly** or facing a **crisis**. This case is an exception. (As in the first example, this is a real case but hopefully well disguised)

Gordon Smith was VP of Manufacturing. His **organization** included **plants, engineering and client support groups** in more than a dozen locations. Gordon had been in his job for six years and had met his product delivery, inventory and quality objectives every year. His cost reductions had made corporate life pleasant. Being a bit of a hero, he had freedom from oversight and the latitude to reward his staff with incentive trips, similar to the way the sales force was treated..

Gordon had inherited a motivated group of professionals, given them lots of headroom and reduced overall costs by 8-10% in each of his six years. Much of his success was due to his personal, maniacal focus on cost, and having drilled the rallying cry of **15%!** into each of his managers. **15% was his goal of total cost to corporate gross revenue.**

# So...why change?

The momentum would continue and achieving 15% , down from 29% six years earlier, was a sure thing. But, **the low hanging fruit had already been harvested**, and global commodity price reductions had ended their downward drift. In short, **there was little room left to be a hero by cutting cost**. At the same time, **his cost focus was starting to show its own downside. Client complaints were rising**, industry quality trends were outshining his and he sensed the whole organization was becoming too complacent and losing their enthusiasm.



**Change wasn't forced on Gordon**— he just thought it was time the ship changed course. He knew the Cost rallying cry had to change but he didn't have any sense of just which goals should replace it. **He needed some help.**

## When he discussed it with his HR

**leader,** Gordon came to recognize he had an asset he had never considered and probably couldn't have named without HR help: **a vibrant community.** All the functions and locations worked well together and were committed to the good of the whole. He decided to call on his community to help him sort out new priorities and guide changes that would be needed in the culture. As for a new rallying cry, why not ask them for that too?



Gordon asked his HR lead, Laura, to call together the 50 top people from all sites and structure a workshop to set a changed course. Gordon would make final decisions but wanted his community to **collectively think out the options,** make cases and advocate them.

After checking with colleagues, Laura recommended **Metaphor Mapping** as the vehicle for the workshop. She liked what she heard about its **ability to generate serious results** but with a **lighter touch than some other methods**. Since thirty of the fifty participants would be traveling, she wanted it to be a fun and rewarding experience that would lead to good future teamwork as well as address Gordon's main concerns. **She wanted culture to be addressed in the context of the group's work to fulfill its core mission. Optimizing processes and managing cost would always be a fundamental part of their mission, even if they took on an additional, customer-related, revenue promoting role.**

The workshop was scheduled for April in a large room of a local hotel. Workshop agenda was planned and small group tasks defined in the areas of business process improvement, and culture change.

## ► **The Community-Driven Culture Workshop**

**Three process optimization challenges were assigned** to six groups of 5 or 6 and the culture change challenge was assigned to two groups of 6. Breakout sessions were followed by plenary presentation sessions and then the next tasks assigned.

**The interspersing of process improvement with culture analysis was energizing.** It quickly was obvious that the values, attitudes and behaviors of team members were critically relevant to their success. The image below is the output of the small group work session related to the R&D Interface group. Here's what it "Says":

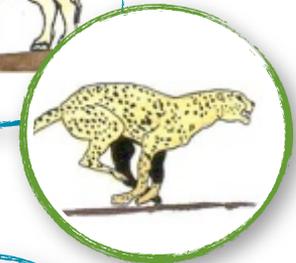
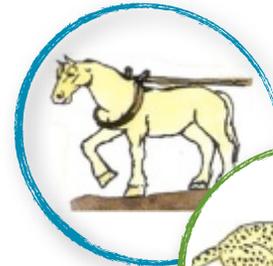
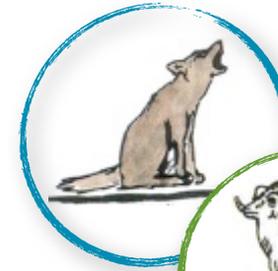
The R&D Interface group consider themselves a bit **naive and a little lost, today.** They did what they were told and were at a loss of how they could **add any further value.** The symbols they chose for themselves was a fawn lost in the woods. In future, with support of Gordon, they said *they wanted an aggressive role and right to eliminate product features known to cause difficulties.* Customers (as well as the company) wanted **fast delivery and products that could be immediately put into production,** without the customizing that was often built-in by Research—**They would be "tigers about it!"**



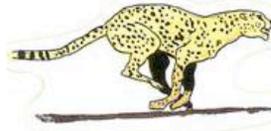
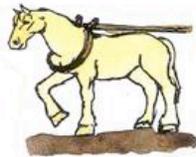
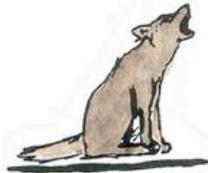
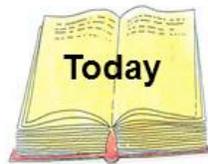
The group thought of **Engineering as coyotes**, howling at the moon. The engineers **complain** to themselves **about** the **designs** from Development but **didn't** put in extra analysis of their own or take the risk of making alternate proposals. In future, **they wanted the engineers to act like big horn sheep-- Agile, sure-footed** with a high vantage point to defend the interests of both manufacturing and customers.

They saw the **shop floor team as workhorses today**. They did the job well but **didn't take on risk** when unique circumstances arose. In future, **they wanted them more fleet of foot, like a cheetah**, with **bursts of speed** when needed

**Finance was a hibernating bear.** They did a great job on the 15% challenge but showed **no interest in looking beyond the borders of manufacturing** to see the greater cost picture that included the impact of design flaws on manufacturing re-work or customer returns. They wanted them to be **wise owls** and address total company end-to-end product cost.



## Group



- ▶ **R&D Interface staff** are **lost today** and need to be **bolder in future**
- ▶ **Engineering complain today.** They need to **make their own proposals**
- ▶ **Shop Floor staff** get the job done but need to **be faster in future**
- ▶ **Finance** have great capability but need to **address end-to-end issue**

# Workshop Results

The teams focused on **business processes** come up with **valuable innovations**. Their work won them a lot of **applause and approval to implement the immediately**.

**The culture change teams came up with the real block buster.**

When they presented their ideas to the full fifty, there was animated discussion and a lot of laughing. The management team agreed the need to **change the core objective**. **The focus on Cost would be replaced by Customer Satisfaction**. The group was ready and resolved to change. **They embraced their new “mascots” and the tiger, goat, cheetah and owl were all saluted!**

The most senior managers then started a dialog about how to make sure the culture change would stick... how to make sure it reached the world-wide organization at all levels... and how it would be sustained. They named a project leader to bring together volunteer representatives to set up a communications plan and to try to find a way to measure the culture, so it could be represented in managers' performance objectives.

# Culture had been addressed for the first time in the organization's history.

Its **importance** as a force for meeting goals had been **recognized**. Many frank discussions of group behavior took place in the workshop and after-hours gatherings.

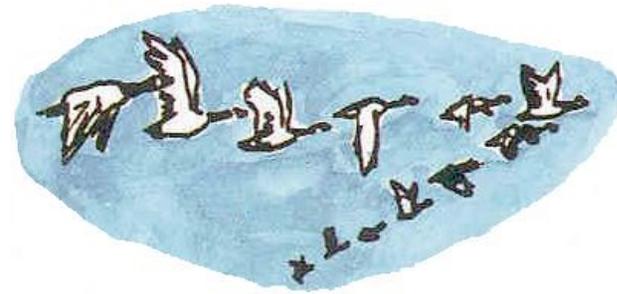
**The animal symbols** were a big hit every time they were presented and they **generated interesting and pointed side discussions**.

Feedback from attendees who were not English mother-tongue was exceptionally high because of the way it **simplified the issues** and **brought clarity** to inter-personal communication and presentations.

# CLOSING MESSAGES ABOUT METAPHORS



**Visual metaphors** do amazing things for **group effectiveness**. They get groups **talking, sharing, listening** and **building** on one another's **ideas**. Groups **solve** the **toughest problems** with them. Setting direction and achieving change, in just a few hours!



The examples of establishing coordination and changing culture are only two of the over three hundred workshops run in corporations and governments. Workshop subjects have included **operations process improvement, team building, strategy planning, quality, sales and others**. Results are always great! If there's an important issue, get the right people together, use visual metaphors to simplify the issue and just stand back!

# The **steps** for a leader are **simple**:

- 1** Make sure you know what you want to solve
- 2** Think about which people should attend and be grouped together
  - Make sure they are respected formal or informal leaders in their units
- 3** Pick a metaphor and get some symbol stickers. **Try it!**
- 4** Get them together, give a few minutes intro and then turn them loose

**OK**, there's a bit more to it than that, but it's not a big challenge for a facilitator to **become expert with metaphor languages**. Managers have even run small sessions themselves after having participated in one with a facilitator.

The best part is the ownership and commitment to results that follows the session. **It's their idea. They'll overcome all obstacles and get it done!**

