

LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE

Collaboration through Metaphors

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 metaphors can help organizations, 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.

"Leading from the Middle" is the second eBook in the "Metaphors for Alignment" collection. "Simplify" and "Alphas Don't Bark" are also available for free download at:
<http://www.metaphormapping.com/>

More information is available at:
<http://riverleadership.org/>
<http://larryraymond.com/>



Introduction

This short ebook is part two of the collection “**Metaphors for Alignment**”. Its target audience includes project managers, middle level managers and professionals in all fields who aspire to lead but don’t have manager titles. It addresses the problem of how to improve an organization when you see a need, have the will but don’t have power.

Although collaboration has long been seen as the most promising style for leading across functions and organizations, there’s a distinct shortage of how-to guidance available.

This book aims to contribute by describing how aspiring collaborative leaders can employ metaphors to quickly engage stakeholders in problem areas and set improvement strategies.

Inclusive workshops aided by metaphoric techniques create an environment for openness, clear communication and creative group thinking. They provide a natural, intuitive process that doesn’t require facilitator-intensive support and leads to a high degree of ownership for solutions.

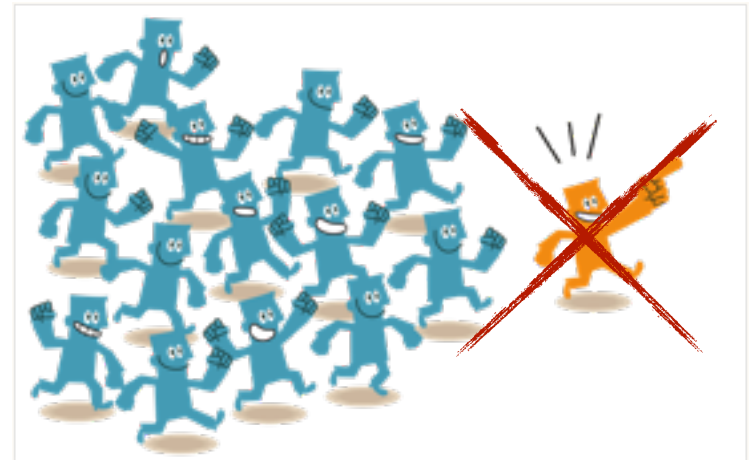
On Leading

“A leader need **not** be on top,
but must be ahead.”

The only style of leadership that delivers results across organizations is collaboration. That means cooperating and building together with others.

When you're a collaborative leader, being "ahead" means you monitor the environment, look to the future, recognize a need and engage the collective know-how of all stakeholders in addressing it.

Unless you're the boss, being "ahead" does **not** mean jumping into the spotlight and aiming to inspire everyone to follow you.



On Being in the Middle

When you don't control everyone's paycheck, you're in the middle.

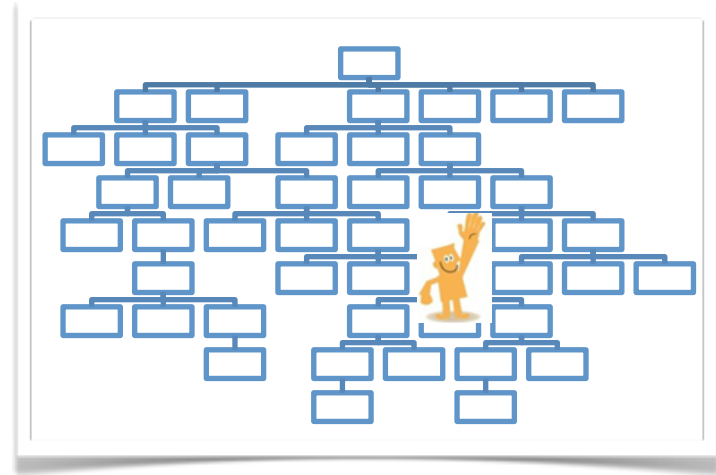
You might be on the top of some org chart, but you depend on others for the heavy lifting, achieving the big things on your plate.

Commanding and controlling is no longer best leadership practice.

Anyone aspiring to leadership needs to be visible and set goals, but, to succeed at collaborative leadership, get some humility from all you don't know and think of yourself as being in the middle, at best.



When your demeanor is one of **being among equals** and the main currencies you exchange are facts and reasoning, **you'll find relationships are easy to build and people are happy to share their ideas.**



Focus on the process, the flow of activities and information underlying the need you identified. That will ground the discussion in reality.

Respect everyone's views.

Test any assumptions.

Your behavior will be reciprocated and passion to excel will fill the room.

Peer Relationships

To lead from the middle you must have passion for the cause, be process-oriented and think “ahead”.

But, it’s understanding the pre-eminent role of peer relationships and building them that will make you successful.

To build strong peer relationships:

First understand and respect the ideas and know-how of others.

You're not the only one who wants to be part of setting the strategies that affect you.

When you're in the middle and aspire to lead, being open yourself and drawing on the abilities of others is a requirement, not an option.

Second be trust-worthy.

Open, honest and predictable. Motivated by the best interests of the whole. The basics. Don't violate them in self-interest. If you're a wolf, don't put on the clothes of collaboration.



On Collaborating

Respect and openness can allow a group to productively work together, but collaboration develops only when a **shared view of the world** emerges from the different perspectives each person walked in with.

When talking or even writing, differences between individuals' mental models can be wide but not obvious until after long, contentious debate, often ending in sense of hopelessness.

When people spend careers in different functions, their frames of reference are very different.

You have to work to fully understand your colleagues' mental models, but that's the entry point for collaboration.



Hidden mental models create an Illusion of agreement.
When it bursts, there's acrimony.

Address mental models quickly or forget
about setting strategy collaboratively-- Your
momentum and leadership position will be lost.

Metaphors promote staying on point,
communication clarity and a big picture
outlook.

They help perspectives converge.

Trust can then take root and start a virtuous
cycle. Openness leads to agreement on
objectives that becomes the base for creative
problem solving, visioning and planning.



Same words,
different meanings

On the Critical Role of Metaphors in Collaboration



Visual metaphors open up group communication

Symbols remove defensiveness

When you build your thinking
into **Metaphor Maps**
You take Pride and

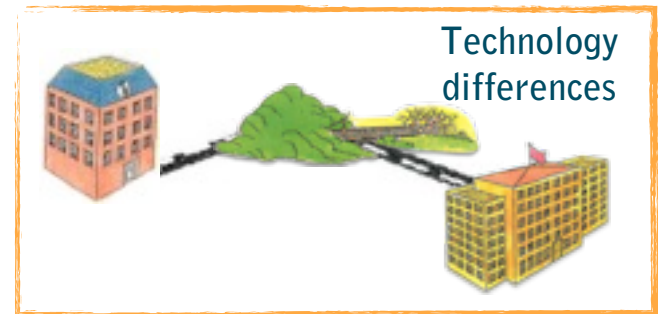
Make a commitment !



What's a Metaphor Map?

It's an image you build with symbols to show how something works
- It takes about 45 minutes

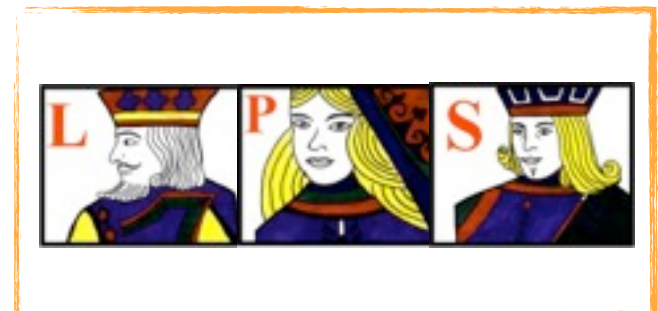
You might equate your operation to a Village,
where buildings are groups, roads are
relationships.
Then add other symbols to show problems



Or, equate your project to a River,
row your boat through time.
Take actions and avoid obstacles



Or, you might equate your roles and
responsibilities to a deck of cards.
The King makes decisions
The Queen is a decision partner
The Jack does what he's told



Leading from the Middle

– Where to Begin?

First, find something that is burning, maybe slowly, maybe fast.



Maybe a weakness in your operational process or a new market or industry trend not being addressed.

Define it.

Then—Start leading— take initiative, bring attention to the issue, and after gaining agreement to address it, bring together the stakeholders.

With Metaphor Mapping, you cover a lot of ground in a short time. In less than a day, group can map the weaknesses in the current operation, create an ideal operations vision and an action plan. Metaphors are that powerful!

If your problem is important and urgent,
Metaphor Mapping will ensure a solid strategy, built
collaboratively.

There'll be clear understanding of who does what-- driven by symbols
that communicate to the gut and can't be forgotten.

You can then bring together
the stakeholders. The
metaphors will draw out
their ideas and the mapping
process will help them build
on the best ones.

**You'll find the solution
you've been seeking.**



Example:

Initiating an I.T. Project

Imagine you're a project manager. You control the performance appraisals of your team members, if not the paychecks. But, **you depend on peers to deliver parts of the project.** And, internal clients who set the requirements and judge you. And further, a steering committee controls your budget and makes the big decisions.

Your project is installing a new IT system: The project's just a dream until there's agreement with the Users about how the new system will work.

You're the project manager.

You need to lead.

- and you're in the middle!

If the Users and Technology team don't collaborate, you're toast.

The need you've identified is for a "contract" on how the new system will work for the Users.



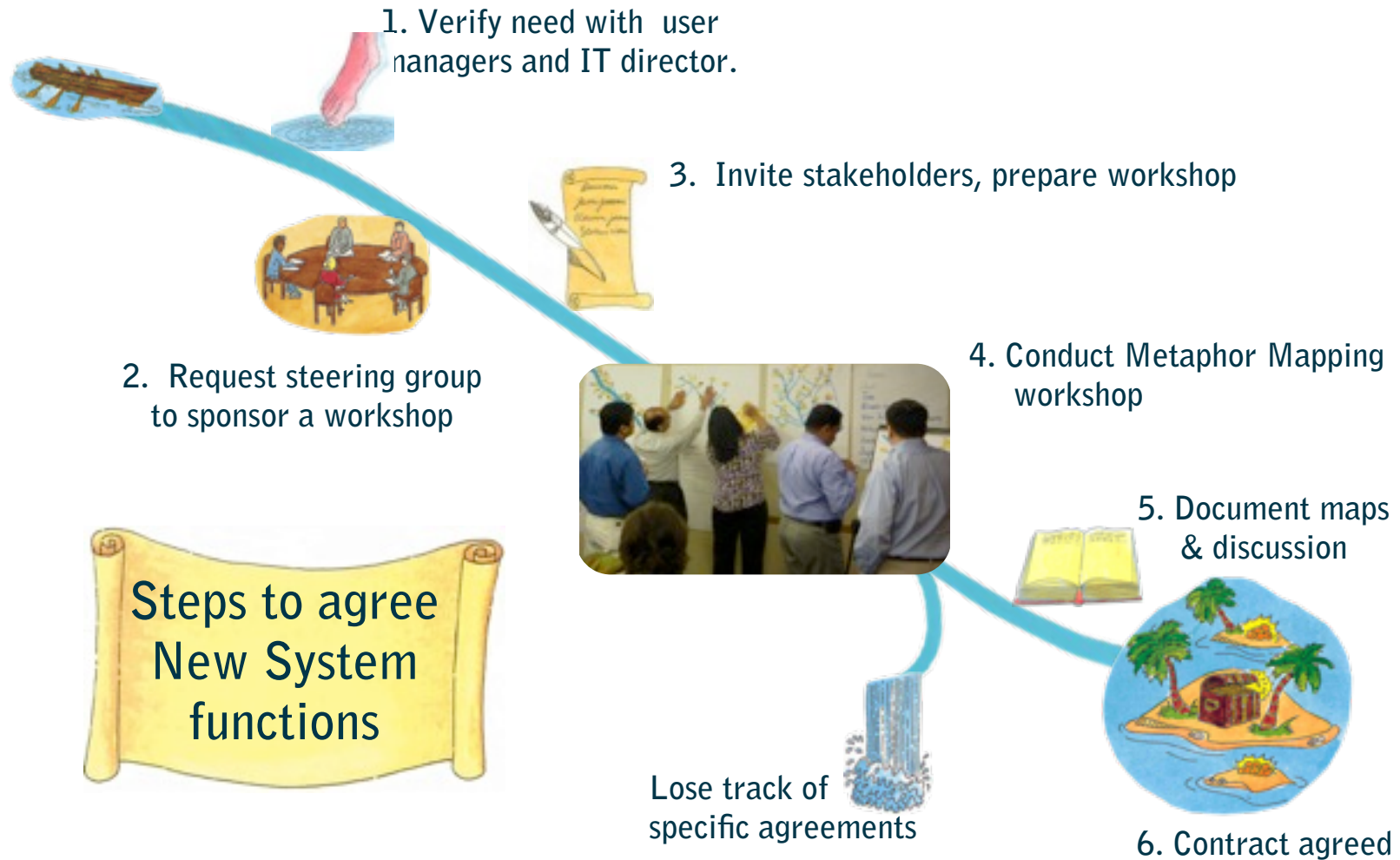
First of all, Relax. You can do this.

Leading collaboratively
is not hard.

If you bring together
knowledgeable people and
some tools, they'll take
ownership of the task,
do all the work and deliver
a great result!



The stream of project manager actions to establish a contract



The action stream



6. Contract for new system function

Start with the end in mind. What will success look like?

As an experienced project manager, you know that unless the project objectives are well understood by user managers and staff, you can't succeed. The workshop goal is a full discussion and agreement on how the organization will operate, the sequence of activities, flows of information and how business controls will be addressed. You need a contract based on this big picture understanding and want to further agree on the mechanisms for steering and managing changes. The detailed specifications will be developed as a next step in the project but this is the moment to get the senior people fully on board.

The first step toward that goal is to test the water with other stakeholders and gain their agreement on the value of a workshop.

This is your opportunity to build or improve relationships that will be of great value throughout the project. Agreement on priorities is the beginning of trust. The bond of common understanding and aspirations will carry you through future problems with schedule or deliverables.



1. Verify need with User managers and IT director

Down stream

Now armed with your colleagues' agreement, you want the project steering committee to confirm the need and insist on the workshop. While you might have been able to sponsor it yourself, it's far better that **those paying for the project require it and take ownership of the resulting contract.**



2. Ask steering committee to sponsor the workshop



3. Invite stakeholders, prepare the workshop

You can take personal responsibility for organizing the workshop or may invite one or more of the user managers to collaborate with you. You want participants to include the formal and informal leaders of all the stakeholder areas. Keep in mind that all who build the contract are signatories to it. **Anyone not in the room is a potential obstacle.**

You'll need to draft an invitation for the steering committee chair to send. It must include a formal workshop purpose statement and make clear the invitees are expected to reserve a full day for this critical task.

Tell them to bring an open mind and readiness to contribute their ideas. Nothing of consequence to the welfare of the project should go un-said.

Planning the workshop flow falls to you and any colleagues you've invited to collaborate.

An important part of your planning is defining the small groups that will build maps. Mix the functions to both include different perspectives and encourage building of new relationships.

The workshop and contract

Since you're to be a full time participant, you'll want to have someone else manage the facilitation. The sequence moves from introduction by the sponsor to small groups mapping and documenting today's operation to presenting maps to the full group.



4. Conduct Metaphor Mapping workshop

Then the mapping groups are mixed again and given the task of defining how the organization will work, once the new system is in place. You'll want the map-builders to provide enough specifics so they and the others can 'feel themselves walking around' in the changed operation. The next task is to lay out the major change steps needed. This action plan emphasizes **identifying obstacles – "What will make this difficult?" – and showing how they can be overcome.**

The full group presentations will have already brought agreement on the current operation, the vision and change process. But, re-confirm by consolidating the small group maps and narratives and reviewing again.

Arrange for the full steering committee to join the end of the workshop for a presentation of the consolidated maps and narratives. **That's the contract!**

Protect and draw value from your contract

Watch out for an unanticipated consequence! This waterfall can still bring havoc to your project. The workshop will have brought out a tremendous number of ideas, some small and some critical agreements. You want to make sure these have all been captured in detail, rather than a short-hand on a flip chart that is subject to later misinterpretation. **Elaborate the contract with some rigor.**



Lose track of specific agreements



5. Document maps & discussion

Your contract is a tremendous asset for all parties and your company.

One way to draw added value from it is to present it to a wide set of people, especially those who will be affected by the new system. While they may not have been direct collaborators in this project, they and the project will benefit from deeper understanding of how it will proceed.

In preparation for your “road show”, **capture the maps in digital form.** You can take photos but better, build the maps in a presentation software package where you can record detailed descriptions of what the group intended when it chose certain symbols. Solicit feedback on the contract and consider any suggestions or additional ideas. Who knows? That may lead to the next fire you want to put out!

Closing Messages

The old adage “there’s no limit to what you can achieve if you don’t ask for credit” is relevant today in all complex situations. The easiest way to make things work better is to engage others, listen and build a solution together. You’ll solve the problem and your solution will endure.

Metaphors are powerful tools for organization development and change projects. They’re perfect for collaborative leaders because they make it easy for a group to see things differently, communicate clearly and address tough subjects.

Next time you’re “in the middle”,
lead collaboratively,
with metaphors!

