

## Metaphorical Thinking

### Using Comparisons to Express Ideas and Solve Problems

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"Time is money."

How often have heard that statement?

Probably many times and in various contexts.

By thinking about time as money, you can create some powerful images. Time wasted is money down the drain. Time well spent is an investment. The seconds are ticking away.

A direct comparison between two unrelated or indirectly linked things is called a metaphor. And as we see in the example of "time is money", metaphors can create strong images that can be used to great effect in everyday communications and thinking. The manager who stands up in front of his team and says, "We need to finish this work quickly", creates considerably less impact than the manager who opens his comments using the metaphor: "As we all know, time is money."

The English language is littered with metaphors, and this is testimony to their power.

So metaphors can be used to improve communications: They can add impact or can help you explain a difficult concept by association with a more familiar one. Metaphorical thinking can also be used to help solve problems: Use and extend metaphors to generate new ideas for solutions.

#### **Metaphor tips:**

The simple metaphor format is "A is B", as in "time is money". Metaphors can also be indirect or implicit: "That's a half-baked idea". This metaphor compares ideas with part-cooked food – without mentioning the food!

And, by the way, metaphors sometimes get mistaken for "similes". A simile makes a comparison too, but uses the word 'like', as in "time is like money"; "the idea is like half-baked food". Similes often sound more powerful than metaphors, even if the idea is the same.

#### Explaining Complex Ideas

By associating an unfamiliar idea with one that is commonplace, you can spark better understanding of complex ideas. Let's say you want to explain the concept of the business cycle. You could use lots of words, definitions, and drone on for five or ten minutes leaving the audience bored and confused. Then you could use graphs and diagrams, to help improve understanding and interest.

Or, you could explain using a metaphor: The business cycle is a pendulum, swinging back and forth from peaks of prosperity, down through economic troughs, and back up again.

The metaphor captures the essence of the business cycle – the listener immediately relates to the continuous back and forth movement. The vivid image helps people understand and also remember the idea. So, simply and in just a few words, everyone suddenly "gets it": To use another metaphor, the light bulb suddenly goes on.

## Creating Impact

Metaphors are great for creating impact and making something memorable. So making use of them is a technique often used in marketing and advertising. But it's just as effective for making impact in your presentations, speeches and even in everyday discussions.

With metaphors, you help people get the idea quickly and efficiently. Here's a marketing example: In a pitch to sell a vacuum cleaner, you could go on and on about how great the new cleaner is and why people should buy it. But, see how much more impact can you create with metaphors: "This vacuum cleaner is so powerful; it can suck the light out of a black hole". The vivid image helps your product and pitch stand out, and so can help you make that sale.

### Tip:

**Make sure your metaphors are understandable to your audience. If there's any risk that your metaphors will sound like jargon, think again. The secret is to use a metaphor that instantly rings true with your audience.**

## Communication

1. Identify what you are trying to communicate.
2. Determine the essence of the message.
3. Think of other instances in life where that same characteristic, idea, emotion, state, etc. applies.
4. There may be many metaphors for the situation you are describing – choose the one that will best relate to your audience.

## Thinking Outside the Box

When you use a metaphor to link two ideas together, you are combining elements that have little or no logical connection. By breaking the rules of logic in this way, metaphors can open up the creative side of the brain – the part that is stimulated by images, ideas, and concepts. So metaphorical thinking can help you with creative problem solving: To use another famous metaphor, it helps you "think outside the box".

Take the problem of how to cut production costs. You could attack the problem logically, and research new technologies or analyze inefficiencies in the production process. You might come up with some cost saving, but will you hit the jackpot?

Problem solving often starts with **brainstorming** and bouncing ideas back and forth with your team. Brainstorming is great for getting the creative juices flowing; it can open up a floodgate of ideas (. more metaphors!) However, people may still be constrained by the images they have of the current problem, or by their preconceived notions about the potential solutions.

When using metaphors for solving problems, you link the problem to something seemingly unrelated. Doing this allows your brain to see the issue from a completely different perspective – one that you may not even have known existed. If the problem is how to cut production costs, you could use the metaphor of someone wanting to lose weight. The next step is to generate solution to the problem of losing weight rather than the problem of shedding production costs. As you identify various solutions to the metaphorical problem, you can then relate these back to the real problem. Chances are, you will come up with something creative ideas for solutions.

Here are the steps for using metaphorical problem solving, using our product costs example:

1. First identify the metaphor for your problem or challenge.

There's no "right metaphor" – the ideas can be as unrelated as you like. If the problem involves increasing something, make sure the metaphor relates to an increase as well, otherwise it can become too difficult to visualize.

**Increase sales > Build larger muscles**

**Decrease recruitment costs > Lower the price of bread**

**Attract more investors > Harvest more corn**

So here's the metaphor of our example:

**Problem:** Cut production costs

**Metaphor:** Lose weight

2. Now it's time to generate solution ideas for the metaphorical problem, in this case, losing weight. **Brainstorming** is a good way to facilitate this.

- Count calories
- Exercise
- Monitor food intake
- Limit intake of certain food categories
- Fill up on low calorie foods
- Drink lots of water
- Join a slimming club

3. Then, the next step is to see how the solution ideas for the metaphorical problem might relate back to the real problem:

Solution ideas for the metaphorical problem	Solutions ideas relating back to the real problem
Count calories	Control expenditure on inputs
Exercise to burn calories	Use up all of their inputs (recycle, remanufacture, etc.)
Monitor food intake	Control inputs
Limit intake of certain food categories	Save costs by carefully choosing certain suppliers
Fill up on low calorie food	Find low cost substitutes
Drink lots of water	Flush out duplicate processes
Join a slimming club	Share ideas and support with other similar departments

**Tip:**

**Don't get too hung up on how well the metaphorical solution ideas map back. Metaphors that map too well can stifle the creativity you are trying to generate! The whole idea is to generate solutions ideas that you may not have otherwise thought of, so just let the ideas flow without too much scrutiny.**

4. Use the solution ideas you have generated for the metaphorical problem to find a workable solution to the real problem.

**Key Points**

Metaphors are powerful shortcuts to instant and memorable understanding. They evoke vivid images and allow us to "see" things from a new perspective, and so are useful tools for creative problem solving. Use metaphorical thinking to help explain complex ideas, create impact in your presentations, and think outside the box.