

Gareth Morgan

IMAGES OF  
ORGANIZATION

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# IMAGES OF ORGANIZATION

For my parents  
Idris and Rachel Morgan

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Gareth Morgan

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ORGANIZATION



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—Gareth Morgan  
Toronto



## Introduction

**E**ffective managers and professionals in all walks of life, whether they be business executives, public administrators, organizational consultants, politicians, or trade unionists, have to become skilled in the art of “reading” the situations that they are attempting to organize or manage.

This skill usually develops as an intuitive process, learned through *experience and natural ability*. Though at times a person may actually declare that he or she needs to “read what’s happening at X,” or to “get a handle on Y,” the process of reading and rereading often occurs at an almost subconscious level. For this reason it is often believed that effective managers and problem solvers are born rather than made, and have a kind of magical power to understand and transform the situations that they encounter.

If we take a closer look at the processes used, however, we find that this kind of mystique and power is often based on an ability to develop deep appreciations of the situations being addressed. Skilled readers develop the knack of reading situations with various scenarios in mind, and of forging actions that seem appropriate to the readings thus obtained.

They have a capacity to remain open and flexible, suspending immediate judgments whenever possible, until a more comprehensive view of the situation emerges. They are aware of the fact that new insights often arise as one reads a situation from "new angles," and that a wide and varied reading can create a wide and varied range of action possibilities. Less effective managers and problem solvers, on the other hand, seem to interpret everything from a fixed standpoint. As a result, they frequently hit blocks that they can't get around; their actions and behaviors are often rigid and inflexible and a source of conflict. When problems and differences of opinion arise, they usually have no alternative but to hammer at issues in the same old way and to create consensus by convincing others to "buy into" their particular view of the situation.

There is a close relationship between this process of reading organizational life and the process known as organizational analysis. The formal analysis and diagnosis of organizations, like the process of reading, always rests in applying some kind of theory to the situation being considered. For theories, like readings, are interpretations of reality. We theorize about or "read" situations as we attempt to formulate images and explanations that help us to make sense of their fundamental nature. And an effective analysis, like an effective reading, rests in being able to do this in ways that take account of rival theories or explanations, rather than being committed to a fixed and unshakable point of view.

This book explores and develops the art of reading and understanding organizations. First, it seeks to show how many of our conventional ideas about organization and management build on a small number of taken-for-granted images, especially mechanical and biological ones. Second, by exploring these and a number of alternative images, it seeks to show how we can create new ways of thinking about organization. Third, it seeks to show how this general method of analysis can be used as a practical tool for diagnosing organizational problems, and for the management and design of organizations more generally. And fourth, it seeks to explore the implications raised by this kind of analysis.

The basic premise on which the book builds is that our theories and explanations of organizational life are based on metaphors that lead us to see and understand organizations in distinctive yet partial ways. Metaphor is often just regarded as a device for embellishing discourse, but its significance is much greater than this. For the use of metaphor implies *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing* that pervade how we understand our world generally. For example, research in a wide variety of fields has demonstrated that metaphor exerts a formative influence on

science, on our language and on how we think, as well as on how we express ourselves on a day-to-day basis.

We use metaphor whenever we attempt to understand one element of experience in terms of another. Thus, metaphor proceeds through implicit or explicit assertions that A *is* (or is like) B. When we say "the man is a lion," we use the image of a lion to draw attention to the lion-like aspects of the man. The metaphor frames our understanding of the man in a distinctive yet partial way.

One of the interesting aspects of metaphor rests in the fact that it always produces this kind of one-sided insight. In highlighting certain interpretations it tends to force others into a background role. Thus in drawing attention to the lionlike bravery, strength, or ferocity of the man, the metaphor glosses the fact that the same person may well also be a chauvinist pig, a devil, a saint, a bore, or a recluse. Our ability to achieve a comprehensive "reading" of the man depends on an ability to see how these different aspects of the person may coexist in a complementary or even a paradoxical way.

It is easy to see how this kind of thinking has relevance for understanding organization and management. For organizations are complex and paradoxical phenomena that can be understood in many different ways. Many of our taken-for-granted ideas about organizations are metaphorical, even though we may not recognize them as such. For example, we frequently talk about organizations *as if* they were machines designed to achieve predetermined goals and objectives, and which should operate smoothly and efficiently. And as a result of this kind of thinking we often attempt to organize and manage them in a mechanistic way, forcing their human qualities into a background role.

By using different metaphors to understand the complex and paradoxical character of organizational life, we are able to manage and design organizations in ways that we may not have thought possible before. The following chapters illustrate how this can be done by exploring the implications of different metaphors for thinking about the nature of organization. While some of the metaphors tap familiar ways of thinking, others develop insights and perspectives that will be rather new.

Thus Chapter 2 examines the image of organizations as machines and illustrates how this style of thought underpins the development of bureaucratic organization. When managers think of organizations as machines they tend to manage and design them as machines made up of interlocking parts that each play a clearly defined role in the functioning of the whole. While at some times this can prove highly effective, at others it can have many unfortunate results. One of the most

basic problems of modern management is that the mechanical way of thinking is so ingrained in our everyday conceptions of organization that it is often very difficult to organize in any other way. In demonstrating this, the chapter helps us to become more open to other ways of thinking.

Chapter 3 examines the idea that organizations are like organisms. This popular metaphor focuses attention on understanding and managing organizational "needs" and environmental relations. We come to see different types of organization as belonging to different species, of which the bureaucratic type is just one. We see that different species are suited for coping with the demands of different environments, and we are able to develop interesting theories about organization-environment relations. We are encouraged to understand how organizations are born, grow, develop, decline, and die, and how they are able to adapt to changing environments. We are also encouraged to consider relations between species, and the evolutionary patterns found in the interorganizational ecology. As in the case of the mechanical metaphor, this kind of imagery leads us to see and understand organizations from a unique perspective that has already contributed a great deal to the theory of modern management.

In Chapter 4 we pursue the implications of yet another metaphor. What if we view organizations as brains? What if we attempt to design them as brains? The metaphor draws attention to the importance of information processing, learning, and intelligence, and provides a frame of reference for understanding and assessing modern organizations in these terms. And it points to a set of design principles for enhancing these qualities. In the history of brain research different metaphors have been used for thinking about the brain, and our chapter explores two of these. The first treats the brain as a kind of information-processing computer; the second, as a hologram. These images, especially the latter, highlight important principles of self-organization for designing organizations in which a high degree of flexibility and innovation is needed.

Chapter 5 explores the idea that organizations are cultures. Organization is now seen to reside in the ideas, values, norms, rituals, and beliefs that sustain organizations as socially constructed realities. This focus, which has received increasing attention over the last few years from writers on corporate culture, gives us yet another way of managing and designing organizations: through the values, beliefs, and other patterns of shared meaning that guide organizational life.

In Chapter 6 we use a political metaphor to focus on the different sets of interests, conflicts, and power plays that shape organizational activities. The chapter explores organizations as systems of government drawing on various political principles to legitimize different

kinds of rule, as well as the detailed factors shaping the politics of organizational life.

In Chapter 7 the focus of attention shifts to a more abstract metaphor: the idea that organizations are "psychic prisons" where people become trapped by their own thoughts, ideas, and beliefs, or by preoccupations originating in the unconscious mind. Could it be that our favored modes of organizing manifest an unconscious preoccupation with control? Or a form of repressed sexuality? Or a fear of death? Or a desire to minimize or avoid anxiety-provoking situations? Could it be that our ways of organizing are designed to protect us from ourselves? Could it be that we often become prisoners of our thoughts, confined and controlled by the way we think? Could it be that we are prisoners of ideologies that confine us in alienating modes of life? The image of a psychic prison invites us to examine organizational life to see if, and in what ways, we have become trapped by conscious and unconscious processes of our own creation. In doing so, the metaphor offers many important insights about the psychodynamic and ideological aspects of organization.

Chapter 8 investigates another metaphor requiring a twist in imagination. This time we are invited to understand organization as flux and transformation. The secret of understanding organization, from this perspective, rests in understanding the logics of change shaping social life. The chapter examines three different logics. One emphasizes how organizations are self-producing systems that create themselves in their own image. Another emphasizes how they are produced as a result of circular flows of positive and negative feedback. And a third suggests that they are the product of a dialectical logic whereby every phenomenon tends to generate its opposite. The insights generated can help us to understand and manage organizational change, and to understand forces shaping the nature of organization at a societal level.

Chapter 9 explores the idea that organizations are instruments of domination. Here the focus is on the potentially exploitative aspects of organization. The chapter shows how organizations often use their employees, their host communities, and the world economy to achieve their own ends, and how the essence of organization rests in a process of domination where certain people impose their will on others. An extension of the political metaphor examined in Chapter 6, the image of domination helps us to understand the aspects of modern organization that have radicalized labor-management relations in many parts of the world. This metaphor is particularly useful for understanding organizations from the perspective of exploited groups, and for understanding how actions that are rational from one viewpoint can prove exploitative from another.

Each of the above chapters explores a *way of thinking* about organization, on the premise that we can use the ideas and concepts thus generated to understand organizations in specific settings. Chapter 10 shows how this can be done through the analysis of a case study. The chapter develops a twofold approach that uses the insights generated by different metaphors to produce a *diagnostic reading* of the situation being analyzed, and then moves to a *critical evaluation* of how the various insights relate. In this way the general idea of reading organization is developed as a concrete method of analysis that allows us to explore and deal with the complexity of organizational life in a very practical manner.

Finally, Chapter 11 focuses on the possibility of developing an approach to organization that builds on the transformative potential of the ideas and analysis developed in earlier chapters.

Each chapter is accompanied by a set of bibliographic notes that appear toward the end of the book, and allow the reader to follow points of interest in greater depth.

Overall, the book thus stands as a treatise on metaphorical thinking that contributes to both the theory and practice of organizational analysis. Frequently, the discussion ranges well beyond the confines of organization theory, for the metaphors and general ideas considered are drawn from diverse sources. Thus in one chapter we may be exploring biology and in another psychoanalysis, or holography, or political thought. In each case the chapter explores the nature of the metaphor being considered, then focuses on the concrete implications for understanding organizational practice and the general strengths and limitations of the perspective thus created.

The metaphors discussed have been selected to illustrate a broad range of ideas and perspectives, but, of course, by no means exhaust the possibilities. This is why it is important to understand that the mode of analysis developed here rests in a *way of thinking* rather than in the mechanistic application of a small set of clearly defined analytical frameworks. While the book focuses on a number of key metaphors that have relevance for understanding a wide range of organizational situations, there are others that can produce their own special insight. Effective organizational analysis must always remain open to this possibility.

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly complex. Unfortunately, our styles of thinking rarely match this complexity. We often end up persuading ourselves that everything is more simple than it actually is, dealing with complexity by presuming that it does not really exist. This is very evident in the way fad and fashion dominate approaches to organizational analysis and problem-solving, an interest