

Internal Metaphors

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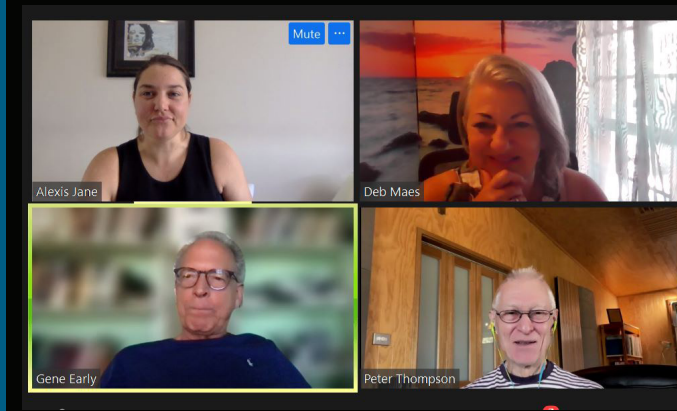
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Discussing and sharing ideas on Wisdom Leadership for a magazine article is a fascinating exercise. As we— Deb, Gene, Alexis, and Peter—¹ sat around our Zoom table doing just that, the ideas were flying.

With all those ideas hovering, it was no wonder that the matter of organising them came up in conversation.

As we chatted, the importance of having an “organised mind” – however that is done – arose. Alexis spoke about a process she uses for herself and which she shares with her coaching clients who are confronting overwhelm and stress. ² We can safely say that most people have experienced that sensation of having a head full of things from their “to do”



list along with other demands of life and work. It’s no wonder that some people talk about being pressured because that’s exactly the feeling that can occur.

Alexis has internal signals for dealing with this pressure by getting the “clutter” out of her mind. It rids her of internal voices telling her all the things she has to do and the sense of having her head full.

The process she uses for organising the clutter works wonderfully for her and for her clients.

‘Let’s do a modelling project on Alexis’s process’, we agreed. So we did, and here’s what we discovered.



After stopping to breathe, and sometimes taking some time to simply rest quietly, she moves the tasks out of her mind ... often by writing them down. Doing that allows Alexis to unconsciously clear her mind.

We know this because, as she is referring to what needs to be done, her hand and eye movements indicate that the tasks are spatially located out in front of her (and off to both sides) where she can both see them and sense where they are. The effect of this for Alexis – and for the clients she shares this with – is that the “clutter” is “removed” from her head and the sense of pressure lifts.

Distancing herself from these tasks gives breathing space and easy reference to them. This shift from an internal to an external location also gives much greater control over her internal state and accompanying action.

When referring to how much of a task is done, she sees a loop in the spatial location for that task. The degree to which the task is completed is represented by a filling in of the loop. This allows easy tracking of progress without copious notes, or apps, or spreadsheets, or Gantt charts.

The loops are internal representations which offer a metaphoric view of her task completion. The mental and physical benefits experienced by Alexis remind us of the extraordinary power of metaphor. As Lakoff and Johnson (p.5) write, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”

¹ Deb Maes, Dr Gene Early, Alexis Jane Fotaras, and Dr Peter Frank Thompson

² Daniel Levitin has written excellently on organising the mind. See the reading recommendations provided.

Finding your metaphor

We often develop or acquire many of our metaphors unconsciously, and they wield their power, unconsciously shaping our lives.

Whether our metaphors empower us or hinder us, discovering them is a key element in determining how we travel into the future we're creating.

When we discover great metaphors, they can be refined and shared.

When we discover one that isn't helpful, it can be changed to or replaced by one that empowers us.

A coach can help surface our unconscious metaphors, but even by ourselves, we can start by noticing our language.

Let's take the example of someone who says their head is "cluttered".



When they hear themselves say that, they could ask themselves questions such as:

- Where exactly is the clutter? Is it all through my head or just in some parts?
- Can the clutter be moved out of my head? If it can, what changes?
- What does the clutter look like? What would be a better way of visualising it and where would I put those images?
- Does the clutter have a sound? Is it sound, or a voice or voices? What can I change about the sound qualities and location that would make it more useful?
- If I move the clutter (e.g. metaphorically outside my head) what do I notice change in my body?

Challenge:

1. If you find yourself not getting results in a particular context:
 - Listen to your language about what's going on.
 - Notice words that relate to metaphors.
 - Ask yourself: What am I seeing, hearing, feeling, and even smelling or tasting that goes with that language?
2. As you uncover your metaphor, investigate how it can be changed or replaced by one of conscious choice such that the new one enables you in achieving your outcome.
3. When you discover already existing empowering metaphors, consider where else in your life those metaphors can be useful.

We develop this ability to re-generate your metaphors consciously in one of our "Focus Sheets"; Generating a Powerful Platform and Auditioning Your Metaphors.

A "Focus Sheet" is a short, sharp practice format we developed, specifically to help keep your attention on a specific area of development for a week, so you can rewire your experience through repetition and integrate your learning.

We recommend you ask for the focus sheet - just email or PM here - and take up the practice presented in the focus sheet.

Recommended reading:

1. Lakoff, G & Johnson, M 1980, Metaphors we live by, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
2. Lawley, J & Tompkins, P 2000, Metaphors in mind, The Developing Company Press, London
3. Levitin, DJ 2014, The organized mind, Kindle version, Penguin Random House UK, from www.amazon.com (Of course, paper versions are available too.)



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