

Dead Metaphors and Counterfeit Conversations

-by David Robinson

HR professionals continue to rely on metaphors of diversity that obfuscate and complicate the very challenges they are meant to address. “Stir fry,” “mosaic,” “tossed salad,” and “bottom line” is all metaphors that HR professionals use—and abuse—in talking about and addressing diversity issues. They have become pabulum of sorts, quaint “shorthand” for diversity; we are losing their meanings and power .

The reality of diversity in the workplace is complex. It requires metaphors capable of grasping complexity, expanding perspectives, and facilitating a meaningful dialogue across difference. By unwittingly “literalizing” their metaphors, HR professionals hinder their capacity to grasp and address the multifarious nature of diversity. Without the capacity to engage with multiple perspectives that comes with metaphor, their only recourse is to default to well-worn cycles of legislating behavior, thereby perpetuating the notion that diversity is a problem to be “solved.”

Business identifies itself through what it believes to be quantifiable, objective data. The “bottom line” is a favorite and oft used expression (and a metaphor). It is not surprising then, that HR professionals, working within a context that greatly values the reduction of information, are stymied when confronted with a complexity like diversity. Business demands that issues be reduced to prose, which condemns HR professionals to perpetually seek ways to address the “bottom line” of diversity. When “seeking the bottom line of diversity” refers only to “what is the pay-off?” or “what will it cost?” the metaphor (bottom line) is being used literally and no longer functions as a metaphor. It is in effect, dead.

The parade of literal business cases made to address the literal “bottom line of diversity” indicates that the metaphor has lost its referential power. A living metaphor connotes; it is the poetry that reaches for understanding beyond the ability of language to grasp. A dead metaphor denotes; at best it describes. It is prose. When taken literally, a metaphor (bottom line) has no power to illuminate; the subject (diversity) is reduced, the interpretive possibilities neutered and the complexities denied. In fact, the inert metaphor holds the subject (diversity) captive reducing its access to quantitative statements, dollars and cents. “Stir Fry,” “Mosaic,” “Jelly Bean Jar,” and “Tossed Salad,” are among the plethora of “different-things-in-a-single-container” comparisons used to describe but incapable of illuminating diversity.

A living metaphor facilitates a more significant and revealing engagement with diversity. It does more than describe. It affords HR professionals the capacity to deal with the complexity of diversity in a useful way. For instance, Robert Fritz teaches that behavior, like water, will always follow the path of least resistance, a path determined by the structure of the land. How might diversity interventions transform if the focus shifted from regulating behavior to engaging with the underlying structure of the land? How might diversity become meaningful if it was no longer seen as a container-of-different-things (a “silo”) but instead was understood as an action, “how we do what we do?” These perceptual changes are possible within a living metaphor in which the “essence” or the “ends” or the “heart” or the “fundamental nature” of diversity become relevant.

Dead metaphors are supported by two concepts: split intentions and counterfeit conversations.

A split intention happens when actions taken do not support the stated intentions. For instance, when an organization sincerely includes diversity in its statement of core values but does little to address its recruiting and hiring practices, systems of promotions, compensation, etc., it has effectively split its intention. A split intention is often invested in the appearance of an action and not the action itself. When diversity is encased in a dead metaphor, HR professionals have no choice but to split their intentions in order to make their initiatives appear impactful.

Counterfeit conversations result from the continued, persistent use of a dead metaphor as if it were still alive. The metaphors we use frame the choices we see; when a metaphor no longer refers to an illumination, it becomes concrete and obfuscates absurdities. In this instance, when we take seriously the metaphor of the “bottom line of diversity,” it appears that the unsolvable might be solved. The organization, invested in the concrete nature of its metaphor, is within its rights to demand that expenditures en route to solving the unsolvable be justified. HR professionals with the task of “solving” diversity while staying under budget have no other recourse but to talk around the issue and pretend that a mountain of data, lists of statistics, 10 best tools or a host of interventions and conferences will actually result in the “solving” of the problem. It is a vicious circle.

It is a trick of language that deludes us into grasping for diversity like it is an object, a thing, jellybeans in a jar. The word “diversity” is, after all, a noun. It is only through another trick of language, a living metaphor, that we will be able to reach beyond the limits of our language and encounter the many complex forces, the poetry that we reduce to the prose “diversity.”

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