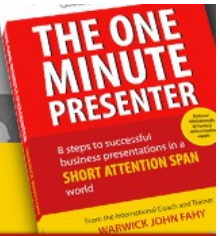


Speak like an Executive



Warwick John Fahy

AUTHOR · EXECUTIVE SPEECH COACH · FACILITATOR OF LEARNING

"I help ambitious senior finance executives switch from technical expert to effective executive"

Using Metaphors to Influence



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Using metaphors to convey your message

One of the key challenges in influencing is to use a range of influencing techniques. Many business executives commonly use data to influence. To be honest, data is often overused, and many business professionals do not use data in an influential way. We will cover how to better use data in a different letter. Today I would like to introduce the idea of using a more visual way to influence. There are various techniques that you can use when it comes to using a more visual approach. For example, storytelling, sharing anecdotes and personal experiences. The reason why visual influencing techniques are effective is because they allow the other person to “see” the ideas that you wish to convey. Storytelling is a very powerful and deep form of communication for humans. As children, we love to hear stories. As adults, billions of dollars are spent on entertainment such as going to movies, watching videos and playing video games. Reading fiction allows the reader to visually create the story in their own minds. So the ability to use visual images to allow the other person to see the ideas that you wish to share is a powerful, memorable way to communicate and influence.

Today I'd like to share a technique around using metaphors. Metaphors are commonly used in business. For example the famous Chinese book, The Art of War by Sun Tzu, is frequently referenced in business. Here the metaphor of war is applied to the world of business. There are many metaphors that you can use in business to convey a visual picture let's look at some of them.

1. The metaphor of a ship

Let's imagine that you wish to describe your organization and you want to use a metaphor to do so. You could use a metaphor such as a ship. The ship, like an organization, is a complex system. You could think of a ship as going on a journey, you think of the ship as having to be constantly in motion, a ship always has to be making correctional changes to reach its target, a ship has a captain that decides on direction, ship has a crew who needs to be working together to help the ship reach its destination. A ship could be considered as going on an adventure, you could use metaphors of Christopher Columbus or in China you have a similar general, Zheng he. You can use different types of ship. Consider the classic voyaging ships from the 18th century. They convey the sense of adventure, facing undiscovered worlds and the hardships that go along with being pioneers. Alternatively, you could also have a different metaphor if you wanted to focus on speed. Perhaps then a better metaphor is not a huge ship but a small faster speedboats that can adapt quicker and is more flexible to the environment. The business environment that many companies operate in is harsh and changes rapidly. If you stand still, you get beaten. Many technology companies face this reality. You could use the metaphor of having to decide to go through a storm or go around the storm. When it comes to the crew, you can talk about how it's important that everybody pulls together and works together. If you are talking to an audience who were familiar with the America's Cup you could use the idea of a race and the technology that goes into the



modern yachts. The most important aspect of a metaphor is that the audience can very easily picture and also understand it.

2. The metaphor of a machine

Another example that you could use when it comes to using a metaphor is you could talk about an organization as a machine. You could talk about the importance of process, a system, you could talk about the need to increase effectiveness and efficiency. You could use examples of businesses that are regarded as machines, for example when it comes to franchising, such companies such as Starbucks or McDonald's have very effective systems to open and serve a huge network of stores. The metaphor such as the machine focuses on cost and consistency and delivering the same experience every time. On the other hand using a metaphor such as the machine is slightly cold in the sense that it's not something that people naturally appeal to. While many organizations have very systematic processes underpinning their success, they won't necessarily focus on this when communicating with their staff and customers. An organization may not actually wish to be seen as a machine. However you also have to relate the metaphor to to your audience. So for example if you're presenting to a group of technical people or to blue-collar workers who were very familiar and have hands-on experience of machinery, then this would be a good metaphor. You could expand this metaphor to include the importance of maintenance, safety and quality.

3. The metaphor of natural environment

You could also use a metaphor such as the natural environment. You could use nature as a metaphor to show how a business needs to evolve, how it needs to compete for resources to survive by gaining an advantage against other organisms competing around it. This type of organization needs to respond to its environment and needs to be able to learn and adapt to be able to grow. This is quite different from the machine metaphor because once machine is set up and and its programmed to run, it stays the same, it doesn't evolve. If you're using nature as a metaphor, then there is not some central controller. In the ship metaphor you could say that the captain was in control of directing the ship. But with a natural environment maybe there's an ecology maybe there's a lot of interdependencies so it's not clear who's in charge. Today many companies operating in a matrix organization where reporting lines are more complex than before. By using nature as a metaphor you could talk about ideas of whether your actions have a bigger impact on the environment or if the environment has a bigger impact on you. You can talk about how a company needs to respond to the market, needs to be agile. In this metaphor you could say that a company's focus needs to be more focused on external influences rather than internal influences. We could make the case that external influences have a much stronger impact on an organization. You could also take this metaphor forward by thinking about what kind of organism or natural metaphor could be used. Is our business more like a spider's web where we need to adapt to the environments, we need to have different connections, we need to be able to survive. Even when one part of the web is destroyed, the other parts of the web can



still do their jobs. Select a relevant and appropriate image that conveys the message effectively. While financial firm, Merrill Lynch were known as the “thundering herd” in their early days. Post financial crisis and acquisition by Bank of America, this is downplayed although they still retain their bull logo.

4. The metaphor of sports

Another commonly used metaphor when it comes to business is sports. In many countries football or soccer is the most popular sports and that's an easy one to use. You could have a look at your organization as a football team. For example, you have the manager with a supporting coaching team which could be linked to the leadership team, you have the people performing on the football pitch, the fans in the stadium cheering them on and the media projecting their brands around the world. There's lots of ways that you could use as a sports team as a metaphor. Depending on the culture that you wanted to influence, you could use different sports metaphors. So for example in America, baseball and American football would be a better metaphor. In Brazil, football. In China you could use volleyball or basketball. The advantage of a sports metaphor is the idea of being competitive and staying competitive in competing with other teams. Also most sports result in winners and losers. Except of course if your country plays the unusual game of cricket, where two teams can play together for five days and the result can be a draw. There are very few sports played in the 21st century where this can happen. You got the British to thank for that. You can also use the language of sports in your metaphor. You can talk about a project “kick off”. You can take a “time out” to review activities. You can analyse the situation at half time. You can advise your team to “keep their eye on the ball”.

5. The metaphor of a movie

You could also use that the metaphors of the movie industry to relate to your business. The production of a movie is a large and complex process. You have the talent acting in the movie, the movie director to work with the talents and of course the behind-the-scenes guys like the script writers, the video animators, and other technical guys who all need to work together, on a demanding schedule. You have the importance of the publicity and marketing departments and of course you have the fans. Have a look at the type of movies your target audience are watching and see how you can relate it to them. If you're conveying a change message to a younger audience, think about using Transformers as a metaphor. Large epic projects may be matched to Lord of the Rings. Go and watch every movie that grosses over USD500m at the box office, even if it's not to your usual tastes. Watch it and look for the metaphors that are connecting to the target audiences. There is most likely a strong powerful story line or great archetypes that you can learn.



Conclusion

So you can see when it comes to using metaphors, you are only limited by your creativity and your ability to link your metaphor to a picture that is easily understood by your audience. Recently I've been speaking in Asian countries like Japan, China and Thailand with audiences ranging from high school students to executives in multinational companies. The metaphors that I use when I'm facing these different audiences will vary. When I'm facing a younger audience I will do some research to find out what are the current popular movies, hot brands or singers in that culture for that particular age group. Then I will find a way to link my message to these metaphors. In that way I'm helping the audience to digest my message by providing them a picture that is easily understood because they are already familiar with the particular metaphor whether it's a singer or actor or brands. Finding ways to link your message to a metaphor or image is a very powerful way to influence because it's memorable, it's easily understood, and often you find that it sticks far longer after your presentation.

Action - Next Steps

So for your next presentation think about a message that you want to convey and then try and find a metaphor that you can link it to. Good luck and if you would like to share your metaphors or if you have any questions about how you could use your metaphors then please feel free to reach out. Send me an email or connect with me on LinkedIn.

Further Resources

Read and watch a good article and video on the difference between a burning platform and a burning ambition in how it shapes change in an organisation.

<http://hbr.org/2011/11/fire-snowball-mask-movie-how-leaders-spark-and-sustain-change/ar/1>



I help business professionals from technical backgrounds become more influential when communicating with their senior leaders in cross cultural environments

About the Author

“Warwick helps C-level executives, working in multinational companies based in Greater China, who need to become more confident and effective in their spoken communications. Warwick helps the executive project a clear message allowing them to express their opinions powerfully and gain respect from senior managers even when under pressure.”

Warwick is the author of “The One Minute Presenter: 8 steps to successful business presentations in a short attention span world”.

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Warwick John Fahy and The One Minute Presenter Team



Let's connect on LinkedIn. My profile is cn.linkedin.com/in/warwickjohnfahy/