

Instructions

1. Print out several copies of this Leadership Metaphors Worksheet.
2. Break your class into four groups and provide each group with one worksheet each.
3. Have everyone in each group cut the worksheet so each group member has one metaphor strip.
4. The students then read their metaphor out to their small group one by one.
5. After each metaphor is read out, the small groups should discuss the metaphor. Have they felt like this in the past? Do they agree with this metaphor? How might they change it?
6. After discussing the provided metaphors, have each small group put their heads together to come up with one metaphor of their own, which they will then report back to the whole class.
7. When reporting back to the whole class, the group needs to explain why they came up with this metaphor and what they think it reveals about their ideas of what it means to be an effective leader.

18 Leadership Metaphors & Analogies

1. The Juggler

This is a leadership metaphor that I think most leaders can relate to. You have many things to do with your day, and many hats to wear.

When you were in a previous role you may have had a very specific spectrum of tasks. But when you become the team leader, you realize all tasks and roles come under your purview. If there is a problem in the IT department, it's your job to assemble team members to address it. If there's a financial issue, it's your job to focus on that. Then suddenly a staff member approaches you with a personal issue that you need to manage. By 10am, you're already juggling three different balls at once!

2. The Chef

The chef metaphor situates the leader as someone who has a bunch of raw ingredients that they need to put together. Cooking is a bit of an art at times. You need to know how much of each ingredient to throw in, plan out the flavors, and make changes on the fly as you 'taste test' your creation. In your leadership position, you might similarly need to evaluate what needs to be added or removed on the fly. The more experience you have, the better at this you'll be.

3. The Cop on the Beat

As a leader, you're the person who has to set a standard in the workplace. So as much as we might not enjoy it, we'll often need to take up the position as the 'bad cop'. Most of us will likely have had a boss who enters the room and instils fear in the staff. People put their heads down and try not to gather the attention of the angry boss.

There's also the 'good cop' who ensures justice and fairness in the workplace. This cop is appreciated by the staff because there's a sense that their efforts are recognized and they're treated with respect.

Finding out what sort of 'cop' you want to be is complicated. Some leaders might think some forms of leniency may help sustain morale while on the other side of the spectrum they might think any sign of leniency will lead to decay – “give an inch and they take a mile.”

4. The Salesperson

A great deal of the leader's job is to 'sell' a message either to the team members or the broader public. You may feel as if your role when walking into a team meeting or giving a speech is to stand up and talk about your vision for the company. Where there may be reluctance to embrace a vision, you need to use your communication to show people why your vision for the company is beneficial for everyone.

Looking outward, it's also often your job to communicate with the broader public to sell your company and its products or services. Here, this may not even be a metaphor but simply a fact: you are out there as chief salesperson for your organization.

5. The Cheerleader

A leader who tries to get the most out of their team might see themselves as a cheerleader. This leader might put on a positive and upbeat persona around their staff. They'll likely seek ways to make their team feel appreciated. They might also listen to the team member's ideas and ambitions then encourage them to strive toward those ambitions, so long as those ambitions are commensurate with the team's overall mission.

6. The Charlatan

Many people who graduate to leadership roles feel like charlatans. They will walk into the role feeling like they need to find their feet without being "found out" as being inadequate or having lack of knowledge.

While we may feel like sometimes we're literally a charlatan, I do think this is usually more an internal feeling, and we will over time find our feet and realize that our early 'freshness' was to be expected. All new leaders have to go through a learning curve.

Nevertheless, talking through this sense that you're a charlatan (especially among other leaders and mentors) can help you work through these emotions and realize your own potential.

7. The Bulldozer

This overwhelmingly negative metaphor for leaders might be one that the team feels about a new leader who has been placed in the position from the outside.

I recall working in a university once where a new Chancellor of the university was put in place specifically to shake things up. The new Chancellor came in like a bull in a China shop without understanding the culture or mission of the university. Rather than listening, he ploughed through everyone through restructurings and firings, which dramatically killed the morale of the place.

This leader, most of my colleagues would have said, was this metaphorical bulldozer.

8. The Firefighter

The firefighter spends all her day putting out spot fires. You walk into the workplace at 8.30am and you've already got 3 emails that need to be addressed. They're all issues you weren't expecting to come across today, but you have to address them immediately.

This leader feels like they're rarely able to get their core projects done because they're so busy trying to keep the train on the tracks. The leader in this workplace may feel they need managers under them to deal with these issues, or the processes in place within your team are not adequate to make the team work like a 'well-oiled machine'.

9. The Backstop

We'll often look at leaders and think they have glorified job with autonomy that the rest of the team can only dream about. But it's often the case that the leader is the person who is tasked with chipping-in and doing any task – from janitorial to leading board meetings – in order to ensure things are running smoothly.

One of the most quintessential examples of this is when the school principal steps-in to teach a class when a teacher calls in sick at the last minute.

10. The Storyteller

The storyteller and the salesperson are two very similar metaphors for leading a team. The storyteller is an expert salesperson, because the storyteller weaves a narrative about where the organization is coming from and where it's headed.

The best leaders can create a coherent story around what it means to be a part of the team, and why the work of the team is a worthwhile endeavor.

11. The Follower

Some leaders lead with bluster, without listening to the voices or needs of their team. Others lead from behind, empowering their team members without being assertive or providing direction.

There is debate on whether leading from behind is worthwhile. Nelson Mandela says leaders should lead from behind in good times and from the front when there is danger.

But there's also the famous Alexandre Ledru-Rollin quote:

“There go my people. I must find out where they are going so I can lead them.”

This sounds like a politician who lacks conviction and simply seeks power for power's sake, not because they can lead with courage.

Balancing listening to others (leading from behind) and leading from conviction (leading from the front) is one we all need to reflect on as leaders.

12. The Performer

Have you ever felt that you're always performing for your team? They look to you and are aware of your posture, facial expressions and everything you say. So, you feel like you're in a fishbowl, always being looked at all day long.

You're performing!

You might notice you have been playing the role of the performer when you get home and drop to your couch, let out a curse word, and kick off those uncomfortable shoes. You're yourself again!

13. The Backbone

The leader who is 'the backbone' is a leader who feels like everything would fall apart if they took a day off. The team would fall to jelly and all structure will be lost. This leader might feel trapped in their role, as if they can't quit or take a holiday because they're doing all the work.

In my opinion, this is not a great situation to be in. This leader may need to think about how they can put in place processes and backstops to get the team to a stable footing, where you would be able to drift into the shadows and the team still runs smoothly.

14. The Personal Trainer

The personal trainer is a leader who spends one-to-one time with all of their team to check-in on them. Each team member may have personal goals that they need to meet. But the good personal trainer also checks-in regularly and is the team member's greatest supporter. It's not checking-in for accountability's sake, but because you actually care about your team.

15. The Healer

The healer is a leader who sees rifts within the team and tries to identify ways to bring people together. This leader might be very focused on conciliation and respecting all points of view. They focus strongly on the emotional aspects of the team and has strong emotional intelligence. Many people may identify female leaders with this metaphor, and might seek this type of leader for a team that has had bad blood recently.

16. The Hostage Negotiator

The hostage negotiator metaphor is most likely to occur in a large, unionized workplace. When workers exercise collective power, the leader might feel as if their workers are withholding work or productivity until they get certain concessions from the leadership.

This metaphor situates the workers and leaders as opponents in a struggle for power, which leads to a destructive working environment. Such workplaces may need to re-frame negotiations with their staff to identify mutually beneficial ways to create a healthy workplace for all.

17. The Director

Some leaders are literally called “directors”. But here I’m thinking of the director of a play. It’s your job to say when someone enters the stage and when they leave. You assign roles and choose how big someone’s role should be in each scene. A big part of this is choosing who would be best in which role. When doing this, you need to bring out the best in each member your cast and find where they can contribute the most good.

One concern with this metaphor is that your team doesn’t have much agency. Do you agree or disagree?

18. The Contortionist

We might use this metaphor to explain how we're often sitting between the needs and demands of an overseer (such as the shareholders) and the experts, staff or even customers. The shareholders might tell you to take the business in one direction while the advice you're getting elsewhere tells you to do something completely different.

This is also common when you're told to make budget cuts while also increase productivity or revenues. At these instances, you're "Squeezed Between a Rock and a Hard Place" and need to leverage your skills as a contortionist to find your way out of this tough situation.

something to focus on.