

# YES! AND... CREATIVE GORILLA # 95

*The metaphors you use can influence how you approach a situation. Creative leaders can use this to help people respond constructively to situations...*

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## Use Metaphors to Reframe Issues ...

*“The metaphors you use to describe a situation can influence how you approach it.” - John Brooker*



*“Seismic shocks in the city...”*

*How might you influence the way people approach a situation?*

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My colleague and I were running an interactive focus group to gauge people’s reaction to a proposed training course on Flexible Thinking for Innovation. We had received a positive reaction but I was not convinced we were hearing all opinion. I asked if anyone had any concerns.

One of the group, an experienced manager, emitted an exasperated sigh and exclaimed, “Personally I think this course is a waste of \*\*\*\* time.” That perked the group up a bit!

“What’s your reason for stating that?” we asked. “Well, there’s no money to do anything, even if we do come up with innovative ideas.” He then used his hands to describe an obstacle in front of him. “The budget is a huge wall around us, it stops us doing anything.” We nodded, thanked him and noted his reaction; we weren’t there to argue the case.

Driving home afterwards, I mused on what he had said. It was a great example of how people use metaphors to simplify and describe complex

situations. It was also an example of how the metaphors people use can influence how they approach a situation. From his point of view, it was not worth doing anything because the budget was finite, an “insurmountable obstacle” or at least one he seemed no longer willing to overcome.

So

If metaphors can influence how people approach a situation, what might we do as creative leaders to influence them in a constructive way?

In his excellent book “*Imaginization*”, Gareth Morgan explains that if people use only one metaphor to describe a situation, they limit their thinking because metaphors reveal only certain facets of a situation.

Thus, one way to influence people is to encourage them to think of several metaphors, which, in the case of our budget might be:

- A river; a stream of money to irrigate new initiatives?
- A springboard; budget used as a base to seek further investment?
- The ingredients for a cake; perhaps use fewer or cheaper ingredients?

Each describes a different way of viewing the budget, helping to see it not as a finite obstacle but perhaps as an enabler on which to build.

True, a river could be viewed as an obstacle, which leads us to another way to help someone think more flexibly using metaphors. Using this

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approach, we help them to find different characteristics of the metaphor and then relate those characteristics to the literal topic. So, to use our wall as an example again, if it is an obstacle we could:

- Take it apart brick by brick and rebuild it in a different way (reallocate the budget to free up money for innovation)
- Use a pole to vault over it (co-operate with another department to create more funds for innovation)
- Walk around it (find ways to innovate without spending money)

What else can you think of?

This example may seem trite (although there are likely to be a number of managers wrestling with budgets at present), but limiting metaphors are an issue at a national level too. If ministers and commentators use only limiting metaphors for the economy (“biggest depression in one hundred years”, “city in meltdown”), it is likely to influence people in negative ways and reduce optimism.

What are some constructive metaphors you might use to describe the current economic situation? One church commentator recently said (I paraphrase), “The financial crisis is an opportunity for a spiritual reawakening”, which sets the mind thinking in different, perhaps more constructive ways. In a crisis, isn’t that what creative leaders should be doing?

## Action

Listen for the ways people use metaphor, in private, in public and in your organisation. Once you are attuned to them, think of different and more positive metaphors that you might use and where possible, suggest these.

For my full article on metaphor, click [here](#).

## To Close

I read an interesting article in a newspaper recently. A 79 year old grandmother in Britain was very upset with her insurance company, which kept stalling her attempts to seek compensation for what she viewed as a bad investment. As the paper described it, she refused “to surrender to faceless bureaucracy” (some “mixed metaphors” there) and she travelled on three occasions to try and meet the Managing Director.

Despite these three attempts, which culminated in her arrest, he remained elusive. In frustration, she reported him to the police as a missing person! I wonder how you display a “missing” poster for a faceless bureaucrat.

Have a metaphorically brilliant week.

*John Brooker | Facilitate, Innovate, Transform.*

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