

# SELECTING AN APPROPRIATE METAPHOR FOR MBA

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## ABSTRACT

*Metaphors are powerful tools that allow individuals to understand complex concepts by comparing them to something familiar. In the context of an MBA, selecting an appropriate metaphor can help students comprehend abstract business concepts and navigate the complexities of the business world. This abstract explores the process of selecting an appropriate metaphor for an MBA. The first step in selecting an appropriate metaphor for an MBA is to identify the key concepts that need to be communicated. This can include concepts such as leadership, teamwork, strategy, and innovation. Once these concepts have been identified, the next step is to brainstorm potential metaphors that could be used to illustrate these concepts. This could involve comparing business concepts to sports, military strategies, or even natural phenomena.*

**Keywords:** Metaphor, Leadership, Teamwork, Strategy.

## INTRODUCTION

A Master of Business Administration (MBA) normally covers various areas of business administration such as applied statistics, human resources, business communication, business ethics, finance, management, law, entrepreneurship, marketing, supply-chain management, and operations management in a manner most relevant to management analysis and strategy. It is offered by over 15000 universities world-wide and is the flagship for most business schools but recently there has been a decline in student applications (Byrne, 2019).

Three current criticisms are that a standard view of the market is being taught and new challenges are not being addressed; it is implicitly assumed that humans are “*in control*” and the knowledge imparted is not highly regarded by business. In many cases, the MBA is simply a networking opportunity (Rudolph, 2018). To face these criticisms, the Georgian National University (SEU) has created an MBA based on system thinking which aims to produce critical and reflexive students who can address the new challenges faced by modern businesses. The detailed design and structure of this MBA is a topic of another paper. The problem that this paper addresses is how to communicate our ideas effectively.

The rise of robotic and artificial intelligence, climate change and a re-evaluation of the planetary resources have triggered a conversation about the very purpose of education, particularly in a growing global economy and how curricula should directly relate to the needs of the future. Educational leaders are questioning the “*traditional*” curriculum, which did not provide students with the appropriate employment skills for the modern industrial and knowledge economy. Professionals in education are now focusing on specialization or vocational education, which is a curriculum that prepares students for specific career paths such as business, law, medicine, or engineering. A debate is emerging about liberal education (sometimes referred to as general education) and its value and potential to help employment. Liberal education or

liberal learning puts an emphasis on a broad interdisciplinary curriculum, which is designed to provide a general understanding of how things actually function. Liberal education stresses the importance of cultural awareness when solving problems, as we work in a global and diverse world. Its learning outcomes focus on developing creativity and critical thinking as the new era requires new solutions to problems some of which we have not encountered before. A primary focus of liberal education is teaching effective communication. This is the skill to identify a message and to be able to efficiently communicate this message to various recipients. To understand modern needs in this highly complex and interconnected world, we believe there is a requirement for a modern workforce to also have generalist skills, to be adaptable to the changing environment, to know how to find the necessary information for new functions, and can "manage and assimilate greatly expanded quantities of information.

Institutions that share the idea of liberal education are beginning to appear around the world. In Eastern Europe, the education systems are adapting to the changing political and economic environment with different learning, and assessment structures. In other emerging democracies like Georgia, liberal education is being considered as “*a means for developing a critical and participatory citizenry*” (Altbach et al., 2019). Economies in emerging democracies require both specialists trained for science and technical professions as well as strong leaders with creative and critical thinking. Many of these skills are generalist such as creativity, adaptability, and the ability to give broad ethical considerations to existing and ongoing social developments. It is important to think carefully and discuss how teaching, learning, and assessment methods need to change if liberal education is to continue to emerge as a worldwide trend.

New ideas are needed but even more so is the means to communicate them. Ideas are frustrating because they are hard to manifest into the world-imagination will always be compromised by reality. Language can be ambiguous which makes it difficult to explain new ideas. Our mind works in interesting ways. We can find it difficult to grasp something physically, but when given an abstraction of the physical through metaphors, something may click into place, and we understand it on a conceptual level. Metaphors are steeped in the collective unconscious and are used extensively to see things in a different way and thus enable many new thoughts to be created. Duit (1991) Using metaphors is a fundamental mechanism of mind, one that allows us to use what we know about our physical and social experience to provide understanding of countless other subjects. Metaphors structure our most basic understandings of our experience. They are many metaphors that shape our perceptions and actions without our ever noticing them (Lakoff et al., 1999).

The context of this article is the choice of metaphor to best communicate our MBA program. Our design was grounded on systems thinking and stressed two important concepts, organizational structure and operational excellence. The article does not justify this design but concerns how best such a design could be communicated to our staff, students and other institutions (Nietzsche, 1954).

### **Possible Metaphors**

We looked at three metaphors: the mechanical metaphor, the classical metaphor and the organic metaphor. These will now be discussed in turn.

## The Mechanical Metaphor

One metaphor which came into being at the time of Henry Ford's production line and Charles Taylor "*time and motion*", is a company running as "*a well-oiled machine*". Obviously, a company and a machine are not the same but some of the connotations of efficiency, stability, precision, continuity are advantageous to both. This comparison still lingers in people's minds as the "*Machine Metaphor*". Is this metaphor still appropriate today? There are certainly some beneficial comparisons we can make with our MBA.

For example, the Formula One Ferrari is a "*well-oiled machine*". It has a good appearance. It is classy-it creates a feeling of top quality, of excellence-value for money. These qualities can also relate to "*good*" companies such as Apple and Google. We are also trying to achieve this with our MBA. Each part of the Ferrari is superbly made and the best example of its kind in the world-the best braking system, the best injection system, the best suspension system. All parts work perfectly together with absolute precision and timing. Any breakdown would be a failure. In our MBA, all our courses are well designed and are designed to integrate and connect together (Ostrom, 1998).

The Ferrari is well designed to overcome perceived problems such as: air resistance (using wind tunnels and mathematical modelling to minimize turbulence, special paint) and cornering (using spoilers to stop it lifting off the ground and designing a low center of gravity. In our MBA we have anticipated and allowed for problems. So far, the metaphor seems to work but does it cover all of what we are trying to achieve?

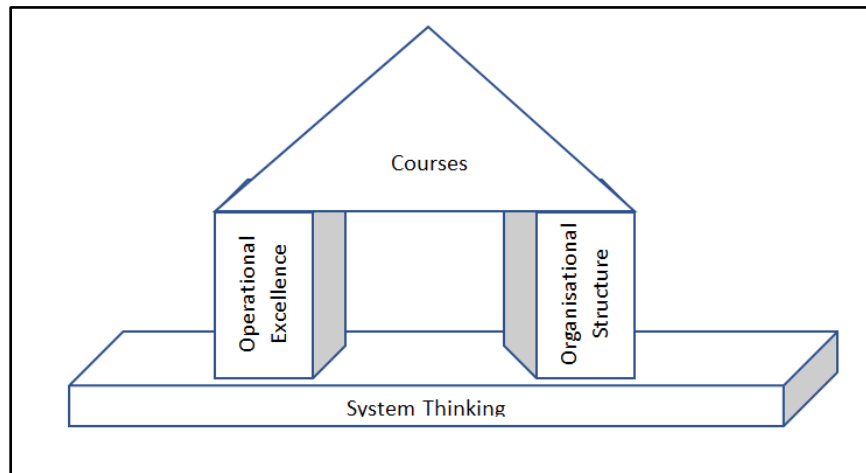
There are several drawbacks. In reality, the Ferrari is simply a pile of scrap material. It cannot even start without a driver; its parts are individually excellent and well connected but are inanimate. The parts of our MBA are people-staff, students and companies. These make mistakes but can learn from them. The Ferrari has only one purpose, which is to beat its competitors-to win. This is not our message. The Ferrari is not agile in the sense that if conditions change then it becomes useless unless it is changed by an external agency. It has no growth or learning built-in. It is extremely expensive in fuel which certainly is not the message to be conveyed. For these and many other reasons, although the phrase "*our MBA runs like a well-oiled machine*" is superficially appealing, the mechanical metaphor was rejected.

## The Classical Metaphor

The second metaphor is illustrated in Figure 1 too and is based on a classical Greek temple. These are famous for their elegance and their aesthetic appeal. System Thinking forms the foundation for our degree-the bed rock. The two pillars of the degree (organizational development and operational excellence) are firmly attached to this base, and they support a portico, which contains the rest of the courses. This is a solid structure and conveys the impression of ancient wisdom and permanence. The message is that here we have an MBA which will endure.

But what is the purpose of this structure? It is to impress. One admires the design rather than why it exists. If we look at the Parthenon today, it is a shadow of its former self. It has been subject to the ravages of time. Because the shell is still standing, one can still appreciate its beauty even if it no longer generates the "*awe and wonder*" it was designed to create. Although the time scales are different, this criticism can be applied to the use of this metaphor for our course. Yes, we want solidity, coherence and usefulness but we don't want a rigid, static

structure. The structure must have an opportunity for growth. When a rigid structure experiences environmental shocks, it can easily collapse. As the Ferrari, it has no innate capacity to grow, learn or develop. Extra buttresses and attachments can be added but then it loses its purpose which was to impress with its elegance. In the rapidly changing sphere of global business and communication, tsunamis of change are occurring which would tear down such an edifice. To survive one must be flexible and adaptable. A new metaphor is needed Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1**  
**THE CLASSICAL METAPHOR**

### **An Organic Metaphor**

We still regard System Thinking as a foundation for the degree but now present it, not as a solid foundation, but as soil in which the degree can take root. In nature, everything depends on the sun. The sun supplies a stream of high-energy, low entropy photons, which are incident on plants, algae and cyanobacteria whose cells synthesize the basic units of organic matter on which the rest of the food chain depends. Operational Excellence can be defined in many specific ways, but the general meaning is clear-it is striving to improve on the part of the individual, the organisations, and the design team. We decided to represent Operational Excellence by the Sun. We then use a sunflower as a metaphor for the MBA program. The head of a sunflower always turns towards the sun and thus it is hoped to convey that our course always looks to operational excellence. This is its goal, its purpose and its path. The soil represents System Thinking and it is here that the seeds for the MBA are planted. Its roots are its organizational structure. By using this metaphor, we are moving away from the search for a predetermined truth or there is no definitive final product-the endpoint is not seen as the end of a path but a completed version of a path which rests on experience, theories and practices and seeing what emerges from the soil.

These ideas are loosely based on the Learning organization first proposed by Peter Senge in the 1990's. The innovation about our MBA program structure is that a Learning organization which includes policy makers, top management, academic staff, students, and businessmen) has been created. A learning organization concentrates on developing a shared vision between all its members-in our case; this is the pursuit of excellence. It encourages the sharing of mental models whilst developing the individual skills of the members. It also actively promotes team

learning. A repository of knowledge will be created where existing knowledge is stored for access by all staff. New knowledge and practices will also be sought out and incorporated into this repository. Thus, the Georgian National University SEU MBA will have its own knowledge management system where all knowledge and innovation is transferred into the program structure. If team members change or leave, the knowledge remains, and the MBA culture pervades. In this way, the program keeps its identity and can “grow”. In this sense, it can be called organic. It is the fact that the SEU MBA has been designed as such a learning organisations that gives the MBA its distinctive, unique identity. The stem of the sunflower is a metaphor for the MBA program itself and the leaves represent the various courses. The whole structure is growing. Learning and developing.

Soil needs care and attention. To continue with the farming or organic analogy, it can easily be exploited in the interests of quick returns and fame. Fertilizers were introduced to further this process but the problem in replacing mixed farming with monocultures is that it relies on artificial means. Overuse of chemicals killed the soil. Previously, fertilizers had come from the waste of animals that lived on the farm and a natural balance was preserved. In our sunflower model, the importance of fertilizer is recognized but they are not artificial. They come from the experience of the staff teaching the courses, from the feedback of students taking the courses and from the incorporation of new ideas in teaching and assessment. There is self-referential feedback loop here-the soil provides the means for the flower to grow which in turn produces the fertilizer for the soil. A truly organic metaphor.

**Analysis of the Requirements on Georgian Labor Market**

Before starting to plan our MBA, 17 managerial positions from the Georgian labor market were selected and studied Each position identified was studied individually with five vacancies of the same position from different companies based on reputation, size and image of the companies including local as well as international companies operating in Georgian market. The requirements of each position were combined and for each position, a company representative holding the position was chosen for an interview. The interviews held to validate each requirement in the vacancy and link it to the real implementation Table 1.

<b>Table 1</b>		
<b>POSITIONS SELECTED FOR THE ANALYSIS OF LABOR REQUIREMENTS</b>		
<b>Management</b>	<b>Marketing</b>	<b>Finance</b>
Store Manager Process Manager Project Manager Human Resources Manager Talent Acquisition Manager General Manager Business Development Manager Event Manager	Marketing Manager Social Media Manager Marketing and Communications Manager Sales Manager Customer Support manager	Financial Manager Financial Analyst Financial Controller Risk Manager

As a result of the 17 positions, 85 vacancies and 17 interviews, the future responsibilities of MBA graduates were categorized into three directions: Strategy/Analysis, Operations and Communication. This enabled us to develop relevant aims for the MBA program as well as the learning outcomes that a graduate should have upon completion of the program. Each category

was studied extensively and the courses curriculum was designed accordingly. The study once again supported our notion of using an organic metaphor as the best choice for the program. A manager our program offers is a new type of manager who believes that learning is a lifelong endeavor and is constantly improving and aspiring towards excellence (Objective four of SEU MBA Program).

Below are the categories, the functions and the discussion of why we think the chosen organic metaphor fits our MBA program.

By studying strategy and analysis, we researched the responsibilities that an employer requires from MBA graduate. The whole category revolves around the improvement and change. The MBA graduate is a decision maker, or a supporter for decision-making in identifying new trends, opportunities, challenges and therefore, possible improvements. The graduate is encouraged to develop a mindset that inherently strives towards understanding changing customer needs better, tracking shifts in industry and environment and analyzing the company in terms of its strengths and potential improvement to take an advantage of the evolving nature around.

Our MBA is organic as it strives to operational excellence, optimizes its operations and has a developed metrics as well as benchmark to measure efficiency of execution and progress. Based on the responsibilities required on the labor market the managerial positions under study require a thinking that is able to see interconnected elements of a larger whole, think systemically when identifying the problems, interpreting and assessing the quality of data and critically reflecting on the situation given. This we understand is not a planned process of checkup but rather a natural course, an organic development requiring appropriate mindset set forward by our program.

As a response to the labor market requirements, with our new MBA we offer a new type of manager who is not necessarily an expert in narrow specialty but is aware of the interconnected nature of all problems. Who, in a systemic way, can identify problems, interpret and assess the quality of data, critically reflect on situations, develop and implement plans and, using the knowledge of best current practices, resolve problems (Objective one of Georgian National University SEU MBA educational program) Our manager will be working with teams of different specialists and we offer a new type of manager who understands that the aspirations and practices of the workforce have changed creating a more value-based working environment in constant communication with others. This requires new type of leadership, which are more people centric (Objective three of Georgian National University SEU MBA program).

The pandemic has once again shown that communication skills are extremely important, as many companies have witnessed the glitches in their operations due to the failure to communicate properly. Based on the analysis of the vacancies we identified, the flows of communication an MBA graduate will need involve employees, customers, within organization and its different units, with partners outside organization. Based on this we are creating an MBA that prepares a new type of manager who is aware of differences of the 21st century for the need of operating and communicating in a global environment and dealing with the challenges of existing ecosystems, environments and social dimensions that every organization must address (Objective two of Georgian National University SEU MBA educational program).

## CONCLUSION

The design team of a new MBA program have investigated how best to communicate the novelty of their degree. Two traditional metaphors were debated and found wanting. An organic metaphor, which used farming analogies and the behaviour of a sunflower, was finally adopted. It is thought that this metaphor suits the identity of the program and communicates on a deeper level than just mere words. Some differences between our organic view and a traditional view are:

1. Traditional view: Good Companies are efficient, thus should be left alone.
2. Organic view: Good Companies are effective, if well-tended.

A company can be efficient i.e. doing things right, but that does not mean that they are doing the right things. (Efficacy) A good company should be effective and efficacious. This needs awareness and growth i.e. is an organic quality rather than a prescribed one. A garden needs constant care and attention.

1. Traditional view: Regulation destroys companies.
2. Organic view: Companies need constant fertilizing and weeding, or else decay.

Traditionalists say regulation distorts the “*natural*” and efficient allocation that companies want to achieve but good companies are consistently and continuously changing. Gardens, if not carefully regulated, get overrun by weeds or exhaust their nutrients (education, infrastructure, etc.) if left alone, and then die. For companies to deliver broad-based wealth, they need to be constantly monitored and adaptive to their environment such as enforcing rules that promote pro-social behaviour, and thus keeps the economy functioning. Too much regulation can prevent innovation but the most beautiful gardens are carefully monitored and regulated. Traditional view: Wealth is created through competition and by the pursuit of narrow self-interest Organic view: Wealth is created through trust and cooperation.

Where traditionalists praise competition, complexity economist’s show that unchecked selfishness kills the one thing that determines whether a society can generate (let alone fairly allocate) wealth and opportunity: trust. Ostrom, Trust creates cooperation, and cooperation is what creates win-win outcomes. High trust networks thrive; low-trust ones fail. And when greed and self-interest are glorified above all, high-trust networks become low-trust. To conclude, this short paper has described how SEU have chosen an organic metaphor to communicate its aims and objectives. It is hoped that this will resonate with the readers and the authors will welcome any discussions that arise.

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**Received:** 03-Feb-2023, Manuscript No. BSJ-23-13189; **Editor assigned:** 06-Feb-2023, PreQC No. BSJ-23-13189(PQ); **Reviewed:** 20-Feb-2023, QC No. BSJ-23-13189; **Revised:** 03-Mar-2023, Manuscript No. BSJ-23-13189(R); **Published:** 10-Mar-2023