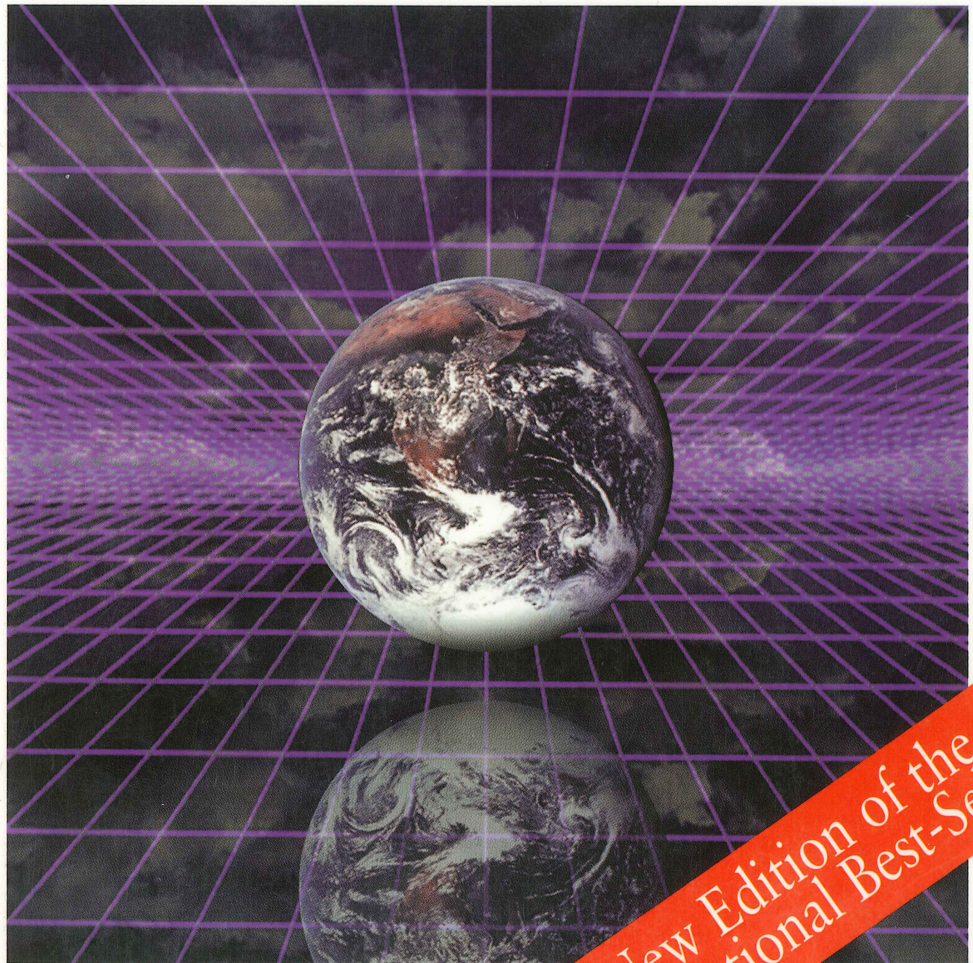


Gareth Morgan

IMAGES OF ORGANIZATION



New Edition of the
International Best-Seller

IMAGES OF ORGANIZATION

Gareth Morgan (Sage Publications, 1997, Pp. 355-373)

Chapter 11 -- Reading and Shaping Organizational Life

The ability to "read" and understand what is happening in one's organization is a key managerial competence. As has been suggested, if one can broaden understanding, it is possible to broaden the range of actions through which one approaches key issues.

How can this be achieved?

The advice drawn from earlier chapters and summarized in Exhibit 10.1 is this: learn how to generate, integrate, and use the insights of competing metaphors. Use them to understand and shape the situations that you are seeking to organize and manage.

We have discussed the process in general terms, so the purpose of this chapter is to go one step further by offering a concrete illustration at a practical level. In the next sections you will find a short case study followed by two readings of the case from different points of view. One adopts the perspective of a manager-consultant seeking to deal with the problems presented in the case. The other presents a reading from the perspectives of a social critic and policy analyst. Together they illustrate how we can mobilize the insights of different metaphors to identify and understand key dimensions of a situation to serve the purposes at hand.

It must be emphasized that the aim of the case study is to provide just one simple illustration of the methodology in action. Readers interested in further applications, and more advice on use of the method, will find these in this book's companion volume *Imaginization: The Art of Creative Management*.

The Multicom case

Multicom is a small firm employing 150 people in the public relations field. It was started by Jim Walsh, a marketing specialist, and Wendy Bridges, a public relations expert. They had worked together for several years at a medium-size communications firm and decided to branch out on their own to realize their own ideas as to what a good PR firm could and should be. They felt that their combined expertise and extensive contacts provided an excellent base on which to do this.

Before submitting their resignations at their old firm they persuaded two colleagues, Marie Beaumont and Frank Rossi, to join them as minority shareholders. Walsh and Bridges each held 40 percent of the equity in the new venture; Beaumont and Rossi were each given 10 percent. Rossi was an editor and writer with an excellent reputation, and Beaumont was a well-regarded film and video person.

At first, business was difficult, and they were glad of the corporate clients that they had taken with them from their old firm. Competition was keen, and their old firm seemed subtly to be doing everything it could to block their progress. However, they worked hard, and their reputation steadily grew along with the size of their staff and their earnings. By the end of their second year, the four partners were each earning almost double their previous salaries and building a significant capital investment as well. They felt that they were well on the way to achieving the kind of top-notch outfit on which they had set their sights.

These early years were exciting ones.

When they established Multicom the four partners adopted a client centered mode of organization. They each had certain clients for whom they felt a special responsibility, and in effect became project managers for these clients. Each developed a reasonable competence in all aspects of the agency's work so that they could substitute for each other when necessary. New staff were encouraged to develop the same all-around skills and capacities in addition to their specializations. While this was often time consuming and expensive, it created great flexibility. The search for new business and continuing contacts with clients took a significant proportion of staff away from the office most of the time, so the existence of a number of good "all rounders" was a real asset. Besides that, it often made work more interesting and enjoyable and added to the general team spirit of the office.

The staff at Multicom worked hard, often starting early in the morning and working late at night. They also played hard, throwing regular parties to celebrate the completion of major projects or the acquisition of new clients. These helped keep morale high and project Multicom's image as an excellent and exciting place to work. The firm's clients often attended these parties and were usually impressed by the Vitality and quality of interpersonal relations.

During the company's third year, however, things began to change. The long hours and pace of life at Multicom were getting to Walsh and Bridges. Each had heavy family commitments and wanted more leisure time. They increasingly talked about the need to "get more organized" so that they could exercise a closer control over staff and office activities, which, in their view, at times verged on the chaotic. Beaumont and Rossi, however, both of whom were single and at thirty and thirty-one, respectively, almost ten years younger than the senior partners, relished the lifestyle and were keen to maintain the firm's present character. They would have been happy to shoulder a greater share of the work and responsibility in return for a greater equity in the company, but Walsh and Bridges were reluctant to hand them this sort of control.

As time went on, it became clear that there were important philosophical differences with regard to the way the office should be run. Whereas Walsh and Bridges regarded the ad hoc style of organization that had developed during the first two years as temporary- "necessary until we've sorted out our ideas as to how we want to put this organization together" Beaumont and Rossi saw it as a desirable way of doing business in the longer term. Whereas Walsh and Bridges complained about the frequent absence of staff from the

office and the lack of clear systems of responsibility and office protocol, Beaumont and Rossi relished what they often described as their "creative chaos." To them, the firm was producing excellent results, clients were happy and knocking at the door, and this was all that mattered.

By the fourth year, tensions were close to the breaking point. The four principals frequently found themselves in long meetings about office organization, and the differences were as deep as ever. Walsh and Bridges argued for "more system," and Beaumont and Rossi argued for the status quo. The differences were straining personal relations and were having an unfavorable impact on life in the office generally. Many staff felt that Multicom was in danger of losing its special character and was no longer quite the same "fun place" at which to work.

All four principals sensed this change, and they talked about it frequently. However, there was simply no consensus as to what should be done. As a result of general frustration, they began to break an unwritten but golden rule set in the early days of Multicom: that all four would always be involved in major policy decisions. Walsh and Bridges began to meet together and resolved that the only way forward was for them to exercise their authority and to insist that a reorganization of the office be initiated. They agreed to propose this at a meeting with Beaumont and Rossi the following day.

Walsh and Bridges were surprised. The idea produced little resistance from their two colleagues. It was almost as if it was expected. Beaumont and Rossi insisted that the decision should not be taken without a lot of thought because it represented a major departure. They reiterated their view that no change in office organization was necessary other than a streamlining of a few financial procedures. They were by no means happy with the proposal, but it was clear that they weren't going to fight it.

The following week Walsh and Bridges called a meeting of all staff to outline their plans. In operational terms these involved a clearer definition of job responsibilities, a more formalized procedure governing the exchange of staff between projects, and a closer control over the conditions under which staff were to be away from the office during business hours. A number of other office procedures were also introduced.

The meeting was unique in Multicom's history in tone and nature. For weeks there was talk about a rift among the four principals and about how winds of change were blowing through the firm. Some members of the staff welcomed the greater degree of structure; others resented the new developments. Staff continued to work hard at their jobs with the professionalism they knew Multicom demanded, but everyone knew that things were not quite the same. Multicom was no longer working-or playing-the **Multicomway**.

Walsh and Bridges, however, were well pleased. They felt a lot more secure with the way things stood, and could see the time ahead when they would be able to take a lot of pressure off themselves and let the office run itself within the framework they had begun to develop.

Beaumont and Rossi continued to work hard as usual, and their project teams were least affected by the new developments. Within a year, however, they had left Multicom

and set up a new company of their own, taking a number of key staff and clients with them.

Thanks to a large number of faithful clients, Multicom continued to produce sound financial results, but it gradually lost its reputation as a leading-edge agency. It could be relied on to produce good solid work but was, in the eyes of a number of disaffected clients, "uninspiring."

Beaumont and Rossi's new firm, Media 2000, picked up many of these clients and, adopting the organizational style pioneered at Multicom, recreated a "fun business" employing eighty people. The firm quickly established itself as a talented and innovative agency. Beaumont and Rossi take satisfaction in the firm's reputation and financial success and look back on their days with Multicom as "a great learning experience." In retrospect, they view their differences with Walsh and Bridges as part of a "lucky break" that spurred them to find an even more lucrative and satisfying work situation.

Interpreting Multicom

How should we interpret this case? Clearly, in view of what has been said earlier, many different metaphors or theoretical frameworks can be used to understand the pattern of events at Multicom. The tendency for many people is to seize on a particular point of view—for example, that "Multicom offers a clear case of organizational politics"—and elevate this to THE VIEW of the situation, instead of recognizing that, as illustrated in **Exhibit 11.1**, many different interpretations and meanings may all have a measure of validity in understanding what is happening. A reflective reading of Multicom requires that we remain open to as many possibilities as we can and then find ways of integrating the insights to suit our purposes.

I find it helpful to think about these two stages as involving a diagnostic reading, whereby we strive to gain as comprehensive an understanding as possible, accompanied by a critical evaluation that integrates key insights.

The diagnostic reading allows us to remain in an open-minded mode. The evaluation brings us into a more focused perspective. The trouble, for many people, is that they jump into the latter too quickly, instead of recognizing how an openness to multiple interpretations can create a much broader range of insight and action opportunities.

Consider, for example, the *diagnostic reading* offered in **Exhibit 11.1**. This reading is schematic, highlighting how different metaphors can draw us into different features of the case. Thus, as we learn to see Multicom through different frames, we may be struck, for example, by holographic qualities that were originally out of view. We may be intrigued by the DNA-like cultural codes that are being transferred from the old Multicom to Media2000. We may note interesting connections between the tendency toward bureaucratization and the conscious and unconscious motives driving Walsh and Bridges to tighter control. We may want to dwell on the political dynamic or on the way Multicom is moving out of strategic alignment with the needs of a changing external environment. Or the focus may lead to Multicom's client list and the seamy side of its operations.

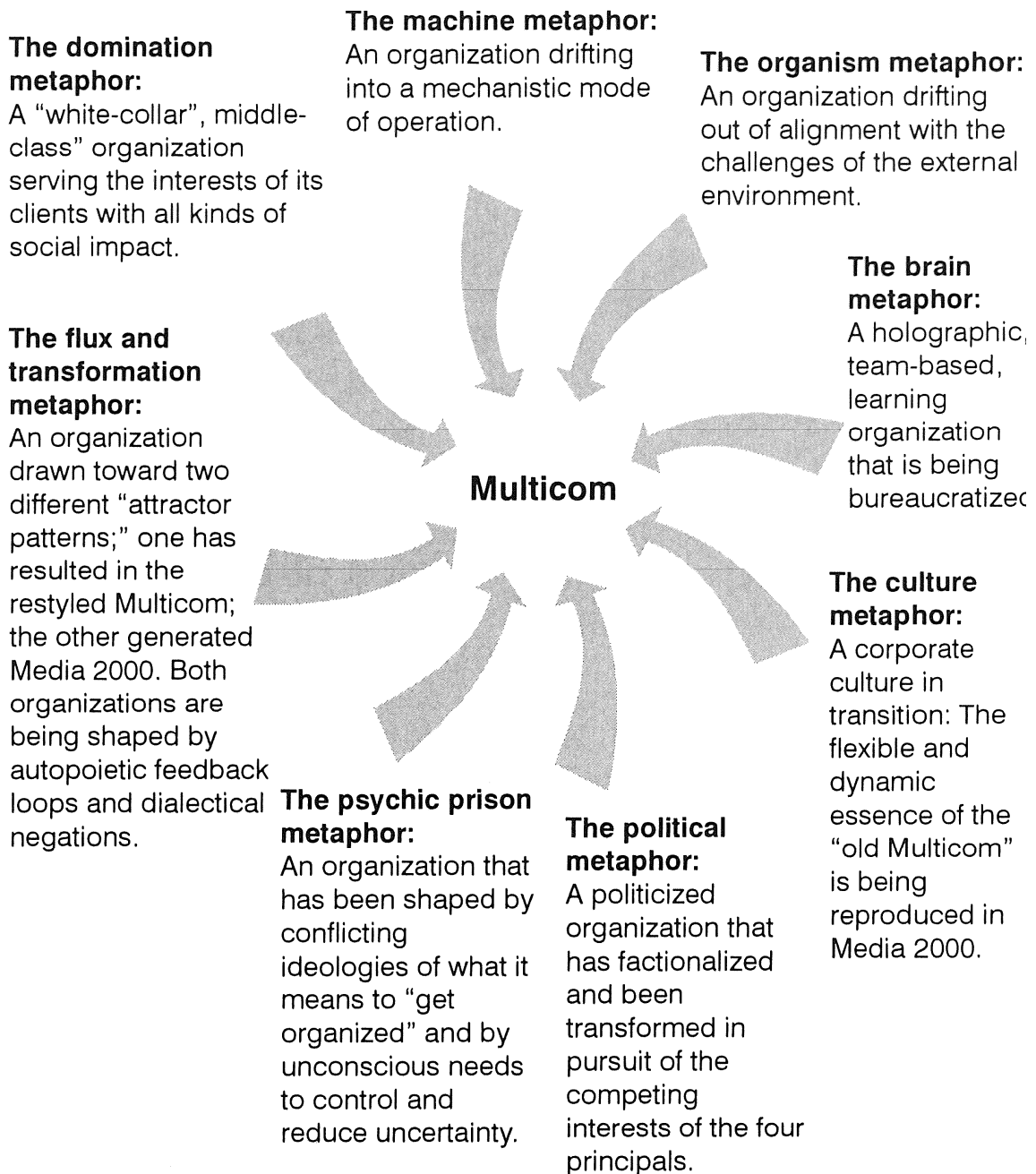


Exhibit 11.1. "Reading" Multicom

A good diagnostic reading seeks to generate a comprehensive range of insights that allows us to discern the unfolding tendencies and character of a situation:

What is happening at Multicom, and in the emergence of Media 2000?

What understandings or lessons can we take away from the experience?

How can we use the knowledge thus gained?

The answers to such questions, of course, ultimately depend on the point of view and

set of interests that we bring to the task of understanding in the first place. If we are examining Multicom from a detached academic standpoint, we may enjoy exploring the paradox of competing viewpoints as an end in itself. But, if we are in a position that requires that we *act* in relation to Multicom in some way, we will want to drive beyond this kind of relativism. For example, if we are a new manager or management consultant charged with advising on recent history and what Multicom or Media2000 should do next, we will want to find a way of integrating our insights to serve this end. If, however, we are a social critic or policy analyst, we will want our reading to serve quite different purposes in terms of our policy agenda or critique.

This is where the *critical evaluation* stage of the reading process comes into play. It involves creating what may be described as a kind of *storyline* that can advance our ends. Whereas the diagnostic phase generates a range of insights that can open avenues for creative interpretation, the "storyline" seeks to bring them together in a meaningful way.

DEVELOPING A DETAILED READING AND "STORYLINE"

To illustrate, let us adopt the perspective and role of the new manager or management consultant charged with making recommendations on the case. As we "read" through various metaphors, we find ourselves being "pulled into" their ways of seeing. We begin to identify key insights, such as those illustrated in **Exhibit 11.1**. Some of the insights strike us as particularly resonant or meaningful and worthy of further investigation. We choose to investigate in more depth.

Thus, following the insights of the organismic metaphor, we find ourselves asking more questions about the relationship between Multicom and Media 2000 and the broader environment:

What is the nature of the environment?

What are the critical tasks influencing the ability to survive?

Have Multicom and Media 2000 found an appropriate niche?

Are they adopting appropriate strategic organizational and managerial styles?

Pursuing this line of inquiry, we may choose to perform a contingency analysis using the framework offered in Chapter 3 (Exhibit 3.6) and map the relationships between internal and external characteristics. As a result, we conclude that the trend toward increased bureaucratization in Multicom is a dangerous one, creating an incongruent relationship with the challenges of the environment. Using the same framework (**Exhibit 11.2**) we note that Media 2000, with its flexible holographic style, is much better adapted. Viewing both organizations as part of a wider ecology of competitive and collaborative relations, involving similar and dissimilar organizations and rapid developments in multimedia technology, we find ourselves reflecting on various paths for future strategic development. Can each firm survive as distinct entities? Are new alliances necessary to cope with new technologies and the patterns of organization shaping the multimedia sector as a whole?

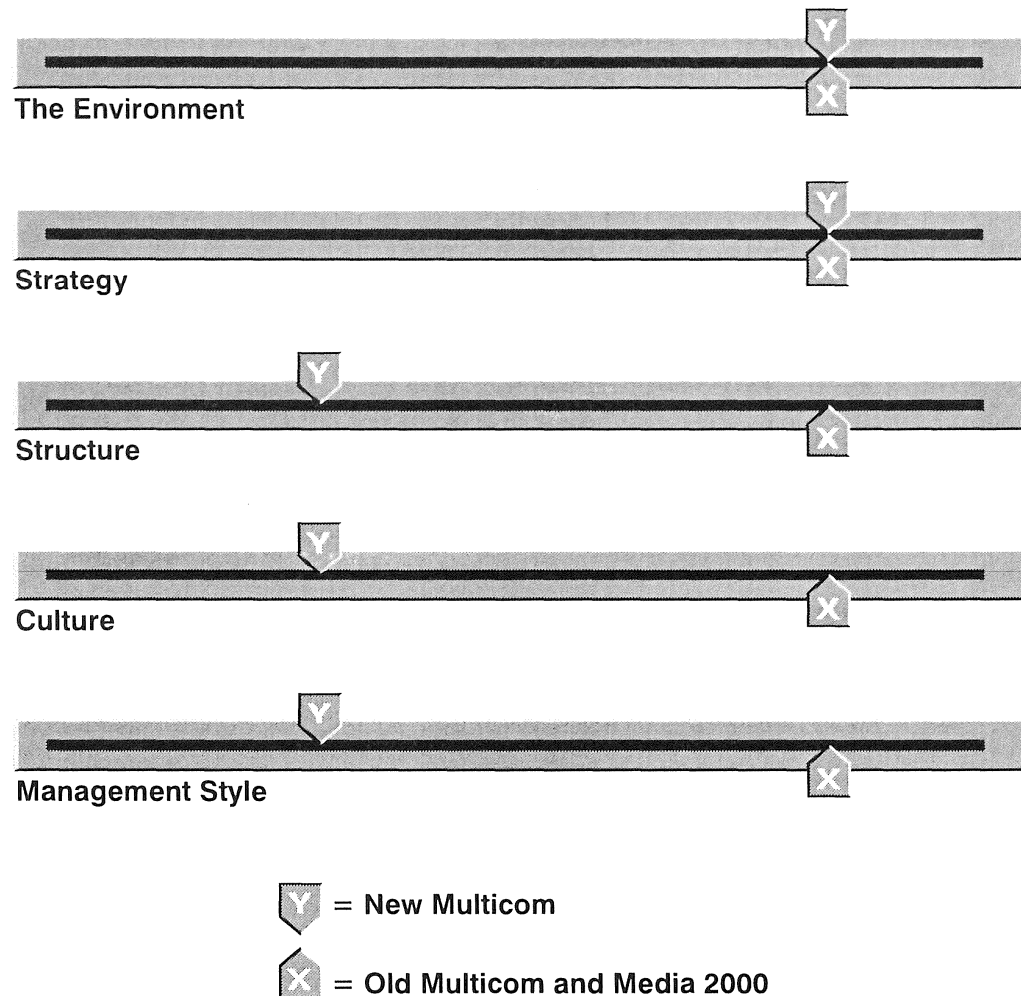


Exhibit 11.2. Rough profiles of Multicom and Media 2000 (based on the contingency model presented in Exhibit 3.6, p. 58)

In this way, the detailed insights of the organismic metaphor help us build a comprehensive reading of where the two organizations stand. The other metaphors also lead to rich insights.

For example, pursuing the perspective of the brain metaphor and the requirements for creating learning organizations, we note how the holographic characteristics of the early Multicom implicitly built on the principles of requisite variety and redundant functions. The client teams were microcosms of the whole. They built requisite ability at every level in a way that encouraged flexibility, learning, and development. We note how the same principles underpin the organizational style of Media 2000.

Or, viewing the situation through the lens of the culture metaphor, we note how the holographic style of operation in Multicom's early years was underpinned by a highly cohesive corporate culture built around the shared values of the four principals. The corporate philosophy stressed the importance of working and playing hard in a way that affirmed the corporate identity. We note how the culture is still alive in Media 2000 and how it has been undermined by the bureaucratization at Multicom.

Switching to the political metaphor we note that the troubles of Multicom and the new success of Media 2000 were spawned by the divergent styles and interests of the four principals. History has repeated itself. Just as Multicom was born politically as Walsh, Bridges, Beaumont, and Rossi broke away from their old firm, taking key clients with them, Multicom has split into two separate elements. We note how this potential was seeded by the unequal ownership structure and power base that ultimately allowed an autocratic decision to be made.

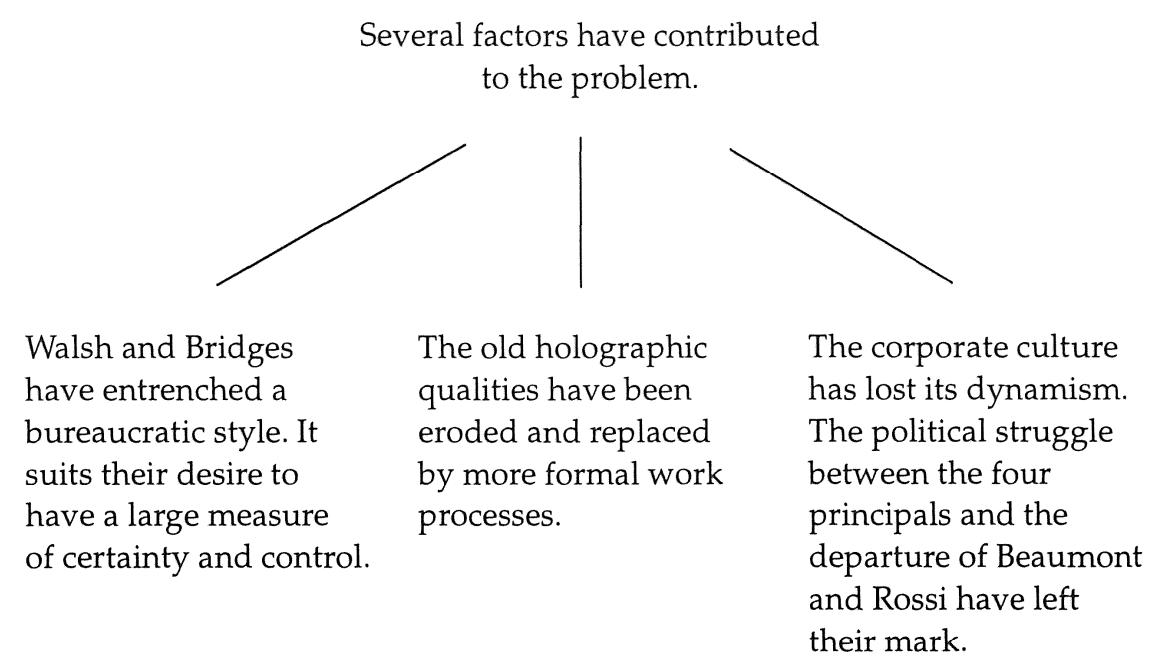
As we probe the psychic prison metaphor we find ourselves asking new questions. Were unconscious factors driving Walsh and Bridges's desire for control? Could the problem of overwork and conflicting family obligations have been resolved in another way? Were Walsh and Bridge strapped by the idea that good organization ultimately means more bureaucracy?

The challenge, of course, is to convert this diagnostic reading into a storyline that can help us deal with the complexity. Thus, as the new manager or management consultant faced with advising Multicom or Media2000, we may find ourselves developing an integrated perspective along the lines illustrated in **Exhibit 11.3**. Using the organismic metaphor as a dominant frame, we see the main challenge facing both organizations as that of evolving with a changing environment.

We see Media 2000 as well adapted. We see Multicom as facing major problems. Our advice to Media 2000 is to build on the organization's holographic style, using the strong corporate culture as a way of creating systems of shared meaning and understandings that continue to bind the organization together while maintaining a flexible, free-flowing style. We urge Beaumont and Rossi to look at the broader ecology of relations of which they are part, and to strike the alliances and connections that they will need to flow with change.

Our advice to Multicom is to understand what has happened and how the organization has become incongruent with the environment. We have to tread carefully here because there may be deep forces behind the bureaucratization. Our task will be to explore these with Walsh and Bridges, learn more about the psychological and political factors that have driven the change, and advise accordingly. If the increased bureaucratization is indeed a psychological force, as opposed to a pragmatic time-management ("Let's get Multicom under control") strategy, we will probably have a difficult task launching any kind of restructuring. Entrepreneurial figures that create successful new enterprises are notoriously reluctant to let the reins of control go, even when it is in the best interests of the future enterprise. As we interact with Walsh and Bridges it is likely that a deeper reading will unfold, suggesting an appropriate course of action.

Multicom is an organization that has become bureaucratized and incongruent with its wider environment. It must recapture the flexibility and vitality of its old culture and style to achieve future effectiveness.



Given the politicized history, any transformation of Multicom must first win the confidence of Walsh and Bridges. Hence: Use the above analysis to present the history of Multicom in a new light and to argue for a new mode of alignment with the environment.

Media 2000 seems adapted to its environment in every respect. Look to the future here: How can Media 2000 evolve with the broader environment?

Exhibit 11.3. An “adapt to the environment” storyline

As should be clear from the above account, a storyline implies a course of action. If Multicom is indeed out of alignment with its environment, the task of the new manager or consultant will be to help it strike amore effective configuration. The detailed insights about the psychological, political, cultural, and other factors that have created the malalignment provide clues as to how the bureaucratization should be approached and how the situation can be rectified. They are incorporated into the storyline within the overall framework presented by the organismic metaphor, offering detailed insights as to how the manager or consultant can shape his or her change strategy.

We will have more to say on the relationship between a storyline and the mode of action that it recommends later in this chapter. So, for the moment, let's stay with the process of developing an appropriate storyline. As summarized in Exhibit 11.4, a storyline ultimately involves a prioritization of insights generated through one's diagnostic reading. In the above analysis, our emerging storyline has given priority to insights generated by the organismic metaphor. The insights of other metaphors are brought in as subsidiary themes. They are mobilized to inform and shape action around the primary task of helping Multicom and Media 2000 thrive in a rapidly developing media business.

Dominant Frame:

The Organismic Metaphor

Supporting Frames:

The
Holographic
Metaphor

The
Culture
Metaphor

The
Political
Metaphor

The Psychic
Prison
Metaphor

Exhibit 11.4. "Storylines" prioritize the insights of different metaphors

The development of a storyline is always a highly relativistic affair, depending on the precise circumstances being faced. To illustrate, let's turn the clock back on the situation and assume a point of intervention in them middle of the chain of events leading to the schism within Multicom. Our manager-consultant would have found him- or herself dealing with a very different set of circumstances and evolving a very different storyline.

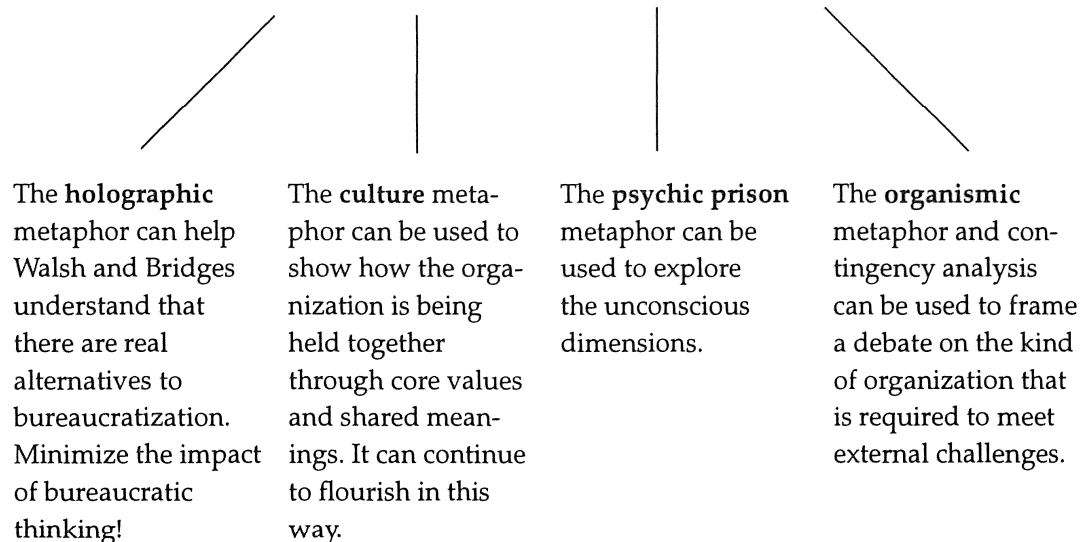
As illustrated in **Exhibit 11.5**, it is likely that he or she would be seeing "politics" all over the place. The issue of whether Multicom was adapted to the environment would at first probably be nowhere in view. The primary aim of our new manager-consultant would be to understand the political dynamic:

- What are the key forces driving the four principals apart?
- Are they rooted in truly different sets of interests and styles?
- Do they hold different assumptions and beliefs about what it means to "get organized"?
- Is there a deep psychological dimension behind the actions of Walsh and Bridges?
- Can the organization be held together?
- Is there a different way of helping Walsh and Bridges manage the conflicts between work and family?

- Is there a gender dimension here?
- Can we use the insights of the holographic and culture metaphors to demonstrate how Multicom is already well organized?
- Can we use the contingency model generated by the organismic metaphor (Exhibits 3.6 and 11.2) to make the case against bureaucratization?
- Will the insight that the firm has discovered a highly effective way of organizing for flexibility with a strong client orientation help the principals preserve their success? And so on.

Multicom is being politicized in an extreme way. The challenge is to understand and defuse the political dimensions.

The insights of other metaphors can help this process.



Dominant Frame:

The Political Metaphor

Supporting Frames:

**The
Holographic
Metaphor**

**The
Culture
Metaphor**

**The
Psychic Prison
Metaphor**

**The
Organismic
Metaphor**

Exhibit 11.5. A “political” storyline

As summarized in **Exhibit 11.5**, the political metaphor provides the principal frame for analyzing the situation. The other frames tend to be used in a subsidiary role. For example, the organismic metaphor, which provided the dominant frame for understanding the situation once Multicom and Media 2000 had split (see **Exhibits 11.3 and 11.4**), now has less status. Although from a professional standpoint Our manager-consultant may *want* to see this metaphor as offering a dominant frame for understanding, since the ability to survive along with a changing environment is the long-term challenge facing Multicom, the political realities may require that it be used only as a supporting frame to bring a measure of detachment into a hot political situation. For example, the contingency analysis presented in **Exhibit 11.2** could be used to help reframe the politics by allowing the four principals to see the proposed bureaucratization and its consequences from another viewpoint.

The main point being made here, however, is that a storyline dominated by political considerations usually requires that change strategies be approached with the political factors firmly in mind. As suggested earlier, different storylines tend to favor different actions.

An effective diagnostic reading and storyline hinges on an ability to play with multiple insights with a view to integrating them into a coherent pattern. In a way, the metaphors, theories, and frames through which we implicitly scan the situations that we are trying to understand act as a kind of “radar” or “homing device” that draws our attention toward key features of a situation. These factors become elevated in importance, with others remaining invisible or in a background role. As I suggested in Chapter 1, the way of seeing becomes a way of not seeing. The skilled reader of organizational life has a well-equipped radar system embracing many potential points of view and learns to marshal relevant insights in a way that provides a basis for effective action.

In describing the process, a clear distinction has been drawn between the “reading” and “evaluation” phases and the suggestion made that there is a temporal sequence here, with the evaluation implied in the storyline following the diagnostic reading. This is an oversimplification because in reality the elements are intertwined. As we read a situation through different metaphors we inevitably begin to form an evaluation as we become attracted to one line of interpretation over another. But the distinction drawn between the two stages is a very useful one, because it warns us of the dangers of jumping prematurely into an evaluative mode. The challenge is to remain open to a range of possibilities, so that an effective reading and storyline providing real insights and real leverage on situations and problems can emerge.

The process has been illustrated from the perspective of a manager consultant, showing how readings and storylines have an unfolding character. They’re not fixed. They’re not absolute. They change over time. They vary with the objectives and perspectives of the reader. Although the process and skills are consistent, the content and product vary.

MULTICOM FROM ANOTHER VIEW

To illustrate and reinforce these important points, let's change perspective once again. Instead of adopting the role of a manager-consultant, let's view the developments at Multicom through the eyes of a social critic or policy analyst interested in the field of media relations.

The Multicom story now has a very different significance. There is probably little interest in the internal politics or the new Multicom's malalignment with its task environment. The horizon is set much wider. Both firms are likely to be viewed from a broader institutional perspective that focuses on understanding the role that Multicom and Media 2000 play in serving the interests and public relations needs of their clients. The domination and flux metaphors are likely to provide key frames (**Exhibit 11.6**):

- What clients do the two firms serve?
- What services do they offer?
- What are the explicit and *unstated* functions of these services?
- How do they serve to legitimize their clients' activities?
- Is there a seamy side?
- Are there cover-ups?
- Is there government lobbying?
- What role do the activities of Multicom and Media 2000 play in creating a pattern of positive and negative feedback loops that create "space" in which their clients' activities can thrive?
- Are they, in effect, paid to dampen, mask, or gloss the negative social impacts of their clients?

The social critic is likely to "zero in" on signs of domination wherever they can be found. The insights and methodologies of the political and flux and transformation metaphors may be used to analyze key relationships and marshal the evidence relating to Multicom and Media 2000's social role and impacts.

If our social critic was more of a policy analyst, however, it is likely that he or she would choose to use the flux and transformation metaphor as a primary frame (**Exhibit 11.7**). The modes of analysis illustrated in Chapter 8, for example, in relation to the study of dialectical oppositions or loops of mutual causality (Exhibits 8.5, 8.6, and 8.7) may provide ideal frames for analyzing the institutional patterns and processes to which Multicom and Media 2000 contribute, and for understanding where, from a policy point of view, it is most effective to intervene.

Multicom and Media 2000 belong to the ideological superstructure of modern capitalism. They are handmaidens of power. Their main role is to perform services that legitimize and enhance the interests of their clients. Their true nature can be revealed by studying their ultimate impacts on people, society, and the environment.

A detailed "political analysis" reveals the patterns of interest being served and can reveal the coalitions and webs of power that Multicom and Media 2000 help to sustain.

An analysis of the feedback loops and contradictions linking the activities performed by Multicom and Media 2000 to the broader context reveals their role in sustaining key social patterns and power relations.

Dominant Frame:

The Domination Metaphor

Supporting Frames:

**Political
Metaphor**

**Flux And
Transformation
Metaphor**

Exhibit 11.6. A social critic's storyline

The point being made here is that the way of "seeing" and "reading" that our social critic or policy analyst brings to the situation will be very different from that of our manager-consultant. Their different perspectives and interests favor different theoretical frames. They see completely different dimensions of the same situation. Indeed, the perspectives of the critic and policy analyst will lead them to break the boundaries of the case study presented earlier in the chapter and seek a completely different pattern of information. From these perspectives, most of what has been provided in the Multicom case description would probably be deemed irrelevant to the needs at hand.

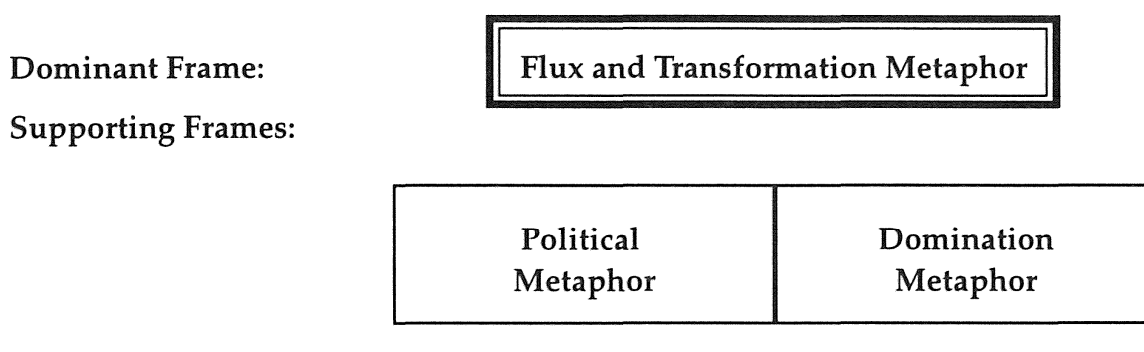


Exhibit 11.7. A policy analyst's storyline

In juxtaposing these different perspectives, we thus underscore the inherent partiality of any reading process. Whoever we are, it is impossible to obtain a complete point of view. Our perspectives always have horizons and limits dictated by the factors that we implicitly or explicitly value and deem important. We are back to Albert Einstein's point that our observations are always shaped by the "theory" through which we see.

One of our challenges as managers, consultants, critics, or policy analysts, and as individuals in everyday life is to cope with this problem. If we dwell on the impossibility of achieving an all-embracing understanding or comprehensive insight, we will surely be depressed and overwhelmed. But, if we turn the problem around and focus on what *can* be achieved by refining our interpretive skills, a much more positive message emerges.

"Reading" and emergent intelligence

In Chapter 4 we discussed how the human brain is characterized by a form of "emergent intelligence" whereby coherent order and pattern result from a multitude of possibilities.

It is useful to think about the process of reading organizational life in similar terms, for, as has been shown, an effective reading requires that we remain open to different possibilities that can form and reform in a way that allows us to act appropriately.

The process is organic, not mechanistic. There is a dynamic quality that unites "the reader" and the situation being "read" in an unfolding process through which the reader can begin to grasp, shape, and understand the pattern of events or circumstances being encountered.

By being open to the frames and concepts generated by different metaphors we can be sensitive to the different dimensions of a situation. We can be aware of when "politics," "culture," "domination," or the insights of other frames "call our attention" and, in effect, say "take account of this point of view."

We can open ourselves to a variety of insights on which creative interpretation and synthesis thrive. We can learn, as illustrated in relation to the Multicom case, to use different frames and sub frames to explore, elevate, or diminish the significance of what we are seeing.

We can be sensitive to the all-important relationship between figure and ground and realize that when we elevate the importance of a particular metaphor or group of metaphors we tend to push others into a background role. We can recognize that in making something highly visible and a focus of attention, we do so in a way that inevitably makes other features much less visible.

In this way, we can use our "reading" skills to open new horizons as well as deepen understanding of the territory we already know. We can learn to keep open, reflective, and evolving as we search for meaningful insights.

As discussed earlier, the purpose of an effective reading is to develop creative insights that open new action opportunities or give new leverage on difficult problems. The reading is not an end in itself. It does not rest in the mechanical application of a few favored metaphors or analytical schemes. Its purpose is to connect with the truly significant dimensions of a situation.

Effective readings are *generative*. They produce insights and actions that were not there before. They open new action opportunities. They make a difference.

The criteria for judging an effective reading are thus not objective. They are pragmatic. Returning to the specifics of the Multicom case, for a manager this pragmatism may rest in understanding how the political dynamic of the "old Multicom" can be reframed through a contingency analysis that defuses the politics. For a social critic or policy analyst, the pragmatism may rest in discovering positive and negative feedback loops that can change the social impacts of key Multicom clients.

Another important point that must be emphasized is that the process of reading a situation is always "two-way." In trying to discern the meaning of a situation, we create an interplay between the situation itself and the frames through which we are trying to tie it down.

To illustrate, consider the process of reading a book. The book presents us with words and sentences. But the reader also brings his or her personal perspective to the reading, and this plays a vital role in determining the meaning that the text conveys.

The same is true in organization and everyday life. Situations may "call" for our attention. But the interpretive frame of the reader also *shapes* what is read into that situation. As has been suggested, if we are dominated by an interest in structure, culture, or politics, this is what we will probably see. The dominant frame will push other potential insights from view.

In this sense the reader is also an author. He or she is not in a passive role. This is what makes the challenge of reading organizational life so powerful. The manager truly does have an opportunity to shape how situations unfold. All these issues are discussed in more detail in the Bibliographic Notes to Chapter 11.