

Using Metaphors and Similes to Explain the Socio Economic Approach to Management

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Abstract

It is harder for people to understand and accept new ideas when the ideas stem from a different frame of reference. Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM) represents a different frame of reference and philosophy in terms of management and change interventions. Metaphors can be helpful for SEAM practitioners and teachers to convey the essence of the SEAM concepts. The authors present examples of how they metaphorically explain some basic principles of SEAM.

Key words: SEAM, metaphors, root causes of dysfunctions, organizational effectiveness.

Introducing new ideas is challenging, especially when those ideas come from a totally different frame of reference or mental model. This certainly is the case with the Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM), which is very different from traditional management practices in the U.S. What makes SEAM radically distinct is the underlying philosophy. From the SEAM perspective, it is impossible to separate the people side of a business from the economic side without producing dysfunctions (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011, 2015, 2016; Heorhiadi, Conbere, & Hazelbaker, 2014; Savall, 2010).

When introducing SEAM principles to potential U.S. based clients, students, or conducting workshops for those interested in SEAM, we regularly encounter skepticism and sometimes outright resistance to the approach. The pushback comes in the form of comments like: “What’s wrong with our management approach; it seems to work fine!” or “What is so special about this new approach?” Because we know that SEAM is a significant paradigm shift for most U.S. businesses, we like to use metaphors, tropes, and stories that illustrate SEAM principles as a more effective way to buffer the shift to a new frame of reference.

This paper presents some examples of how we explain the SEAM concepts metaphorically to help people understand them more easily. We note, however, that the purpose of the paper is not to explain the SEAM concepts at length, but rather to show what metaphors are used to help people get at the heart of the basic, yet cornerstone, principles of SEAM.

Metaphors in Constructing Organizational Theory

The use of imaginative metaphors is nothing new for those who develop and introduce organizational theories and models. In his work at the University of Michigan, Karl Weick (1989) once described theory construction as essentially “disciplined imagination” (p. 507). Similarly, in musings about the utility of metaphors Morgan (1980) wrote:

The use of metaphor serves to generate an image for studying a subject. This image can provide the basis for detailed scientific research based upon attempts to discover the extent to which features of the metaphor are found in the subject of inquiry. Much of the puzzle-solving activity of normal science is of this kind... (p. 611)

We adopted Morgan’s view in selecting metaphors to illustrate different SEAM concepts. We tried to assure that the images conveyed by our stories evoked an easily seen connection to the SEAM theory and its most significant elements. An illustration of our approach can be taken from Pinto (2016), who created the *Icehotel* as a metaphor for what he called “temporary organizations.” That metaphor addressed a variety of issues including organizational design, responding to the unpredictable, and coordinating the activities of teams that had short durations (because the Icehotel would eventually melt). In analyzing Pinto’s article, Morgan (2016) wrote:

As a metaphor the Icehotel may just seem a crazy and outlandish flight of fancy until elaborated in this way. It is the metonymical reduction that give the metaphor grounded meaning and relevance beyond the fact this it is a large block of ice that is constantly coming and going and functioning as a ‘wonder of the world’ in Northern Sweden. (p. 879)

In simple words, metaphors can help people interpret and understand new concepts in terms of ideas with which they are already familiar or which can be easily comprehended. Based on our experience as university teachers, we are well aware of the power of metaphors and storytelling, especially those that cause people to laugh and relax. In using metaphors when explaining SEAM concepts, not only do we hope to engage the audience, but also want to provide them with memorable stories they could use in explaining SEAM concepts to their colleagues or business associates.

Examples of Metaphors to Explain SEAM

In looking for metaphors to explain SEAM, we believed that familiarity and humor would be an effective way to overcome resistance of the audience to new concepts. We realized that if people knew the idioms or had fun with our stories, perhaps they would be more open to hearing and hopefully understanding the essence of the theory. Thus, our choice of metaphors

took the forms of parables, stories, and seemingly mundane – but recognizable – examples that would help convey the heart of the SEAM concept.

Types of organizational data. Once when presenting SEAM to a group of senior leaders, we commented that SEAM helps organizations uncover good information and data. One participant said in a loud voice, “We don’t need more data; we have all the data we need!” In turn, we responded that although his organization apparently had lots of data, perhaps this is not the “right data.” Later when we reflected on the exchange with that leader, the following metaphor came to mind.

Many people are familiar with the exercise in which a professor fills a jar with large stones and then asks the class if the jar is full. Naïve students often answer “yes,” to which the teacher responds by pouring smaller pebbles into the jar. When asked again if the jar is full, some students still say “yes,” but the teacher proceeds to pour sand into the jar, filling the gaps among the stones and pebbles. When next asked if the jar is full, students have become more skeptical and respond by saying “I am not sure.” In turn, the instructor pours water into the jar, proving that more room is still available.

The illustration of filling the jar is a good metaphor for what new information SEAM can offer to organizations. The rocks and pebbles represent the type of data gathered via traditional U.S. business models. It is not that such information is irrelevant, it is that the information is incomplete. Unfortunately, this incomplete information is often used by leaders to make important decisions. SEAM can fill all the existing informational cracks and crevices in helping leaders to understand how to make their organizations more effective. The type of information collected by the SEAM approach is represented by the sand and the water: much more detailed information that can inform about organizational dysfunctions and hidden costs, both of which are often ignored in traditional management.

Dysfunctions and hidden costs. One major difference between SEAM and traditional change management is that in SEAM, before any change initiatives are launched, an organization first collects information about the processes or “functions” that are not working well and their costs. In the SEAM jargon, these are “dysfunctions” and “hidden costs.” Because from time to time we meet clients who dislike the word “dysfunction” and tell us not to use such a “strong word,” we needed a metaphor to explain our message in a way that does not produce resistance. From our viewpoint, all organizations are supposed to perform certain functions, and if a function is not done well, it becomes a “dys-function (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2015). Thus, we needed an image that would convey the importance of our message without alienating our audience.

One image we like to use in describing an organizational dysfunction is a dripping water faucet. We also use this image to contrast the difference between a broken versus dripping faucet. Whereas a broken faucet – with water streaming out in torrents – is quickly seen and usually fixed quickly, a dripping faucet is more obscure and thus is often ignored. Little drops of water are not perceived as a major problem, but they add up to a big loss over time. Similarly, in an organizational sense, the “dripping faucet” wastes organizational resources, especially over a long period of time. In addition, when employees have to work around “dripping faucets,” they are less efficient and their energy eventually evaporates.

The resources wasted through an organizational “dripping faucet” cost a lot of money, and yet such losses are not measured by traditional accounting practices and never show up directly on financial statements. Metaphorically, this money goes down the drain. Different categories of hidden costs exist, both in the present and in the future (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011, 2015). Thus, we have developed images and stories to help people understand what constitute hidden costs. For example, while the hidden costs of wasted resources and wasted time are fairly easy to comprehend, the hidden cost of paying someone a higher wage for a lower-valued function is often missed by managers and leaders. We refer to this category of hidden costs as “overpaying for a shift in function,” and this term initially produces puzzled faces in the audience. The story we use to explain this term is about a CEO who was about to make a PowerPoint presentation when he realized that he was missing a computer mouse. He notified IT and asked for help. One of the most highly qualified IT employees dropped everything he was doing at the moment and ran to deliver a mouse to the CEO. It took this IT employee 15 minutes to get to the building where the CEO was presenting, and the same amount of time to return to his desk. The organization paid the high IT salary for 30 minutes of a courier’s duty. This story usually triggers a loud moan in our audiences. They quickly recount similar examples of teachers cleaning classrooms instead of janitors, department directors fixing copy machines, physicians doing the job of scribes, or managers doing the work of their direct reports. The concept is quickly – and sometimes painfully – grasped, and when seminar participants return to work, they start noticing this category of hidden costs almost immediately.

The TFW virus. Presenting the idea of the Taylorism, Fayolism, and Weberism (TFW) virus (Heorhiadi et al., 2014; Savall, 2016) to client organizations and their leaders often is a challenge. Some leaders take the notion of the TFW virus personally, view it as a criticism of their leadership, and become defensive. On one occasion, after listening to our explanation of the TFW virus, a leader of a non-profit organization blamed us for not appreciating how hard he works and how much good he does for his organization. We explained that while individually people do their best, they fail to see the underlying assumptions that contribute to the socially constructed way to lead and manage businesses. The TFW virus is pervasive in U.S. businesses, and most organizations and their leaders are infected, regardless of whether they see or admit this.

We found the concept of the TFW virus, perhaps, the most challenging and hard to accept by people with a paradigm of a traditional management view. In order to help people understand the concept of the TFW virus, we needed a good metaphor to explain the concept well. To do this, we chose a parable called *The Poisoned Well*. This is an old story about a wise king who ruled a vast kingdom. He was loved by his subjects for his great wisdom. The water source for all of his subjects was a well containing pure and crystalline waters from which all but the King drank. (The King had his own well in his castle – one of the perks of being a king.) One night, when citizens were asleep, three witches, who were angry at the King, entered the city and poured seven drops of a potion into the public well. As they did, they chanted: “All who drink this water shall become mad.”

By the following day, all the subjects had drunk from the well, except for the King. As the witches had promised, the subjects soon became mad; their perceptions of reality became distorted. Based on these new perceptions, the actions of the King now seemed irrational and baseless. Soon the subjects began to say, “The King is mad and has lost his reason. We cannot be ruled by a madman, so he must be dethroned.”

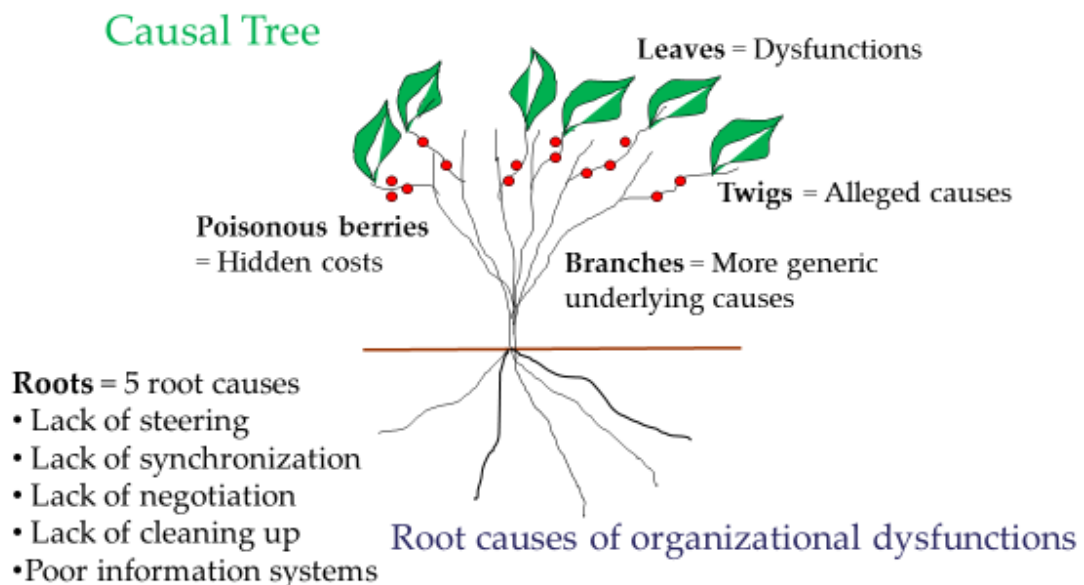
The situation forced the King to make a difficult choice: risk being destroyed by his beloved subjects, or drink from the poisoned well and become mad like them. Being weak of spirit, he chose to drink from the poisoned well. The next day the subjects of the kingdom rejoiced because their beloved King, now impacted by the same potion, had suddenly regained his reason and wisdom.

The moral of the story is obvious: Clever and reasonable ideas look strange through the eyes of those who are mad. Metaphorically, people poisoned by the TWF virus, find it difficult to accept that the way they work and manage is flawed. Because many organizations have drunk from the poisonous well, SEAM can be a fresh sip of water.

The low-hanging fruit fixes. Our work in the practice of organization development has shown that many organizations try to solve only the most easily fixed problems, the so called “low hanging fruit.” Picking low-hanging fruit is not necessarily bad, but it often leads to ignoring the organization’s more significant problems. Metaphorically, many organizations fail to climb the ladder to reach the top of the tree, where the sweeter, sun-ripened fruit is usually found. Because low-hanging fruit is poorly exposed to the sun, they are subject to rot and disease, which weaken the entire tree. Thus, only seeking simple solutions and quick fixes – the low hanging fruit – prevents an organization from undertaking a comprehensive analysis of its major problems, which weakens the overall system. We believe that SEAM encourages leaders to consider the “high-hanging fruit” – the issues that most influence their organizations’ overall health and effectiveness.

The low hanging fruit metaphor not only helps us explain that quick fixes are not always effective to change an organization but also prepare the audience to talk about the root causes of dysfunctions. Our French colleagues illustrate the concept of dysfunctions and their causes with a causal tree. We somewhat modified their concept and below is its visual representation (Fig 1).

The berries and leaves on the tree represent only the symptoms of problems. The natural instinct is to deal with berries because they are visible. It is harder to recognize the underlying causes of problems, and to do that more skills and patience is needed. However, many organizations with their quick pace of operating do not have patience to analyze the root cause of many problems. Yet only by tracking and tackling the right cause of a problem, it is possible to find the solution that will work and sustain.



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Figure 1. Root causes of organizational dysfunctions

Metaphors that Explain the Root Causes of Dysfunctions

Regardless the amount of dysfunctions found in organizations, there are only five ultimate root causes. These five categories of root causes have been identified through more than 40 years of research by our French colleagues at ISEOR, the Socio-Economic Institute of Firms and Organizations (Savall & Zardet, 2008). Some of these root causes are examined below.

The lack of steering. Leaders have difficult jobs that require not only setting the strategic goals for their organizations, but also aligning people with resources and directing them towards achieving those goals. In SEAM jargon this is called “steering,” and steering is the primary task of managers (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2016). However, many leaders and managers fail to provide adequate steering by finding excuses like not having enough time, not enough training, or not having the needed information. In explaining the lack of steering, we show a picture of a vise-grip wrench, instead of a steering wheel, attached to a car’s steering column (Fig. 2). This image always brings laughter from the audience. Although steering a car with a wrench is theoretically possible, as proven by an Australian car thief in 2013, this method of steering is not the most effective way to get to the destination (the guy was caught by police) (ABC News, July 2013). SEAM helps leaders and managers to be effective in their primary role of steering the organization.



Figure 2. An image to illustrate lack of steering. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-23/adelaide-police-charge-man-over-missing-steering-wheel/4837706>

Lack of synchronization. Poor steering leads to a lack of synchronization and alignment among the different parts of an organization, and as result, people pull in different directions and serving at cross purposes. The metaphor we selected to illustrate the lack of synchronization is the story by Russian fabulist Ivan Krylov, written in 1814:

Once Crawfish, Swan, and Pike
Set out to pull a loaded cart.
And all together settled in the traces;
They pulled with all their might, but still

The cart refused to budge!
The load it seemed was not too much for them;
Yet Crawfish scrambled backwards,
Swan strained up skywards,
Pike pulled toward the sea.
Who's guilty here and who is right is not for us to say –
But anyway, the cart's still there yet today.

This fable was written two hundred years ago, but its message is still relevant today. It illustrates the way many organizations work. The critters in the fable, pulling in different directions, represent modern day turf wars when different silos fight for organizational resources. Turf wars disperse the organization's energy and disorient employees. This lack of synchronization and integrated effort is one of major dysfunctions for many modern organizations. The outcome of the lack of synchronization is that, while individually people work very hard, collectively the organization is not moving very far.

Lack of clean-up. Lack of clean-up can be illustrated by a desk, closet, or house that contain too much “stuff.” Everything is collected, but nothing gets thrown away. A *hoarding disorder* is the medical term for a person who has difficulty discarding possessions and needs to save everything. The same phenomenon can be found, in a slightly different form, in many organizations. *Organizational hoarding* describes an enterprise that accumulates different policies, procedures, rules, rituals, and routines, without reviewing and changing (or discarding) those that are outdated. Organizational hoarding can be intentional (e.g., “Let's keep certain policies in case we need them,” or “We cannot change this procedures as we have used it for years”), or unintentional (not taking/making time to review the old processes). As a result, different parts of an organization live by different rules, some of which can be contradictory. Inconsistent rules or policies exacerbate the problems with lack of synchronization, the problem we described earlier.

A variation on lack of clean-up is when organizations add new initiatives to those that already exist, further diffusing human efforts and often slowing or derailing the enterprise's original momentum. Because these “add-on” initiatives usually are not part of organizational strategy – and sometimes may contradict it – they also create high levels of ambiguity and cognitive dissonance among the already overworked employees. In a healthy organization, individuals resolve the dissonance by making a choice between, “Yes I can do the work, but it won't be very good” or “No, it is impossible to do all of these things.” However, in unhealthy organizations that are infected by the TFW virus, employees engage in “magical thinking” (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2016). Magical thinking is reflected in people's unrealistic expectations of what they physically can do in certain chunks of time. As time goes by, people overcommit and find themselves in the situation where there is too much work and not enough time to do all

the work. Magical thinking eventually results in decreased morale, the sense of hopelessness, and disengagement. Additionally, the leader's reputation and credibility with subordinates is often damaged, sometime irreversibly.

The SEAM Intervention Process

Time line. When we tell clients that the SEAM interventions will take at least a year, many frown and ask, "A year? Are you kidding?" They somehow expect significant changes, such as improved morale or a change in organization culture to occur in 3 months or sooner. The most impatient ones want the change even faster, say in 3 weeks. So they settle for consultants who offer shorter and less expensive types of change intervention. The results are seldom satisfactory, as despite some superficial changes (leaves and berries) the underlying problems are not addressed (the root causes).

To address the time line of an intervention we use a sport metaphor. In terms of time and effort distribution, a SEAM intervention cannot not be a sprint; rather it should be considered a marathon. Setting a reasonable schedule and pace is just as important in organizational change as it is in distance running. In the marathon, pace is the single best predictor of success. And, as all good runners know, it is not important how fast one starts; it is important how fast one is running at the end of the race.

The three foci of the SEAM intervention. A SEAM intervention is a combination of three simultaneous processes: (a) the intervention itself, (b) teaching managers about the Socio-Economic Approach to Management and six simple management tools; and (c) coaching leaders through implementing changes so the changes are synchronized with the strategic goals and political environment of their organizations. Because of these three simultaneous processes, we refer to the overall process as the SEAM Trihedron (For more on the SEAM intervention process, see Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2015). To metaphorically illustrate the differences between a SEAM intervention and other management approaches, we chose the story of the three little pigs.

In some types of consulting, a practitioner conducts an intervention and then, when done, departs from the organization. This approach is similar to building a straw house. When the consultant leaves, the big, bad wolf is still outside the door, and the company can easily slip back into its old way of doing things. In other types of consulting, in addition to intervening, the interventionist also provides training of leaders and/or employees. This approach is better – sort of like building a stick house – a stronger, yet not fully sustainable structure. Alternately, beyond intervening and training, the SEAM consultants provide added services that can be compared to constructing a house made of bricks. Specifically, SEAM consultants stay with the client for a year and longer, coaching the client through implementation of changes in a fashion that is well-integrated into organizational strategy and politics. Whereas some quick changes occur during

the first few months of a SEAM intervention (a straw or stick house), it is not until the end of the first year that one can assure the acquired changes can be sustained for a longer time (a brick house). Choosing a SEAM intervention is a big commitment for a leader and the organization, yet given the three foci of the SEA process, this change intervention has the most lasting and self-sustainable effect.

Conclusion

Socio-Economic Approach to Management represents a totally different philosophy of leading and managing organizations as well as organizational change. While some of SEAM ideas seem to be very easy at first glance, to understand their essence requires a different frame of reference, or paradigm. Challenging one's paradigm is not an easy process, as people resist changing the familiar frame of reference.

SEAM challenges people who operate by the traditional management model, so they often are resistant to trying to understand the tenets of SEAM. To reduce skepticism and resistance of the audience during the teaching of SEAM, we have been using metaphors and similes to translate the ideas across the paradigms. Even those who are deeply entrenched in the old paradigm of management and organizational change start to recognize the kernel of truth in new ideas, or at least to reflect on their old viewpoints.

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