

Importance of Visual Symbols in Leadership

Any visit to a mega-bookstore, such as *Barnes & Noble*, or even an Internet search at the *Amazon.com* site will confirm that organizational and leadership issues are a hot topic in today's world. This plethora of offerings may include books proposing new trends in management and theory of leadership, but often one finds merely a re-hashing of the same issues in new dress. What is not found, however, is an abundance of proponents of the use of **symbolism**, especially *visual* symbols, as an effective organizational or management technique. Such is the topic of this paper.

Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal present the role and value of symbolism in their book on organizational management, *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations*. They recognize that "of the four major organizational perspectives, the symbolic is the newest, least developed, and least mapped" (1984:223), but its newness does not diminish its value. It behooves anyone interested in the study of leadership, organizational theory or the use of the visual arts to consider the resource of a symbolic approach in organizational motivation.

This paper will begin with a definition of the term symbolism and offer a valid basis for its use in regards to leadership. Included also is the nexus of visual art and symbolism. In the main body of the paper, a discussion of values- or meaning-based leadership will be undertaken, especially as it relates to the use of symbolism. Some specific examples of the use of symbols in various contexts will follow. Finally, a warning concerning the negative use of symbolism will form the conclusion.

A word concerning the limitations of this study is appropriate. While Bolman and Deal rightly include the use of myth (1984:153), ritual and ceremony (1984:158), stories and fairy tales (1984:155), and metaphor, humor and play (1984:163) as indices of the use of the "The Symbolic Approach" (1984:148), this paper will attempt to chart a more limited (and difficult to research) course of the use of the *visual object* as a symbol. It was a daunting, but worthwhile, endeavor.

The Definition and Use of Symbols

The Pervasiveness of Symbols

The use of symbols is at the heart of who we are as human beings. It is a defining characteristic of all of mankind. In fact, *all* communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is built upon a symbolic base. Communication specialist and author Julia T. Wood explains,

While other life forms behave meaningfully and understand limited signals, only humans seem able to create and interact with symbols. Symbols are representations for other things. A symbol may be a word, a diagram, a gesture, an emblem, or anything that represents an act, event, idea, feeling, relationship, person, process, or object. We use symbols to represent concrete aspects of our world...and abstract dimensions of our existence...Humans have the apparently unique capacity to symbolize ideas, experiences, hopes, fears, passions, doubts, dreams, even themselves. Because we think and act symbolically, we can

impose order and meaning on our experiences. We can persuade ourselves to new courses of action. We can make sense of our past, adapt to our present, and plan for our future (1982:6).

Other writers concur. For instance, Howard Gardner writes, “What distinguishes us from all other creations, of course, is our ability to deploy, understand, and even create whole ensembles of symbols and symbol systems (1996:38). The genesis of symbol use is found in the *earliest* stages of the human lifecycle, not at maturity, as Gardner asserts,

By age of five, most normal children have already become experts in ‘symbolizing.’ They continue this ‘first-order’ symbolic mastery with almost no formal tutelage...It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that, after the first years of life, cognitive development becomes equivalent to symbolic development. Moreover, this process of ever-heightened symbol use continues unabated when the child enters school or other educational milieus. In any modern society, a primary burden of schools is to teach second-order symbol systems...More esoteric symbol systems, ranging from those employed in the physical sciences to those used in music or dance or football notations, may also be acquired (1996:38-39).

While the youngest child is involved with symbolizing their world, some authors maintain that the conscious use of symbolic forms needs to be enhanced, or at least harnessed; by the time we reach adulthood. Julia Wood declares, “Symbolic ability is central to humanity...we should learn about our symbolic abilities and how we can use these to enhance ourselves and our worlds” (1982:7). Organizational and leadership structures are merely one of those areas benefiting from such enhancement.

The use of symbolism is not merely a human activity. The Creator God, seeking communication with his creation, often engages in symbolic activity, to a variety of ends. Also, for centuries the Church has relied heavily on the use of symbols in teaching, worship and the propagation of belief. Later in this presentation a small sampling of God’s use of symbols will be offered. God demonstrates the truth that “there is in a visual symbolism a power to communicate ideas and feelings, especially those which lie beyond the net of language and logic” (Child & Colles: 1). It is just this power that motivates the discussion of using symbolism in the discussion of leadership.

The Definition of Symbol

Some simple definitions are required before exploring the use and value of the symbol. It is in the definitions of several authors that provide a fuller understanding of the term. Julie T. Wood defines symbol as “an arbitrary, ambiguous and abstract designation of something else. . . subject to a variety of interpretations by those who use it” (1982:63). She asserts that such symbols may be an object, event, person, relationship, condition or process (ibid.). She emphasizes the *arbitrary nature of interpretation* in her definition.

In regard to the “arbitrary nature” of symbols, Dorothy Sayers sheds some light for our understanding as she makes a distinction between “conventional symbols” and

“natural symbols.” She defines “conventional” as those symbols with “only an *arbitrary* connection to the idea it symbolizes” (Veith 1991:125 emphasis added). She gives the example of language, which is based on conventional symbols and can be defined with clarity and precision in each context. In contrast, “natural symbols” have “a real connection to the idea” (ibid.) Using a lion as a symbol for strength would be a natural symbol. Veith continues the discussion by saying that symbols are “evocative, with many levels of meaning which appeal to the imagination as well as to the intellect” (1991:125). He asserts that the interpretation of all symbols “demands more than finding a one-to-one literal correspondence” (ibid.). Anthropologist, Victor Turner, defines symbol as:

The smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior, it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context. . . symbol is a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought” (1967:19).

In this definition, the emphasis is on the *use or function* of the said object as a symbol, and the *communal understanding the meaning* of the use. *Context* is the focus. Others, such as Heather Child and Dorothy Colles would agree, stating, “Private symbols are a contradiction in terms, they should be a visual language between like-minded people” (1971:xxi).

William and Aida Spencer focus on the representational aspect of a symbol, writing, “A symbol is something that stands for or represents another thing; especially an object used to represent something abstract” (1998:23). It is interesting to note that they assert that this representation of an abstract is found in the work of both God, as He creates, as well as in works of art done by humans.

Numerous authors do not attempt a specific definition but contribute to the understanding of the term by a focus on the *use or value* of a symbol. As early as 1934, Andrew Landale Drummond underscored the use of symbols as either (1) gateways through which news comes to the sense-conditioned mind from the super sensual world, or (2) a substitute for reality (1934:144). Most modern writers would not see symbolism as beyond the sensory world, but his viewpoint is interesting.

Psychologist Daniel I. Schacter offers that a symbol (or image) while “evanescent and incomplete,. . . exudes a strong emotional resonance” (1995:21). Other writers do not ignore the emotional component of symbolism, but it is the functional components in cooperation with the emotional that makes symbolism so powerful. It is in the use of symbols that one deals with the “concepts of meaning, belief and faith” (Bolman & Deal 1984:151). It is this combination of power to elicit an emotional response and the producing of a desired end that brings the use of symbolism to this discussion of leadership.

The Function of Symbolism

The role or function of symbolism varies between the disciplines of research. For all, “symbolism cuts across disciplinary boundaries and the symbolic frame constructs, out of those ideas, a lens for viewing life in collective settings” (Bolman & Deal 1984:151). It is the “lens for viewing life” that underscores all the discussion of function in regard to symbolism.

In anthropology, it is the *social process* that defines the role of symbolism, as one anthropologist states that he

...could not analyze ritual symbols without studying them in a time series in relation to other events, for symbols are essentially involved in social process...ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force in an activity held. The symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means, whether they are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observant behavior. The structure and properties of a symbol becomes those of a dynamic activity, at least within its appropriate center of action (Turner 1967:20).

For our purposes, a review of Bolman and Deal's use of symbolism is appropriate as a foundation to the subject. Their presuppositions and assumptions regarding the use of symbolism in organizations are:

1. The *meaning* of an event is of crucial importance;
2. The interpretation of an event by humans determine its meaning;
3. Events may be ambiguous or uncertain;
4. Ambiguity and uncertainty undermine rational approaches;
5. When faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, humans create *symbols* and these symbols function to:
 - Reduce ambiguity;
 - Resolve confusion;
 - Increase predictability, and
 - Provide direction (1984:149-150)

Bolman and Deal's view provides a lofty understanding of the power of symbolism. Symbolism becomes the tool to bring organization, dedication, vision and unity. It is wrapped up in the formation and communication of such core values as meaning, purpose and mutual expression. Julia T. Wood concurs, writing for several pages on the function of symbol to define, organize and evaluate (1982:69-76). She acknowledges the value of symbolism to the communication process, saying, “When you speak publicly...your success depends largely on your ability to select and organize symbolism in ways that invite listeners to interact with your ideas and to construct meaning similarly to those you hold. When this happens, a speaker has effectively built bridges between his or her phenomenal world and those of listeners” (1982:245). The cogent use of symbolism is demanded.

It is in the construction of *meaning* that Bolman and Deal offer the crucial function of symbolism in organizational approaches. Again, they are supported in their view. The “Symbolic Interaction” perspective concludes, “When we use symbols to designate our interpretations of events, situations, and people, we construct meanings....

Throughout our lives we define symbolically our experiences and, in doing so, we construct the reality in which we live" (Wood 1992:6). Leadership "guru" Howard Gardner continues in this vein as he writes, "Symbol systems are a means of thinking and categorizing; equally they are a means of communicating" (1996:29).

Symbolism serves a variety of functions. Communication, meaning development and values definition, group unity and the lessening of confusion being only a few of recognized uses. Also, it must be underscored that these functions occur within the realm of external images of life AND in the deep, internal recesses of our being. It is significant that this is also true of the role and function of art within any culture.

The Role of Art as Symbol

The role of the visual arts (of all types and quality) is clearly at the center of any discussion on symbolism. It is not pertinent for this paper to engage in a study of specific visual artistic symbols or their interpretation, but consideration of the nature of art as symbol does have merit. Visual art communicates on multi-levels within a person. It is. . .

. . . a way of knowing. This way of knowing is capable of a kind of knowledge of which, for instance, the way of science is not capable. Instead of the scientifically abstracted ideas about things and conditions, art presents those things and conditions.. Our experiencing of them heightens our sense of them, and we can come to a fresh, full, and intimate awareness as we are confronted by them in relation to ourselves. Art is a means of reaching into our experience of the world, of revivifying it as the relation between reality and ourselves (Weismann 1970:4-5).

No discussion of the value of symbolism should ignore the powerful aspect of the visual symbol, although Bolman and Deal seem to minimize it in favor of other possible symbolic expressions.

Art may be defined in many ways, with a vast number of interpretations. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's definition is especially pertinent to our subject. She highlights the essence of art as "meaningful form and values" (1995:421). Meaning and values...visual art and symbolism are alike in this aspect of their definition. In 1984, an author named Vaill was quoted, saying, "The artist is after. . . something more, determined to find coherence and meaning embedded more subtly and deeply in experience that no one else seems to see quite the same way (Apps 1994:157). It is the "something more" that embraces symbolism.

There is more evidence of the power of visual art and the nexus with symbolism. Jeremy Begbie writes, "A work of art does not normally make a direct or literal statement. If you try to reduce it to such, you will destroy its power. It communicates symbolically, allusively" (Brand & Chaplin 1999:124). Calvin Seerveld underscored the symbolic role of art as he is quoted in his "Seerveld Reader." In fact, he declares that symbolism is the defining characteristic of art. He asserts,

"Symbolical" for me is the norm for art. Symbolical, as I said, is the allusive feature heightened professionally, the allusive squared, you might say, or taken to a higher power of refinement... "Symbolical",

then is the criterion for whether something is art or not. Whether an artifact or handicraft is art or propaganda, art or the exercise of an expert, and so on, depends on whether its defining characteristic is symbolical.

It is not easy to describe the power of art, as it is often very individual in its interpretation. But, the power cannot be denied. Perhaps this will help, "A work of art, then, functions in a way that is both subconscious and ambiguous. Its hints and nuances exist whether or not an audience is present to interact with them, but they *are* interactive, dependent for their power on whether someone is open enough to take the hint, sensitive enough to discern the subtle shades of meaning and feeling, self-aware enough to even notice the memories and feelings the artwork evokes" (Brand & Chaplin 1999:128).

But art is not only in the esoteric realm, it is also functional. According to Gene Edward Veith, Jr.,

Aesthetics, the perception of beauty in all its forms, is at the essence of the arts and imparts richness to everyday life. . . . Art can be functional. That is, the aesthetic can be joined with the practical. . . . Artistry and aesthetics can thus apply to every vocation in which human beings exercise their ingenuity in productive ways. . . . Art. . . can also teach by embodying and communicating ideas. In other words, *art can be symbolic*. Such art was prominent in the Tabernacle and the Temple, where its purpose was not only to glorify God but to build the faith of the worshipers (1991:29, 33, 123 emphasis added).

Clearly, if the use of symbolism is promoted, as in Bolman and Deal, it cannot be done without serious consideration of the role of the visual arts. Their book emphasizes the telling of stories and engagement in ceremonies as symbolic acts, and so they are. But the subject is not complete without a consideration of the visual dimension which art can bring. "Words are just one type of language or symbol system. The arts have many others, all of which emerged from specific historic contexts to help formulate our perceptions of life," according to Hillary and Brand (1999:133).

Meaning and *truth* are at the heart of the use of art within a symbolic approach. Leland Ryken holds such a high view of art. He writes, "Works of art can use concrete images and symbols to embody truth to the glory of God and the edification of people" (1989:19). He continues,

Art aims to convey not primarily the facts of life but the truth and meaning of those facts, Art is not about things as they are, but about things as they matter. The arts are concerned with what the English poet Shelley called "the spirit of events"... The meanings that art communicates are meanings that take hold of us both consciously and unconsciously as we enter into the imagined world of the work (1989:26).

Another function, the communicative nature of art, must be understood as well. Thomas Lawson writes, “The discursive nature of painting is persuasively useful, due to its characteristics of being a never-ending web of representations” (Risatti 1990:125). Such is art. . . and such is the function of symbolism.

It might be helpful to further consider the power and role of art, as offered by Leland Ryken. In abbreviated form, these are some of the functions and descriptions of art presented in *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly About the Arts*:

1. Art presents some aspect of human life for our contemplation (1989:30).
2. The artist observes life and then transmutes it into the language of a given art form (ibid.).
3. The function of the arts is to heighten our awareness and perception of life (1989:31).
4. The arts are one of the chief means by which the human race grapples with and interprets reality (ibid.).
5. The wisdom that the arts convey is often a bringing to consciousness what people already know (ibid.).
6. One function of art is to give shape to our own experiences, insights and feelings (1989:32).
7. The arts organize reality in our minds (1989:35).
8. Art enlarges our own fund of experiences (ibid.).
9. Art is the chief means by which a society focuses attention on its own values; it is a humanizing force in society (1989:36).
10. Art puts people in touch with each other (ibid.).
11. Art is symbolic in that it uses physical images to stand for a corresponding reality, especially in the area of the spiritual (1989:55).
12. Art is the most accurate index we have to basic human values (what is worth having, what is not important and what matter most in life, as well as preoccupations, fears, values and longings) (1989:131).
13. Arts are therapeutic and corrective (1989:132).
14. Art captures the inner weather of human emotions (1989:137).
15. Art expresses truth about human character and society (1989:138).

Merely considering this one list, it is obvious that the importance and role of the visual arts in regards to leadership and organizational “symbolic approach” can’t be denied.

Visual art and symbolism take on an even greater role in the current “postmodern” world. It is clearly documented that we are ceasing to be a primarily literate world and that visual images are the *lingua franca* of today’s generation. James Gardner, noted art critic, writes, “Visual art has not merely achieved parity with poetry and music, but to all appearances has overtaken them...at this moment in our culture, art and the artist generate an intensity that other provinces of the imagination rarely command” (1993:2). The communicative power of visual art cannot be ignored. In an attempt to underscore this issue, Howard Risatti offers, “Today, anyone seriously

concerned with art cannot ignore the question of how art functions *socially and politically*” (1990:68 emphasis added).

The connection of art and symbolism cannot be denied, but the role of both in issues of leadership requires further consideration.

The Organizational Search for Meaning

The Symbolic Approach

Bolman and Deal describe four approaches to leadership within organizations, with the Symbolic Approach being the final, and least obvious of the four. In the course of research for this paper, little evidence was found concerning such a clarion call for the use of symbolism in leadership as an organizational approach. What was clearly evident, at least since the 1980’s, was the demand for *meaning- or values- based leadership*. It is in the fulfillment of this newly recognized “core value” that the use of the Symbolic Approach is appropriate.

Bolman and Deal describe viable organizations, based on the Symbolic Approach, having “strong cultures (that) produce results... (that serve as) a framework for understanding, based on shared values and beliefs” (1984:152). They continue, “The symbols and symbolic activity give meaning to the workplace and provide opportunity for anyone—from the boardroom or executive suite to factory floor—to be a part of a dynamic social institution” (ibid.). It is the drive for *meaning* that prompts the use of symbolism...as a teacher, clarifier, unifier and promoter of that meaning. Numerous other books sound the same call.

Success through Sharing

Max De Pree clearly agrees with the premise of Bolman and Deal. He wrote in 1989, “Shared ideals, shared ideas, shared goals, shared respect, a sense of integrity, a sense of quality, a sense of advocacy, a sense of caring—these are the basis. . . . Our system of values may not be generic. It must be explicit” (1989:90).

Much has been written of “purpose driven” organizations, including churches and Mission agencies. But, success does not start with determining such a purpose. It begins with *values*. Kevin Cashman agrees, writing, “Get in touch with your values: values will guide you in your purpose. The language of leadership is expressed through our values; leaders remind people which values are important” (1997:83). Others echo this call, such as Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, as they write,

All organizations depend on the existence of shared meanings and interpretations of reality, which facilitate coordinated action. The actions and symbols of leadership frame and mobilize meaning. Leaders articulate and define what has previously remained implicit or unsaid; then they invent images, metaphors, and models that provide a focus for new attention. By so doing, they consolidate or challenge prevailing wisdom. In short, an *essential factor* in leadership is the capacity to influence and *organize meaning* for the members of the organization (1985:39 emphasis added).

The significance of this emphasis on shared meaning was not accepted in organizational research prior to the 1980's, if the survey of materials undertaken for this paper is accurate. But it is clearly preached now! Bolman and Deal attribute the beginnings of this teaching to a 1982 book, *In Search of Excellence*, by Peters and Waterman (1984:151). During the intervening twenty years, their premise has been assumed as foundational. It is expressed in many ways. In that original work, the authors assert,

If companies do not have strong notions of themselves, as reflected in their values, stories, myths and legends, people's only security comes from where they live on the organizational chart. Threaten that, and in the absence of some grander corporate purpose, you have threatened the closest thing they have to meaning in their business lives. So strong is the need for meaning, in fact, that most people will yield a fair degree of latitude or freedom to institutions that give it to them (1982:77).

The authors state, without hesitation, "Shared values are at the core of organizational structure of successful companies" (Peters & Waterman 1982:10). William Pollard simply states, "People want to work for a cause, not just for a living" (1996:45). In 1989, Warren Bennis, concurred, "If its (an organization's) meaning, its vision, its purposes, its reasons for being is not clear, if it does not reward its employees in tangible and symbolic ways for work well done, then its reflective structures are inadequate, and in effect it is flying blind" (1989:186). By 1995 James O'Toole wrote an entire book on "Values-Based Leadership" and declared,

Learning to lead is thus not simply a matter of style, of how-to, of following some recipe, or even of mastering 'the vision thing.' Instead, leadership is about ideas and values...it is about creating a value-based umbrella large enough to accommodate the various interests of followers, but focused enough to direct all their energies in pursuit of a common good (1995:xi).

Especially interesting about the O'Toole book is that his entire treatise was built upon and illustrated by the 1988 painting by James Ensor called *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (1995:1). He obviously understood the function of art and symbolism!

Other authors call for such a commitment to shared organizational values. One groups writes, "If leaders advocate values that are not representative of the collective will, they will not be able to mobilize people to act as one" (Hesselbein, et al 1996:105). Also, we are warned that it is not sufficient to merely begin an organization with shared values, but that at each transition or adjustment stage within an organization, a renewed commitment must be gained. William Pollard agrees, "the vitality, focus, innovation, and the entrepreneurial spirit tend to naturally deteriorate with each new major increment of growth" (1996:88).

Robert Hargrove discussed the evidence of shared values in an organization. He lists four examples:

1. Openness to new relationship,
2. Nurturing and supporting ideas,

3. Rigorous thinking that includes questioning deep beliefs and assumptions,
4. Operating with integrity (1998:92).

Clearly, these are valued outcomes of such an approach to leadership. Hargrove continues, "Cultivating these values will expand an individual's capacity to identify opportunities, solve problems and generate real value for customers...The shared, understood goal is the most powerful antidote we have discovered for the human tendency to pursue one's own agenda" (1998:92, 101).

A Holistic Approach

The communication of a vision or meaning that is embraced is more than hierarchal memos and edicts. "The acceptance of a vision requires that the employees (or any audience) be willing to pay attention to the would-be creative contribution...acceptance of a new idea is never determined solely by the quality of that idea" (Bennis & Nanus 1985:42). It requires a different approach to communication, a "commonwealth of learning" (ibid.). This is accomplished by "focusing attention on a vision, the leader operates on the emotional and spiritual resources of the organization, on its value, commitment, and aspirations" (Bennis & Nanus 1985:92).

Modern leadership models in higher education concludes that the shared meaning and values on every level of the person to be essential. Jerold Apps offers,

The artful dimensions of leadership are felt; they are embedded in the leader's spirit rather than in the person's intellect...Many of today's successful leaders argue that what is important more than a series of measurable skills, a list of traits, a body of knowledge.

The leader often talks about the artful dimension of leadership, about values and beliefs, about feelings (1994:186, 205).

Underscored in the previous quote is the role of the *emotional* dimension within leadership. This is the "whole leader" leading "whole people" in a "holistic" manner. There is scientific evidence for the need for this. We are not merely logical and verbal creatures; we are also emotional and feeling entities. This is because we have two hemispheres in our brains, not merely one (such as a computer or robot). "Research on the functions of the brain show that the left and right hemispheres differ substantially. The left half is the reasoning, sequential, verbal half; it is the 'logical' and rational half. The right half is the artistic half; it is the half that sees and remembers patterns, recalls melodies, waxes poetic" (Peters & Waterman 1982:59). So what? "True leaders tap into peoples' hearts and minds, not merely their hands and wallets" (Kouzes & Posner 1995:40). Also, one must not neglect the "importance of beauty as a starting point for the business logic that ensue" (Peters & Waterman 1982:61). Jerold Apps continues,

As leaders attempt to adjust their leadership approaches to the requirements of the emerging age, most will experience transformation...(that) involves a rational, analytic side...at the same time, the process involves an emotional side that is non-rational and non-analytic. The emotional side is expressed in feelings rather than facts, in passion rather than in

deliberation...from the heart rather than from the mind, from the soul rather than from the intellect (1994:211).

Much of the power of this approach is in the *communal* or *shared* commitment to the meaning and values of the leader within any organization. Barry Mitchelson said, “It isn’t enough for a leader to have a vision, or an organization to approach its potential and successfully implement change, its members must understand, accept, and commit to the vision” (Kouzes & Posner 1995:124). Notice how Bennis and Nanus approach this, “A pivotal responsibility is to communicate the blueprint which shapes and interprets situations so that the actions of employees are guided by *common interpretations of reality*” (1985:40 emphasis added).

Even books advocating the “structural approach” for an organization recognized the value of shared goals or visions. Shared meaning and values may not equate with goals or visions, they definitely interact and produce positive results. Collins and Porras write, “Visionary companies prosper over long periods of time, through multiple product life cycles and multiple generations of active leaders” (1994:2). Stephen Covey is well known for his call for “principle-centered leadership” writes, “Without common vision, various groups push for their own special kind of legislation” (1990:303). Covey is not focusing on the goal of a “symbolic approach”—in fact his is a very structural approach, with elements of the political, but he has been influenced by the symbolic approach in his thinking.

The question may not be whether a shared purpose and meaning are necessary, but how can they be achieved. Bennis and Nanus recognize this issue, asking, “How do you capture imaginations? How do you communicate visions? How do you get people aligned behind the organization’s overarching goals? How do you get an audience to recognize and accept an idea?” (1985: 33). Then they restate the imperative, “Workers have to recognize and get behind something of established identity. The management of meaning, and mastery of communication is inseparable from effective leadership” (ibid.).

In the previous quote, it is clear that the “management of meaning” and the “mastery of communication” are not synonymous. In fact, “meaning goes far beyond what is usually meant by communication. For one thing, it has very little to do with ‘facts’ or even ‘knowing.’ Facts and knowledge have to do with technique, with methodology, with ‘knowing how to do things.’ That’s useful... but thinking is emphatically closer to what we mean by ‘meaning’ than ‘knowing’ is” (Bennis & Nanus 1990:40).

Symbols: The Tools of Meaning

In their 1995 book, Kouzes and Posner, discuss “dreams and visions”—but what they actual describe are values and meanings, which can be communicated through symbolism. They write,

Every organization, every social movement, begins with a dream. The dream of vision is the force that invents the future... It’s not enough for a leader to have a dream about the future. A leader must be able to communicate the vision in ways that encourage us to sign on for the duration...(with) a greater sense of purpose and

worth in our day-to-day working life. While the enthusiasm, energy, and positive attitude of a good leader may not change the context of work, they certainly can make work more meaningful... these visions, then, are conceptualizations. They are images in the mind, impressions and representations. They become real as leadership express those images in concrete terms to their constituents. Just as architects make drawings and engineers build models, leaders find ways of giving expression to their hopes for the future (1995:10, 14, 102).

The “concrete terms” referred to in this quotation should include symbolism through the visual arts, as well as other symbolic forms. For, “the critical point is this in the performing art of leadership, symbols and artifacts are a leader’s props. They’re necessary tools for making the message memorable and sustainable over time” (Kouzes & Posner 1995:229).

Not only secular organizations have been influenced by what Peters and Waterman began. For instance, George Barna writes, “Churches that possess a vision are those in which the vision is a constant focus, and in which the vision is communicated through a variety of means” (1995:143). The “variety of means” must include the careful use of symbolism.

Christian leader, Leighton Ford, understands the value of symbolism in leadership. He writes, “Effective leaders must know the importance of symbolizing their cause. . . Effective leaders use symbols that show they are in command. So it is no surprise to find that in Jesus’ final week he used far more symbolism than in all the previous three years” (1991:282). He continues illustrating through the leadership style of Jesus, citing, “A true leader’s words will express reality. Jesus shows us that symbolic action helps to make the words come alive and the impressions be lasting (1991:28).

Bennis and Nanus underscore the many faceted approach to “meaning communication” by writing,

The vision has to be articulated clearly and frequently in a variety of ways, from ‘statements of policy’ that have minimum impact, to revising recruiting aims and methods training that is explicitly geared to modify behavior in support of new organizational values, and not, the least, adapting and modifying shared symbols that signal and reinforce the new vision (1985:143).

One goal of shared symbols is the telling and re-telling of the “story” of the company that personifies the meaning and values of the company. These stories can be presented in a variety of forms, but they must be told. Many authors concur. Howard Gardner writes,

Leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate. . . Leaders in the arts characteristically inspire others by the ways they use their chosen media of artistic expression, be they the phrases of a sonata or the gestures of a dance (1996:9).

Max De Pree carries this requirement even further, likening the telling of corporate stories the power of “tribal storytellers.” He writes,

Every family, every college, every corporation, every institution needs tribal storytellers. The penalty for failing to listen is to lose one’s history, one’s historical context, one’s binding values...without the continuity brought by custom, any group of people will begin to forget who they are (1989:82).

Tribal storytellers, the tribe’s elders, must insistently work at the process of corporate renewal. They must preserve and revitalize the values of the tribe. They nourish a scrutiny of corporate values that eradicates bureaucracy and sustains the individual (1989:91).

In a later offering, De Pree continues this thought,

Those people realize the value of tribal storytellers, the custodians of the history and values and culture of the group. Any healthy organization, like a good tribe, needs certain rituals and symbols like company picnics, outstanding awards, and memorial works of art (1991:72).

The “tribal storytellers” perpetuate the meaning and values of the organization through the verbal re-telling, but also through a variety of other means, including *symbolic visual art*. It is in the understanding of these symbols that meaning and vision is maintained. “Good, lucid communication means commitment to the same symbols of good work and success. Plato said that a society cultivates whatever is honored there. Let us make no mistake about what we honor. If these symbols are understood, we can and do enable each other” (De Pree 1989:108).

Leighton Ford understands the value of this inter-and trans-generational transference of meaning. He writes, “One way we pass on our values from generation to generation is tribal tales. Every family has them. Every organization tells them. They help to weave continuity between our core values and the changes that inevitably come. Jesus’ symbolic actions were the stuff of tribal tales” (1991:28).

In addition, symbolism goes beyond the role of good communication to the valuable function of determining a course for the future. Julia Wood writes, “Because we can think with symbols, we can transcend our immediate, physical world and contemplate alternatives to it. . . We can symbolize possibilities, ideals” (1973:7).

One means of grasping the use of visual symbols “symbolic approach” is to examine evidence of how it has been used. This is a cursory offering, at best, but may be helpful.

Symbolism in Action

The use of the visual symbol ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous, if one is considering the quality of the offering. The items used may be “fine art,” kitsch, decorative arts, logos, or even what some may call “propaganda.” This is not the

setting to determine the artistic value or pass judgment on what is offered as the visual symbol, rather this paper merely offers a variety of examples for consideration.

Symbolism in the Bible and the Church

The Bible is replete with examples of the use of symbolic images to teach, inform and challenge. The blueprint for the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple included detailed instructions on the use of visual symbols and ornamentation. Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin acknowledged God's use of symbols as they wrote,

It is also worth noting that throughout the Bible narrative as God continued his involvement with his people, gradually helping them to understand more of his nature, he often used creative methods to get their attention. Not only did God use story-telling, visual aids in the sky and plenty of dreams and visions, he also instructed those he chose as his representatives to use a wide and wacky range of non-verbal techniques.

They give further evidence of God's symbolic use in this helpful list,

Some of the Symbolic Activities God Instructs His Human Agents to Use (Brand & Chaplin 1999:42)

- Interior Design: Exodus 25-27
- Dress: Exodus 28
- Music: Numbers 10
- Song: Deuteronomy 31:19; Psalm 40:3
- Monument: Joshua 4
- Architecture: 1 Chronicles 28:12,19
- Poetry: 2 Samuel 23:1,2
- Prophetic Performance: Isaiah 20; Jeremiah 19, 27,28; Ezekiel 4,5

Leighton Ford suggests that it is clear that Jesus often used symbols during his life here on earth, stating, "What is surprising is the kind of symbolism that Jesus used" (1991:282). He cites examples given in Mark 11 during Jesus "Triumphal Entry," such as the riding on a donkey, the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the temple. Ford continues,

Here then, are three examples of a leader's need to symbolize his or her cause...Jesus's strange symbols were designed to reveal clearly the essentials of true leadership and true faith...Jesus' symbolic acts were chosen to reveal this truth in startling, unexpected ways. Mere statements could not have set forth the contrast so vividly symbolized of the servant king on the donkey, of the strong Lord who can either empower or destroy (1991:283-284).

Since the First Century, symbols have been the warp and woof of the tapestry of Church life. Even within the catacombs, Christian symbolism is evident. “Use of symbols was important during the periods of the sporadic but violent Christian persecution as a means by which believers declared their affiliation to fellow believers, yet at the same time, was close enough or innocuous enough even to pagan imagery as to render them harmless” (Murray 1996:512). Murray continues, “Later Christian use of images and symbols was a convenience of teaching, particularly among illiterate and semi-literate people who could be effectively instructed by their use” (ibid.)

While the Bible and Church history are replete with symbolism, such as in the Exodus and the Crucifixion (Spencer 1998:23), it was during the Middle Ages in the West symbolism reached its high-water mark. Everything in nature and in daily life was invested with symbolic meaning, and people were encouraged to see symbolic meaning in even the meanest event—the hen lifting its head to swallow the water in its beak was raising its eyes to Heaven in thanks and worship; the lioness licking new born cubs did so for three days to give them, life, as Christ had risen after three days in the tomb (Murray 1995:513).

Familiar Symbols

“Symbols are another form of expression that can capture the imagination,” writes Kouzes & Posner (1995:145). They continue with very familiar symbols to people living in the United States,

The Statue of Liberty is a symbol of American as the land of freedom of opportunity. The eagle is a symbol of strength, the olive branch a symbol of peace, and the lion a symbol of courage. The bull is a hopeful symbol of rising prices in the stock market. Wells Fargo Bank uses the stagecoach to symbolize its pioneering spirit. Mary Kay Cosmetics use the bumblebee as a symbol for doing what others say can't be done (ibid.).

Symbols can “represent time-honored traditions” (Kouzes & Posner 1995:228), such as the mission church on the letterhead of Santa Clara University, “signaling the roots and credo of the institution” (ibid.). The “Bell Tower” of Biola University is a classic example of the use of visual symbols demonstrating both the history and purpose of the institution.

A Leader's Use of Symbols

Visual symbolism has many faces. Jerold Apps recommended that the visual could be a tool for handling difficult leadership situation. In order to ‘become more aware of your reality and help broaden and deepen it’ (1994:217), Apps suggests, “Draw a picture of a leadership situation...sketch in as much detail as your remember; (then) step back and examine it. Often a picture will reveal nuances (that) may not be evident when you use words to describe what you do. Look for subtleties in the picture” (1994:217-218).

Max De Pree tells of one company, Herman Miller, in which “sculpture was used to honor people in the company who exemplify the company’s values” (1991:74). The owner of the company describes the dedication of this sculpture:

To dedicate the sculpture and its lovely setting, we invited all the people to the ceremony whose name would be placed on the granite plinth...A small version of Houser’s sculpture sits outside the CEO’s office to make sure that Herman Miller’s leaders don’t forget the importance of continuity and history in the rush of everyday business. History can’t be left to fend for itself. For when it comes to history and beliefs and values we turn our future on the lathe of the past.

Notice the purpose of this visual symbol, in the shape of a “granite plinth”—it was to insure continuity and history, which perpetuates beliefs and values.

Significant changes in belief system or direction require a re-visiting of the symbols of an organization. At such times groups, “often proclaim new symbols and discard or destroy old symbols and artifacts in favor of the new” (Kouzes & Posner 1995:229). The toppling of the statues of Lenin and other Communist symbols since 1989 is a vivid example of this. It is not coincidence that said statues have been kept in the former Eastern-block countries, such as Bulgaria, which has not fully rejected the old regime and emerged into the new. One country, Hungary, gathered their rejected visual symbols, the huge statues of Communist leaders, and placed them in a “Statue Park” at the edge of Budapest. Frequently the Hungarian families tour this park in order to tell the story of the hardships of the nearly fifty years under totalitarian rule in order that their children may learn from history and never allow it again. In contrast, in the central park of the city, huge statues representing the pride of the Hungarian people—the seven Magyar tribes are proudly and beautifully displayed.

One modern example of the destruction of old symbols under a new regime is reported in the late 1990’s in Afghanistan as the Muslim Taliban destroyed irreplaceable statues and other symbols of the former rulers. Reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution in China during the 1960’s, the rest of the world again helplessly stands aghast at the destruction. But such is the import of old belief systems as expressed through visual symbolism.

The Power of a Symbol

A rather lengthy, but intriguing example of the use of a visual symbol in an organization occurred a number of years ago at the opening of the new Kroger’s Grocery Store in New Albany, Indiana. The leadership team had been given the challenge to create a visual symbol to embody the commitment and meaning of this store opening. This is what was reported.

As team members talked at the workshop, they tried to sketch *pictures and symbols for their ideas*. When someone drew the Sherman-Mitten Bridge, a local landmark connecting New Albany and Louisville, *everyone got excited*; group members knew they were on the right track. Together, using newsprint, colored construction paper, felt pens, glue, and glitter they created a picture

of a large bridge beneath a starry sky. The bridge was holding aloft a company logo, and beneath the bridge was the slogan “Bridging New Albany in the Future.” This was a *tangible image* of how their new Kroger store could make a difference in the community, and it gave them a *theme to rally around* as they tackled the challenge of opening a new market.

But they were not finished yet with this *vision of an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good*. One store associate created an oil painting depicting the bridge and slogan; it was *beautiful and inspiring*—but still not enough, as far as the group was concerned. Gary Hettinger, deli department manager, coordinated the construction of an eight-foot-long, four-foot-high replica of the Sherman-Mitten Bridge. It included a miniature neon logo, lampposts, and cars. Hettinger *kept enthusiasm high* at the store by bringing in photos of the replica’s progress.

When the entire store leadership went to Louisville for the traditional new-store planning meeting with the divisional president and headquarters staff, the new bridge made the journey too, complete with special lighting, smoke machine, and theater curtains. At the right moment, members of the store team proudly and dramatically unveiled the *embodiment of their vision* to a duly impressed senior management team, which quickly decided to incorporate the bridge into the print media promoting the store opening. The store team had *enlisted the solid support of upper management*.

The pace quickened as opening day drew near. Deciding to *share their vision* with the community, team members put the bridge on prominent display in the new store’s lobby, complete with starry sky, neon sign and slogan. The display became a *sort of a shrine, reminding the team of its commitment to leadership, teamwork, and bringing the future* to New Albany’s grocery shoppers. (The bridge subsequently became of *regular part of new employee orientation—a way to share the vision*.)

When opening day arrived, it was the customer’s turn to appreciate what the bridge and the *vision it represented* meant to them and to their community. The bridge remained on display, customer service employees wore shirts with the bridge and slogan colorfully printed on the back, and the scene in the lobby was reproduced in brochures given to each customer. Response was overwhelming; positive customer comments, offers to buy the bridge, requests from the mayor’s office to display the bridge in the town library—and food sales in record numbers!

While the ‘bridge shrine’ has since been replaced, the *vision of leadership, teamwork, and community and customer service* lives on. The store leadership firmly believes that the *right vision empowers positive change by focusing the collective energy of*

store associates and by building commitment and a willingness to take personal responsibility for the enterprise's success (Kouzes & Posner 1995:122-123 emphasis added).

This true story beautifully illustrates the role of the visual symbol!

The Symbolism in a Logo

The original use and interpretation of visual symbols may be lost, or at least they will indicate the dynamic change of social environment. Max De Pree cites one such humorous example of a factory owner using a visual symbol:

The owner would walk right into the plant, give a short speech to the first-year employee and then produce a really beautiful symbol, the company's logo, on a sterling-silver tie tack, all presented in a velvet box. One day the owner was out in the plant giving the speech to a young man who had recently completed his first year. The young man opened the box, took out this wonderful sterling-silver tie tack, and said, "Gee, that's beautiful!" Then he calmly inserted it into the lobe of his left ear (1991:127-128).

While we may laugh at this incident, the reality remains that while the function of the visual symbol might have changed, the significance did not.

Logos are important symbols of an organization. The mega-communication giant AT&T recognized this during their cataclysmic change in the 1980's. At that time they discarded the Bell name and the logo, which reinforced the message, "both internally and externally, that 'Ma Bell does not live here anymore' (Bennis & Nanus 1985:143). But, they did not merely discard the old message and symbol, "replaced the familiar logo (a bell within a circle) with a globe symbolically girdled by electronic communications. Thus AT&T has a new symbol---suggesting new dimensions---of business and future" (ibid.).liberty statue

A Variety of Symbols

Sometimes symbols can be a normal part of workday life. At the offices of TPG/Learning Systems it was a poster "showing a zebra with rainbow-colored stripes" and a slogan, "Good is not enough when you dream of being great" that became a "symbol of going above and beyond the call to produce greatness for our colleagues and clients" (Kouzes & Posner 1995:228). To reinforce this value, "Anyone who does something extraordinary is likely to be awarded a zebra of some variety" (ibid.). Such simple symbols can be found or displayed as "posters, pictures on walls, objects on desks, and buttons or pins on lapels" (ibid.) It is suggested that a leader must consider the symbolism of how they decorate their offices. For instance, if a leader holds a value of egalitarian, or at least shared-meaning and goals for his organization, then "instead of decorating the office with symbols of power, decorate yours with personal mementos that say something about your interests, your family, your uniqueness... Use your unique environment to tell a story about you. It really is you, after all, that people are following—not the title or the position" (Kouzes & Posner 1995:201).

The styles and objects are varied, but the message is clear—visual symbols are important to the success of an organization. “Despite the variations in style, however—whether verbal or nonverbal, whether through words or music, every successful leader is aware that an organization is based on a set of shared meanings that define roles and authority” (Bennis & Nanus 1985:39). These “variations in style” may be the use of an image reinforced through a vast array of symbolism, but the goal is the same, “a set of shared meanings.”

The Responsibility of Symbolism

The previous pages have attempted to illustrate the function and power of symbolism, especially as it relates to leadership and organizations. Obviously, any tool that is capable of such power can also be used negatively and a warning is merited. One use of symbolism that can be either positive or negative, is called propaganda.

It is the *intent and purpose* of symbols used in propaganda that determines the ethics of use. Propaganda is not inherently bad. The definition of propaganda is “making known something you believe in, spreading around information and ideas, openly witnessing to tenets or a cause you stand for” (Seerveld 2000:126). Propaganda means publicity, making a message public” according to Calvin Seerveld (*ibid.*). He calls it a “justifiable human activity” (*ibid.*), based on his definition. He believes propaganda merely to be “persuasive information” (2000:127) but lists three elements that, when present, render this use of symbolism wrong,

1. Propaganda that is ideological (used by self righteous doctrinaires);
2. Propaganda which is manipulative; and
3. Misleading propaganda (*ibid.*).

Bolman and Deal offer another “face” of symbolism which they deem to be a wrong use, that of symbols used as “camouflage and distortion” which can “serve dishonest, cynical, or repressive functions (1984:224). A horrible illustration of such a use of symbolism is the repressive regime of Hitler during 1930’s and 1940’s. “He was able to work crowds up into a frenzy, with a mixture of appeals to idealism, hatred and action. His life and the cinematic use of symbols such as the swastika, the goose step, the ‘Heil Hitler’ salute, and the ‘Horst Wessel’ song have been widely discussed in books on persuasion and propaganda” (Gardner 1996:260-261).

Clearly, ethical and moral issues come into play, as with most of life. It is a responsibility that must be taken seriously. Julia Wood warns, “Humans’ symbolic ability is a mixed blessing. We not only create and use symbols; we also abuse them... We are both the creators and prisoners of our symbol usage” (1982:6). She quotes Hugh Dalziel Duncan, writing, “Man’s freedom is freedom to communicate through symbols of his own creation. This is a glory and his burden” (Wood 1982:3). As we all live in a fallen world, we can choose how we use this “glory and burden.”

In the giving of the Law, God acknowledged the illicit use of visual symbolism in the Second Commandment (Exodus 20)—that of turning such a symbol into an idol of worship. God did not declare the image to be sinful—but rather the use of that image as a substitute for him was wrong. The people of Israel, as well as the Protestant Reformers applied a rigid interpretation of this Commandment and forbade the making of the visual image, illustrating the designated power of symbolism, even when form and function are not distinguished.

The Appropriateness Standard

This study was initiated by the research of Bolman and Deal (1984) regarding four approaches to functioning of organizations. In this book, the four approaches are initially presented as distinct—the Structural, The Human Resources, the Political, and, finally, the Symbolic. Examples of organizations can be offered which exemplify these approaches. But, what seems very clear to me is that all organizations, due either to changes in social environment or stages of organizational life, may demonstrate these varying approaches—frequently simultaneously at one level or another! The challenge then, in considering the Symbolic Approach, is how to integrate this into an organization, no matter what the over-all structure may be.

Vision and shared meaning cannot “be established in an organization by edict, or by the exercise of power or coercion. It is more an act of persuasion, of creating an enthusiastic and dedicated commitment to a vision because it is right for the times, right for the organization, and right for the people who are working on it” (Bennis & Nanus 1990:107). Such “appropriateness” standard applies to the use of symbolism as well.

The Final Challenge

Symbolism is an awesome tool given to us by our Creator. “We inherit from God our ability to sub-create and symbolize...it is the power of using symbols—that makes him lord of the earth...if we are fully human, each of us is an artist in one way or another, communicating by arranging or making what we conceive to be truth in some symbolic manner” (Spencer & Spencer 1998:26). It is the role of a leader, whether in business or Christian ministry to “articulate new values and norms, offer new visions, and use a variety of tools in order to transform, support, and institutionalize new meanings and directions” (Bennis & Nanus 1985:139) and one significant tool is the use of visual symbols. But the challenge is to do so consciously, effectively and with responsibility.

So often an organization, such as a mission agency, is born out of a deeply shared burden and goal, but over time, changes of personnel and in different social environments, that original fire is dimmed, if not extinguished. The ‘retelling of the tribal stories’ through multiple forms of symbolism may bring a renewal of commitment. Also, the launching of a new vision or direction requires a new symbolism, building upon the old.

The use of symbolism has personal benefits as well. At one seminar this author attended, the attendees were challenged to draw a “time-line” of their life, with visual symbols designating each major challenge or growth point. The impact of the visual picture of my life was staggering as a learning tool, as well as catalyst for remembering God’s faithfulness. Another personal use of visual symbols is in pre-field and re-entry training seminars, as attendees are instructed to produce a visual symbol of their experiences, which unlocks feelings, unconscious emotions, as well as tells the story of their experiences. Artists in healing ministries use “story ropes” made of fabric and necklaces of various colored beads to represent the narrative of a person’s life.

We need symbols in our lives. . . whether the wedding ring that speaks of commitment, the diploma at graduation or the memorial stone at the site of a grave. We are a symbolizing people—although we frequently neglect it in our everyday lives. It is definitely a part of the Christian journey. “Just as the nation of Israel used the stones on

the Jordan River bank as a witness to their faithfulness, we should devise and use contemporary memorials testifying to our own walk of faith—whether as individuals, families, friends, or churches” (Issler & Habermas 1994:67).

Symbols—whether the chalice of wine and the bread during Eucharist, the baptismal font or the colors expressing the changes in the liturgical church calendar are essential to the understanding and the expression of our faith. The “cross”—whether plain or as a crucifix showing the dying body of Christ—declares the core of our Christian narrative. Visual symbols of Christ as the “Good Shepherd” or the ICTHYS (fish) affirms both our theology and practice as the church. Leaders, in order to truly lead, need to wisely research and use such symbols in order to present their congregations as mature followers of Christ.

John Johnson, a Biola University student, expressed, “Modern Western societies are poor in symbolism. One of the results is that on a personal level, we fail to incorporate symbols into our lives and give them the emphasis they need. Christian adults need concrete, material ways to summarize the learning and growth they have experienced in some epoch of their lives” (Issler & Habermas 1994:67). Such is true for individuals, as well as schools, churches, businesses and all forms of organizations. The power of the symbol is awesome. May we, as Christians, use it to the glory of God.

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