NEW METAPHORS FOR A BETTER NORMAL

Mr Aaron Maniam, Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of Communication and Information, shares how adopting metaphors can influence perception and reaction

WRITTEN BY TJUT ROSTINA, CHI

The choice of using new metaphors influences us in powerful ways, especially in moving towards a new normal, and changing how we perceive systems, structures and selves.

At the recent CHI INNOVATE 2021 Centrestage session, CHI hosted Mr Aaron Maniam, the Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of Communication and Information. He shares some thoughts on what metaphors can be adopted to create a better normal for healthcare and for the systems within which healthcare finds itself operating. Moderating the session is Mr David Dhevarajulu, Executive Director of CHI.

At first glance, the idea of a world that is "Never Normal" can seem like an exhausting prospect, especially in a world that is never stable. People start to feel like they are running on an endless treadmill, forever playing catch-up and being reactive to current events.

"This is why self-care and taking care of mental wellness (for both ourselves as well as others) is so critical. If we can do that, we can hopefully also find the opportunities in the Never Normal – a world that is dynamic, agile, and where there are endless opportunities to be seized, if we have the skills, experience, knowledge and energy to do so," says Mr Maniam.

To guide us in coping with the rapid changes around us, Mr Maniam shares how adopting metaphors can influence the way we look at things and how we react to them.

For Those in a Hurry...

1 .Metaphors are fundamental in how we see the world

2. Choice of language and metaphor affects our priorities

3. Three levels that matter at work: System, Structure and Self.

WHAT ARE METAPHORS

First off, to get everyone attuned to seeing metaphors in our daily conversations and activities, Mr Maniam sets the stage by sharing the following statements as examples. He then urges the audience to consider what is common in the seemingly unique statements:

- Children **blossom** into adults.
- I will **defeat** his argument.
- I don't have **room** for this in my life!
- Life has **cheated** me.
- **Scarcity has given birth** to a generation of paranoid teenagers.

The common factor is the use of metaphors as a description, where children blossom like flowers, to defeat an argument, like in a battle, and room for this in my life, where life is seen as a space.

"And when we say scarcity has given birth, it says if scarcity is a person, right, it has birth that created a new life along the way. All of us use metaphors, and not just those of us who write poetry. These metaphors are such a fundamental part of how we perceive the world that sometimes we don't even notice that there have been these sentences."

Based on these examples (and more), it can be seen how metaphors shape reality, because these metaphors affect how we perceive that reality, which in turn affects the action taken about that reality.

Mr Maniam then gets us to notice how metaphors are also shaping our thinking in subtle ways.

Some subtle metaphors that we use are:
- We wake up, but fall asleep
- I couldn't get the idea across to them
- His message was buried in a dense prose
- Southeast Asia doesn't need another Vietnam
- We haven't covered much ground
- Can you examine the idea more deeply?

For example, we say we "wake up", but we "fall asleep". Now why is it that waking is about moving upwards, but going to sleep is moving downwards? We say we could not get an idea across to people. That is "dealing with ideas" is a space, right? That it moves across the space from you to another person.

Mr Maniam goes further with references to current political examples, such as "the US does not need another Afghanistan" and "Southeast Asia doesn't need another Vietnam".

In situations where Vietnam and Afghanistan have become metaphors, for the larger concept of long protracted wars that have no clear sign of winners, the draining of resources, and also the political capital of a country like the US. We also say, "we haven't covered much ground", as if covering ground is a physical thing, even when we talk about ideas that are otherwise quite conceptual, and quite political.

Mr Maniam points out that we use metaphors without realising how pervasive these metaphors are, as illustrated in the examples shared earlier.

C+I

Mind Your Language

Now that we are more acquainted with the metaphors around us, how can we apply this idea to the situation in healthcare today? Note that these metaphors are going to shape how we perceive health in itself, healthcare as a phenomenon, and of course, work as health and healthcare professionals, emphasising that the choice of language matters.

Mr Maniam explains: "If you're a healthcare professional, then your job is to deliver health care. If you're a health professional, then your job is to deliver health right or help people achieve health in their situations."
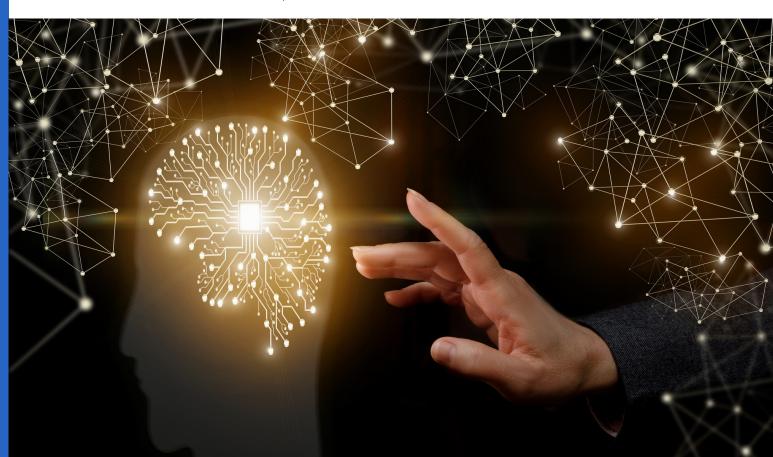
Further emphasising his point, he says that when professionals try and deliver healthcare, then they will create structures that are optimised to deliver that healthcare to deliver the programmes, policies and events that are about the healthcare that people might need to receive.

With that perception, the final outcome would be measured based on the healthcare delivered, rather than the specific resulting health of the patient.

However, if professionals think of themselves as a health professional, then with that change of language, the change in the outcome will follow.

"The healthcare is just a means to that larger end of achieving the health of a population, or the health of an individual, or the health of the patient.

Therefore, it is important, that even in this basic set of ideas, the choice of language and the metaphor that we use, become critically important because it affects the priorities, and it affects the ways in which we approach the world that we are dealing with."

LEVEL UP!

There are three levels that matter in work, and the different metaphors can shape the work we do in fundamental ways.

At the outermost level is the system that everyone operates in. Consider what systems are interacting with this system that we are working in.

Now, delve within the system, there is the issue of structure. What are the structures within that system, the organisations, the teams, the interagency teams, and they are all functioning to achieve a set of aims, those are all structures that we have in place, the rules and the normal practices.

Finally, at the core are the self. Each of us as an individual, our metaphor for ourselves becomes important as well, because depending on how we frame that, we will make very different choices that might have consequential impacts on overall health and healthcare outcomes.

Mr Maniam goes on to breakdown the three levels and to assign metaphors for each one.

From Machine to Community

The system can be thought of as a machine with cogs that inter operate within it, functioning according to very specific mechanical rules.

Pressing a certain button will set off consequences, for example, when the computer is "tired", it is switched off, and then it works better when it is started again after that.

It is important, though, to remember that machines do not describe everything that we do in complete terms.

People are not cogs in machines, and in health and healthcare, relationships matter, and are not seen as just the mechanical interdependencies between different parts of the machine.

As such, it is important to think about the system as a community as well. A group of people, gathering in connection with each other, and to think about systems as a moral ecology, because each action an individual does has important impacts, consequences and ramifications for those around us.

Work is Interdependent

When system is thought of as a community, then work is much more than just measurable mechanical output.

The work becomes a capital because the capital is an investment for the future, where the investment is in today's healthcare so that it affects the people tomorrow.

It is also a social capital because when investing in the health care and the health of people, there is a larger impact for the society and the community.

Work is also interdependent, because each thing that we do affects others, potentially beyond the healthcare system as well.

"For example, during a surgery, someone is in charge of anaesthesia, another is in charge of paying attention to certain basic bodily functions, the person performing the surgery, and possibly other observers looking at different aspects of the surgery. And all of that is a complex interdependence," Mr Maniam explains.

"So when we realise that work is interdependent, and not just static output, then what we realise is, work has significance across space, as we see with the social capital example. And it has significance across time, because the interdependence is actually where we start to see that what we do today affects potential outcomes and consequences tomorrow, right? Not just in the everyday atmosphere of the current timeframe, but effects that are felt much more in the long term."

From Cogs to Stakeholders

When systems start to be seen as communities, then people start to be seen as stakeholders.

Once people start thinking of themselves as stakeholders, they will feel more empowerment in the work that they are doing, where they can make their own choices. Where work is interdependent, then people are not just stakeholders of today, but they become stewards for the future as well.

If people start to see themselves as stakeholders and stewards, then the approach they take will be very different. As health professionals, how the professional views the patient is important.

If the patient is just a cog in a machine, they will be disempowered entities, not able to take on agency for themselves.

But if patients are seen as stakeholders and potential stewards of their own lives, then they can take ownership over the process of healthcare provision, and take charge of their own health.

If stakeholders and stewards are perceived to matter more, then the healthcare system can become more nuanced and sophisticated in its overall operation.

The machine metaphor is very powerful, but it is important to remember that the mechanisation and the automation that are part of machines serve people, and not the other way around.

However, if the machine become the be all and end all, then the more human and relational aspects of healthcare will be lost.

Relationships matter within communities, and stakeholders must realise that the relationships matter as much as the mechanical and technical aspects of how they function.

This means that the equipment of hospitals matter just as much as the ways in which people relate to others.

"If we are stewards, then we're actually holding things in trust, and we don't own anything at all," says Mr Maniam.

He explains that it is holding things in trust considering that once a professional moves to another job, agency or place, that trust is handed over to the next person.

He adds: "In doing so, we will find ourselves designing systems that are resilient across time, and it will result in much better outcomes, because we will be keeping the humaneness and the dynamic interaction amongst people in mind for the overall design of the systems that we operate in."

You can watch the full broadcast (including a Q&A session) of Mr Aaron Maniam's Centrestage session at CHI INNOVATE 2021 here: https://youtu.be/NuNyS4vP6IY

About Aaron Maniam

Mr Aaron Maniam is a Singaporean civil servant, having served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Centre for Strategic Futures, Civil Service College, and Ministry of Trade and Industry. Currently Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Communications and Information, he oversees digital economics, digital regulation, digital literacy and access, and public sector broadcasting.

In his free time, he writes poetry, facilitates inter-religious dialogues, and teaches the National University of Singapore's Scholars Programme. He is a Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum, an Asia 21 Young Leader of the Asia Society, and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.

Q: The healthcare community personality preference is very ST (Sensing plus Thinking/ Logical). This is very much a machine paradigm, talking about automation, information technology, robotics as opposed to possibilities, values paradigm that you spoke greatly about using the ecology metaphor. Leaders within our ecosystem gravitate towards a data centric approach as opposed to exploring using metaphors for possible futures. What advice or suggestions would you have for us to move forward?

A: The binary of personality should not define us in either ways. We need the S and the T functions, the world of data keeps us discipline and technically accurate in the work we are trying to do.

We need to know what we are less good at and realise that just because we don't prefer it, the system might still actually need it. One advice for leaders is to coach ourselves and acquire at least a functional literacy in the other ways of perceiving the world that may not be obvious to us. Even more importantly, we need to hire diversely. If you have a dominantly ST team or dominantly introvert team, then make sure one hires some NFs, some Es and Is – to complement what you already have.

And I think that is going to be quite critical. If we can hire for diversity rather than hiring in our own image then I think we will have a much greater range of views that can be used to broaden the range of metaphors because it's not just only the Ns and Fs have a view on metaphors, STs have metaphors too. We need to find ways for those metaphors to co-mingle and mix with each other in ways that are as rich as possible, rather than assuming that any single metaphor somehow has to dominate because what I hope has come from my talk is that no single metaphor will ever, ever have all the answers to a problem that we are facing. And we need a mix of metaphors to actually function as well as possible.

Q: Language and framing – for many of us in healthcare, it is not our forte. Is there a pragmatic way for leaders to workshop metaphors that we can effectively use? This is so that it ends up as pertinent, sensitive and engaging instead of being misguided.

A: I like the idea of 'workshop-ping' in particular. In fact, we have structures already. I presume many in our team have gone through things like retreat or annual sessions, where you have discussions about where you would like to go next. The problem with a lot of those discussions is that they often focus on the 'what' and the 'how'. For example, the plans that we make are always about: how we organise ourselves, what new actions must we take. If we are very daring, we might ask, what do we stop doing, but we don't get much beyond that. I think one important question to ask in a retreat type setting is how do we think of ourselves, what are we? Once we have that idea, what is that metaphor that undergirds the visualisation of ourselves. Upon which, use the wisdom of the crowd during a retreat or a discussion on strategic planning to actually come up with a different set of metaphors.

There are two books that I would strongly suggest people to read if one is interested in using metaphorical thinking in a more sophisticated way:
i. "Metaphors we live by"
ii. "Images of organisation"

Q: How should organisation deal with the concept of stewardship in terms of innovation where individual ownership and drive is important?

A: Stewardship is particularly important when the issues we are dealing with are so complex that individual attribution of credit or blame cannot be done simply.

And I think increasingly in today's day and age, in so much of what we do, it is collective responsibility that matters.
Each of us have an individual role but we are doing things as part of a larger aim. We need to remember that actually there are going to be both individual as well as organisational accountabilities that need to be put in place.

Once we remember that the group has accountability as well, then I think it becomes a lot easier to envision stewardship as a way of thinking rather than assuming that every individual has to fend for themselves.

Q: It's a struggle when we talk about performance management. How do I recognise individual contribution while acknowledging that it was part of a team effort.

A: In essence, individual accountability does matter but we need to realise that many of the accountabilities and complex situations are much more team based. I would also add that one does not want only team level bonuses (and ignore individual level bonuses) because if everybody tries to be a steward and forgets that they are individually accountable, then you ended up with free ridership problems.

Q: Everybody talks about the new normal – it sounds like a moving goal post. Some may find and feel that this is quite unattainable. What's your take in painting and articulating the parameters more clearly, moving more towards machine and towards ecology? This is so that people become more comfortable thinking of the new normal as something more fluid.

A: I don't like the term 'new normal' to be honest because it suggests that we move from one stable equilibrium to another stable equilibrium. I personally think that that is not the way we are going to go. Perhaps this is the job hazard of doing a lot of planning in my career. But I actually think that the better phrase here is the 'never normal'.

Someone else came up with the 'next normal' to suggest that there is one normal after another and we just have to get used to the fact that we are in a series of normals. This is better than the 'new normal' but I think that is still problematic because it assumes that there is kind of a step function in normality, and you move from one thing to another.

My personal view is that we are already in a 'never normal' – that the world is much too unstable, partly because of macro forces like climate change but also because of other political and social forces that are fragmenting societies quite significantly, things like identity politics. When you put those together, what you end up with is situations where you know the trends just simply are not linear and so I think the idea of 'any' normal is not actually that useful.

Whereas in a 'never normal', what we have to do is plan for resiliency, we have to make sure that we set in place enough optionality to adjust to new situations. We have to make sure that we are able to adapt and keep learning so that as the 'never normal' evolves, we are also evolving, even if we can't keep pace with it, hopefully we can at least be a couple of steps behind and not too far. It is very important that the 'never normal' becomes a new way of thinking about the situations that we are in.

Q: Do you think that we are unable to comprehend this 'never normal' because of the way the paradigm that we were exposed to – as a society, as a people?

A: I think it's quite normal in human nature to crave a certain amount of stability. That doesn't make us bad people, it makes us human. We tend to like structures that are stable, that have clear outcomes. There is a kind of effort–output ratio that vaguely makes sense. There is a proportionally in that. It goes back to the idea that there is a linearity in the world that if that X happens, Y must happen as well; and there is a reasonable process that connects them. But actually the world hasn't always been linear. In fact there has always been logarithms and exponents out there where the world functions in very different ways; and relationship don't work in these neat linear fashion.

Procedures are there precisely so that when they are exceptions, we can adjust to those exceptions rather than have to think on the spot and create everything from scratch. But I do think that we need to get used to the fact that there is an unordered space out there as well – a space where the cause-and-effect relationships are not obvious. They might be there, but they are not obvious and we need to go hunt them down. Even when we find them, we might find that they are characterised by simple but non-linear rules rather than a simple linearity of functions. The more we can get to that actually, the more we realise that a truly healthy organisation is one that toggles between the stability of the normal and the instability of the 'never normal', and tries to work out a balance between them.

Q: Do you think the use of some metaphors will evolve dramatically with time and global developments? For example 'viral' is usually seen as a negative association with the spread of viruses; but in the Internet space, viral can mean a rapid perpetuation of both good and bad information.

A: I agree metaphors will evolve with time. As more things enter our 'normal' vocabulary, the more we will be able to have an expansive vision I think for what exactly those different metaphors can do. Viral is a great example but actually all metaphors will have positive and negative aspects to them if we can think about them in a deep enough way.

There is a negative side to using metaphors – there definitely is. Because all metaphors illuminate certain things: the machine metaphor illuminates certain established cause-and-effect relationships but it obscures the human aspect. The community metaphor might over emphasise the human relationships and ignore the fact that there are actually some stable rules and norms that govern the interaction that people can have. There are always things that metaphor lights up and things that they darken. We need to be very discerning about what exactly those metaphors are like.

Q: What has been the greatest challenge in coping with the change mindset? What's your take on how Singaporeans or the global community have adapted to this change?

A:Change is never comfortable. Change always involves friction and transformation from us – that means abandoning what is familiar and comfortable. Dealing with change takes a huge amount of time, bandwidth and energy. That is why we often avoid these issues if we can help it. But when we do it, we also need to find ways to create opportunities for self-care because if we just try and do all the work, both old and new, we are depleting ourselves quite significantly. We need to get kinder so that we give ourselves opportunities to rest, de-prioritise certain areas of work if necessary as well as give ourselves the capacity to make the transformations again.

Q: Is there a question that should be asked but was not?

A: I would have loved to hear a question about our own mental and overall personal wellness and welfare. What I am asking for in this presentation is very demanding. I am asking for people to be able to toggle between ways of being that are not easy to do. I do think that it is important to remember that we need to most fundamentally take care of ourselves. This goes back to the metaphor that we have – if we see ourselves as machines or a cog in a machine, then it doesn't need much maintenance. But when you remember that you're a person among persons, and that we are all filled with not just physical needs but with emotional and psychological needs as well – I think that the space for mental health becomes so much more important that it might have been before.

The idea of compassion has to start with ourselves. We don't want to just exert control over others, because they are not just beings to be controlled, they are beings who are autonomous and have agency. We must realise that the compassion will and should start with ourselves, because once we do that, then we are able to understand the complexity and the range and depth of this other human being that we are dealing with.

Q: Any famous last words for us?

A: Know your own metaphors and measure the things based on those metaphors.

Q: At this point in the game where the "COVID fatigue" is too real, can metaphors inspire hope in the population? In my opinion, "New", "Next" and "Never" all seem to push us towards acceptance of the status quo (thought "next" has a sense of progression). I wonder if there is potential for these metaphors to give us the strength to look to a new (hopefully better) future.

A: At first glance, the idea of "Never Normal" can seem like an exhausting prospect: in a world that is never stable, we risk running on an endless treadmill, forever playing catch-up and being reactive to events around us. This is why self-care and taking care of mental wellness (for both ourselves as well as others) are so critical. If we can do that, we can hopefully also find the opportunities in the Never Normal – a world that is dynamic, agile and where there are endless opportunities to be seized, if we have the skills, experience, knowledge and energy to do so.

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