

## **Making Strategy Speak: How Figurative Language Can Help Business Leaders Build Sustainable Competitive Advantage**

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# Making Strategy Speak: How Figurative Language Can Help Business Leaders Build Sustainable Competitive Advantage

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*Philip H. Coombes presents a five-step process for turning figurative language - metaphors, similes, and metonymies - into strategy. When used thoughtfully, figurative language helps leaders to clarify their choices, mobilize their teams, and sustain their competitive advantage.*

“A good business is like a strong castle with a deep moat around it. I want sharks in the moat. I want it untouchable.”  
—Warren Buffett

**B**uffett’s castle simile, with its metaphoric moat, illustrates every company’s need for a strong, sustainable competitive advantage.<sup>1</sup> The word *metaphor* is derived from the Greek *metapherein* meaning to transfer. A metaphor transfers meaning from one thing

to another. Although Ortony once described metaphors as “deviant and parasitic,” most management experts today recognize them as central to strategic thinking.<sup>2</sup> Leading academic journals have published an increasing flow of research about the use of metaphor.<sup>3</sup>

In her often-cited paper, “Why Business Models Matter,” Joan Magretta used the metaphor that business models are *stories* about how companies work.<sup>4</sup> Michael E. Porter, likewise coined the metaphor *value chain* to describe all the activities that contribute to a company delivering a product or service.<sup>5</sup> The concept helped leaders to analyze their company’s cost structure and find ways to create more value.<sup>6</sup> Gary Hamel frequently uses metaphors in his writing. In his seminal paper with C. K. Prahalad on competence-based competition, he used the metaphor of *core competencies* to describe how a company can build an unassailable competitive advantage.<sup>7</sup> His narrative lens is both descriptive and strategic.

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## Language is not merely a means of transmitting ideas, it is a medium of creation.

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Indeed, communication is never neutral, whether leaders deliberately plan a strategy or draw one from the company’s interactions. This interplay between conception and communication challenges the traditional linear model for developing strategy. Here, strategy often emerges from patterns of action rather than through deliberate planning.<sup>8</sup> In this context, language is not merely a means of transmitting ideas, it is a medium of creation. Figurative language helps leaders to articulate ambiguity, provoke dialogue, and build meaning. In top-down models, in which leaders first formulate a strategy and then describe it, they may still use figurative language, but more as a narrative device to align workers.

To refine their strategies, leaders spend long hours analyzing markets, designing operating models, and

aligning their teams. Yet too often, they overlook one of the most powerful tools at their disposal: figurative language. Metaphors, similes, and metonymies can shape how organizations, and the people who comprise them, think, act, and compete. These aren’t just poetic flourishes; they are cognitive tools that help leaders to build sustainable competitive advantage.<sup>9</sup> Leaders will find figurative language most useful when they are collaborating on strategy or need to evoke emotion and imagination. They can use simile to explain an unfamiliar concept by comparing it to a familiar one, or just to discuss, advocate, or expand upon an idea. Such reasoning is widely used to formulate, implement, and evaluate strategy.<sup>10</sup> This approach helps us to identify the causal relationships that outline the specific actions that will lead to a desired outcome. With those relationships in mind, leaders are better able to allocate resources, define strategic priorities, and predict performance.

In the early stages of forming a strategy, figurative language, and especially metaphor and simile, can complement logical planning to help leaders define problems more clearly.<sup>11</sup> For example, “Our strategy is a bridge to the future - like the Golden Gate Bridge, it connects two worlds.” The metaphor of a bridge to the future works with the simile of the Golden Gate making both images more powerful. Knowing when to use these tools, and in what combinations, is a critical skill for leaders.

### Why Metaphors Matter

*Metaphor* is the use of a word with one meaning to imply meaning about something else, e.g. *drowning in debt*. Metaphors are cognitive tools that can shape how people interpret complex environments and behave within them. By mapping one experience onto another, metaphors solidify the abstract, make the unfamiliar familiar, and bring order to the chaotic.

Strategically, they both describe and build reality. Consider the metaphor that describes the organization as a *machine*. This framing, common in industrial-era management, emphasizes efficiency, standardization, and control. It describes each employee as a cog, each process as a gear, and success as a product of smooth mechanical operation. It is a very useful metaphor in stable, predictable circumstances. In a dynamic or creative setting, however, it can be limiting. When we instead describe the organization as an *ecosystem*, the emphasis changes. Ecosystems are interdependent, adaptive, and resilient. Employees are no longer parts of a machine. Instead, we view machines, processes, and companies as organisms in a living system. The metaphor invites leaders to consider diversity, feedback loops, and emergent behavior. It encourages them to attune their strategic thinking to complexity and change.

Metaphors like this one guide our attention, shaping what we consider relevant, what we ignore, and what we see as viable solutions to problems. Leaders who see their market as a *battlefield*, for example, will prioritize competitive positioning, defense, and aggressive tactics. Metaphors also influence organizational identity. When leaders consistently describe their company as a *platform*, they shape how employees, partners, and customers understand the company’s purpose. The metaphor is shorthand for the company’s strategic intent, cultural values, and business model. And metaphors are useful in managing change, as leaders reach for new images to communicate a shift in direction. A leader moving her company from hierarchical control to agile responsiveness might describe it as a *jazz ensemble* rather than a *symphony orchestra*, indicating a change in mindset as well as structure while encouraging improvisation, listening, and distributed leadership. Metaphors are not

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neutral; they rely on implicit assumptions and normative judgments. A *war* implies winners and losers, zero-sum logic, and acceptable collateral damage. A *journey*, on the other hand, evokes progress, learning, and shared experience. So, leaders should choose their metaphors with care. In the face of contested meanings and an uncertain future, metaphors can be powerful tools.

### Similes and Strategic Flexibility

Similes refer directly to a likeness between unlike things – *eyes like saucers*. They state explicitly that one thing is like another, encouraging cognitive flexibility by inviting comparison without insisting upon a fixed interpretation. This subtle difference from metaphors makes similes particularly useful to leaders facing high ambiguity, ongoing experimentation, or a still emerging strategic direction. In early-stage ventures, for example, leaders must often make complex decisions with limited data. Using a simile points their teams in a general direction while allowing them to explore a range of parallel concepts. Saying *we're launching this product like a sailboat* encourages employees to pay attention to timing, conditions, and course but does not imply that the business as a whole is a sailboat; it's a temporary lens, not a permanent identity. Similarly, when a leader says, *competing in this market is like a chess game*, they're emphasizing the importance of foresight, positional advantage, and anticipating rivals' moves. The simile invites strategic depth while leaving room for the situation to change, say if the leader wants to approach the same market as *like a poker game*, in which bluffing and probability play a larger role. Similes are also powerful communication tools for teams, helping workers from different functional groups to understand a shared challenge, even though their technical vocabularies differ. A product manager might say, *we need to grow this team like a*

*garden, nurturing a variety of talents, pruning our processes, and respecting seasonal rhythms*. To her team, this framing would make abstract organizational dynamics seem tangible, relatable, and actionable. Indeed, similes make excellent bridges between disciplines. A finance executive might describe allocating capital as *like painting*, invoking artistic judgment and balance. A supply chain executive might say, *logistics are like a river system*, highlighting flow, tributaries, and narrows. These comparisons encourage people to think in new ways, inspiring insights that traditional strategic language would not. Because similes are provisional, they also encourage reflection. The leader who introduced the sailing metaphor could go on to ask: *What kind of vessel is our product? What kind of crew do we need?* These questions would encourage team members to learn from the situation and challenge their own assumptions. While metaphors often become embedded in an organization's identity, similes are open-ended, exerting powerful influence in dynamic environments in which agility and curiosity are strategic assets. They allow leaders to think out loud, test ideas, and invite dialogue. Rather than declaring what the business is, they explore what it might be like. When strategic clarity must coexist with flexibility, similes are essential.

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The language is effective because it distils a broader situation into a brief phrase that prompts immediate action.

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### Metonymy: Focusing Attention

Metonymy is the use of a related object or concept to refer to the thing itself, for example the use of *the crown* to refer to a monarch or

government or *Hollywood* to refer to the film industry. (For our purposes, it serves the same function as *synecdoche*, in which a part of something is used in lieu of the whole – *wheels* to mean car – so I will hereafter use metonymy to refer to both.) Metonymy can be a powerful director of attention. Leaders can use this device to condense complexity, highlight areas of leverage, and concisely describe strategic priorities. When someone says, *Wall Street is watching*, they are not referring to an unusually alert span of asphalt, but to the collective attention of investors and analysts. When a manager says, *the front line is frustrated*, they are using the feelings of a few employees to represent broader operational challenges. The language is effective because it distils a broader situation into a brief phrase that prompts immediate action. Metonymies can help an organization's workers to stay aligned. By invoking a stakeholder group, a geographic region, or a symbolic entity, leaders can quickly orient their teams toward what matters most. They may say *the top brass wants clarity* in calling for a review of reporting structures or *HQ is pushing for speed* to urge faster decisions. This shorthand creates cognitive anchors that help workers to understand the leader's strategic intent without a full briefing. Metonymy is also a means of telling a story. Leaders often use metonymic references to dramatize tension or urgency. *The factory has spoken* may indicate workers' resistance to a new process. *Main street responded* can describe a shift in customer sentiment. These expressions lend narrative texture to abstract dynamics, making them more tangible and emotionally resonant. But precisely because metonymy is used to simplify, it can also distort. Referring to *Wall Street* as a single entity may flatten the diversity of investors' perspectives. Invoking *the front line*

**Table 1: The Metaphors, Similes, and Metonymies of Blue-Chip Companies**

| Company   | Metaphor                            | Description  | Simile                                     | Description  | Metonym         | Description   |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|-----------------|---|
| Amazon    | Flywheel                            | A reinforcing loop of customer experience, traffic, sellers, and selection that builds momentum over time.                           | Like a personal concierge who never sleeps | Constant customer service, logistical precision, and anticipatory convenience. | Prime           | The company's customer loyalty system.                |
| Apple     | Walled Garden                       | A tightly integrated system that prioritizes control, privacy, and a seamless experience while discouraging customers from straying. | Like a designer boutique for technology    | Curated aesthetics, premium feel, and brand intimacy.                          | iPhone          | A shorthand for brand identity and cultural ubiquity. |
| Microsoft | Growth Mindset                      | Borrowed from Carol Dweck's psychology research to describe a culture of learning and resilience. <sup>12</sup>                      | Like the operating system of modern work   | Essential to productivity, collaboration, and enterprise infrastructure.       | Windows         | Represents platform dominance.                        |
| Tesla     | The Machine That Builds the Machine | Describes the automated factory, not the cars, as the true product innovation.   | Like a rocket on wheels                    | High-performance innovation, futurism, and engineering audacity.               | The Gigafactory | Represents manufacturing innovation.                  |

may cause workers and leaders to overlook variations in role, region, or team. Overreliance on metonymy can thus cause strategic blind spots in which nuance is lost and assumptions are unchallenged.

Leaders should treat metonymy as a lens, not a substitute for more detailed information. It should prompt, not dull, inquiry. When someone says, *the customer is confused*, it should prompt questions: Who, exactly, is confused? About what? In which situations? Leaders should use metonymy to open the door to deeper understanding, not to shut down conversations. To this end, metonyms are most powerful when they are paired with data and dialogue. A reference to *getting more eyes* becomes meaningful when it is supported by frontline data about who is seeing what. A mention of *our optics* gains strategic power from specific customer perception metrics. Used thoughtfully, metonymy can help leaders to manage people's attention, draw their focus, speed communication, and reinforce strategy.

### Metaphors, Similes, and Metonymies in Action

The leaders of most blue-chip companies, including Amazon, Apple,

Microsoft, and Tesla, have used figurative language to encapsulate their strategic philosophies, cultural identities, or innovative approaches (see table 1).

The leaders of these companies use metaphors as strategic tools. When Jim Collins introduced the *flywheel* at Amazon, he was describing a self-reinforcing cycle in which improvements in the customer's experience drive traffic, attract third-party sellers, expand selection, and fuel further improvements.<sup>13</sup> Apple's *walled garden* evokes sanctuary, containment, and exclusivity, while Tesla's *machine that builds the machine* shifts focus from the product to the factory.<sup>14</sup> These leaders have also used similes to make the unfamiliar feel familiar. *Like a personal concierge who never sleeps* evokes Amazon's advantage in logistics, personalization, and ubiquity. Meanwhile, Microsoft's *like the operating system of modern work* suggests that Microsoft's tools are foundational, quietly powering collaboration, decision-making, and digital transformation around the world.<sup>15</sup> The metonymies of these companies stand in for entire strategic systems or capabilities. *Prime* represents speed, convenience, and loyalty. *Windows* often refers to

Microsoft itself, reflecting platform dominance, ecosystem control, and familiarity to users.

**Turning figurative language into a strategic asset requires more than clever phrasing; it demands a disciplined approach.**

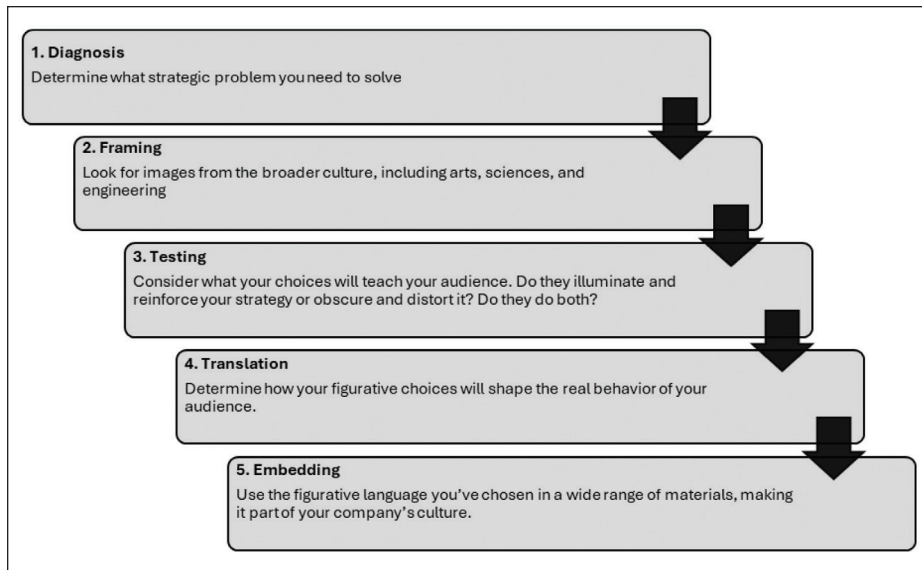
### A Five-Step Process for Using Figurative Language Strategically

Turning figurative language into a strategic asset requires more than clever phrasing; it demands a disciplined approach. I have created a five-step process that guides leaders through designing and using figurative language to make their strategy and execution more coherent (see figure 1).

#### Diagnosis

To compose effective figurative language, begin by precisely diagnosing the strategic problem you need to solve, whether it be a market disruption, an internal misalignment, or a shift in competitive dynamics. Decide how you want to cognitively or emotionally reframe the

Figure 1. Using Figurative Language Strategically



issue. You might use a metaphor to reimagine the problem, transforming a stagnant business into a *sleeping giant* or a fragmented team into a *broken compass*. Or perhaps you need a simile to make an abstract tension more tangible, describing an outdated system as *like a maze with no exit*. A metonymy could anchor the entirety of the challenge to a single symbol, making a struggling product line *the rusting gear* or a powerful competitor *the blue logo*. Without a clear purpose, your figurative language is more likely to be decorative than directive.

### Framing

Once you have defined the challenge, look for a figurative frame drawn from the broader culture. The most resonant metaphors, like an *orchestra*, *ecosystem*, or *flywheel*, evoke the arts, sciences, or engineering. A simile that draws on everyday experiences will help people to connect. You might, for example, describe a new service model as *like concierge medicine for logistics*. Or you could use a metonymy to connect a simple cue with a broader strategic concept. *The dashboard* could represent

data-driven decision-making, or *the mighty machine* could evoke the scale, automation, and innovation of modern production. Build a portfolio of figurative options that enlighten and resonate with a diverse audience.

### Testing

Not all figurative language is created equal. Be ready to test each candidate rigorously to ensure that it is strategically coherent and communicates powerfully. An otherwise inspiring metaphor may also mislead. *War room* could intentionally express urgency while unintentionally promoting zero-sum thinking. A simile that describes a change as *like turning an oil tanker* can cause its audience to understand the scale of the project but also despair of achieving agility. And a metonymy that refers to your product as *the red can* could reinforce brand identity but limit innovation. It is essential to understand how each frame illuminates your thinking and also where it breaks down. By selecting, refining, and sometimes combining figurative frames, you can balance emotional resonance with cognitive precision.

### Translation

Figurative language becomes strategically powerful when it influences people's behavior. Once you have selected a frame, translate it into simple, actionable principles that inform your decisions and guide your employees. The *flywheel* metaphor might inspire rules about compounding effort and sustaining momentum. Calling upon employees to work together *like a Swiss watch* urges them to aim for precision, integration, and timing. Evoking *Prime* could draw focus to seamless customer service and the power of subscriptions. These cognitive shortcuts help people to a shared understanding of complexity and strategic intent.

### Embedding

To have an enduring effect, figurative language must be *woven into the fabric* of organizational life. *Embed* your metaphors into strategic, planning, and visual materials. *Plant* similes in executive communication, *onboarding* materials, and brand messaging. And *lace dashboards*, metrics, and cultural materials with metonymies. Your growth strategy could be a *garden*, your leadership style, *like a jazz ensemble*, and your company's heritage and consistency a call to *rally* around *the red can*. To avoid cognitive rigidity, juxtapose unlike concepts, pairing *engine* with *ecosystem*, or *rocket* with *runway*, but *steer clear* of incompatibilities that are more confusing than evocative.

### Conclusions

By using these five steps, you can move your figurative language from messaging to method, ensuring that it is not just clever, but clear, coherent, and constructive. As you build a rigorous and resonant strategy, this process will help you make language work harder and smarter. The best strategies are indeed stories, told so clearly that people want to act them out. ■

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## Author Bio



**Philip Coombes** is a senior lecturer in marketing at Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University. His research is focused on business-to-business marketing, strategic management, and the concept of business models. He is interested in understanding better the mechanisms through which CEOs in business-to-business organizations operationalize business models to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. philip.coombes@shu.ac.uk

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## Endnotes

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