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MAKING STRATEGY SPEAK: HOW SENIOR LEADERS CAN USE METAPHORS, SIMILES, AND METONYMIES TO GAIN SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

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Executive Summary

Warren Buffett - chairman and former CEO of the conglomerate Berkshire Hathaway - famously used the 'moat' metaphor to articulate his company's sustainable competitive advantage. In today's corporate environments, figurative language - metaphors, similes, and metonymies - is more than stylistic flair; it's a strategic tool for senior leaders to navigate complexity and uncertainty. This article explores how such language shapes not only how strategy is communicated, but how it is conceived, aligned, and executed. Metaphors frame strategic identity, similes enable cognitive flexibility, and metonymies focus attention on what matters most. Drawing on examples from five blue-chip companies, the article presents a five-step process for turning figurative language into strategy-as-language. When used rigorously, figurative language clarifies choices, mobilizes teams, and sustains competitive advantage. In a world where strategy must resonate as well as perform, the metaphors, similes, and metonymies senior leaders choose - and how they use them, can help shape the future of their organizations' success.

Introductory Note

This article presents a novel five-step process for turning figurative language - metaphors, similes, and metonymies - into strategy-as-language. When used rigorously, figurative language clarifies choices, mobilizes teams, and sustains 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).

Buffett's castle-and-moat metaphor stresses the need for a company with a strong sustainable competitive advantage¹. The word 'metaphor' is derived from the Greek 'metapherein' where meaning is transferred, from one concept to another. In the past,

the use of metaphor was widely believed to be “deviant and parasitic”². Today, metaphor is recognized as central to strategic thinking in business with an increasing flow of metaphor-oriented research being published in leading academic journals³. For instance, in her highly cited paper, *Why Business Models Matter*, Joan Magretta famously used a metaphor to argue that business models – in the context of strategy - are, at heart, ‘stories’ that explain how enterprises work⁴. Michael E. Porter famously uses the metaphor of ‘force’ with his Five Forces model to describe the competitive landscape of an industry⁵. Porter also used the metaphor of a ‘value chain’ to represent the different activities a company performs to deliver a product or service. This framework helps analyze a company’s cost structure and identify opportunities for creating more value. He then moved on to use the ‘diamond’ metaphor to explain the competitive advantage of nations. It uses the analogy of a diamond to represent the key factors that contribute to a nation’s competitive edge in specific industries⁶. Gary Hamel frequently uses metaphors in his writing. One prominent example is his seminal paper on competence-based competition where, with C. K. Prahalad, he used the metaphor of a company’s ‘core competencies’ for building an unassailable competitive advantage⁷. That narrative lens is not just descriptive; it is strategic. Whether strategy emerges through company interaction or is deliberately planned and then announced, *communication* is never neutral. This interplay between conception and communication challenges the traditional linear model of strategy development. Strategy often emerges from patterns of action rather than deliberate planning⁸. In such contexts, language is not merely a vehicle for transmission - it is a medium of creation. Figurative language enables senior leaders to articulate ambiguity, provoke dialogue, and co-construct meaning in real time. By contrast, in top-down models where strategy is formulated first and communicated later, figurative language still plays a role, but more as a narrative device to mobilize alignment. Senior leaders spend long hours refining their strategies - analyzing markets, designing operating models, and aligning teams. But too often, they overlook one of the most powerful tools at their disposal: language. Not just any language. Figurative language - metaphors, similes, and metonymies - can shape how organizations think, act, and compete. These aren’t just poetic embellishment for presentations, they’re cognitive tools that help senior leaders reframe uncertainty, mobilize alignment, and build lasting sustainable competitive advantage⁹. Figurative language is most prevalent

when strategy is being constructed collaboratively or when senior leaders need to mobilize emotion and imagination. However, in addition to metaphors, similes, and metonymies, there are alternative modes of communication that senior leaders can use to convey meaning, emotion, or emphasis, for instance with the use of analogy. Analogy is both a cognitive and rhetorical device that explains an unfamiliar concept by comparing it to a familiar one, or as a tool used for explanation, discussion, and persuasion, and analogical reasoning is widely used in strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation¹⁰. This approach aligns with strategy: identifying causal relationships that explain how specific actions lead to desired outcomes. This logic is crucial for resource allocation, strategic prioritization, and performance prediction. However, in the early stages of strategy formulation, especially when problems are novel or ill-defined, causal logic may be underdeveloped. Here, figurative language, especially metaphor and analogy, can play a complementary role¹¹. For example, “Our strategy is a bridge to the future - like the Golden Gate, it connects two worlds.” Here, metaphor - bridge to the future - and analogy - Golden Gate - reinforce each other. Recognizing when to substitute, combine, or sequence these tools is a critical skill for senior leaders.

This article explores how senior leaders can use figurative language as strategy-as-language - not merely to communicate strategy, but to conceive it, align it, and execute it. Metaphors, similes, and metonymies give senior leaders a succinct and striking way to make complex strategy understandable and memorable. Done well, they generate new strategic insights, sharpen choices, and move organizations in unison. Done poorly, they blur priorities, foster misalignment, and stall execution. While figurative language offers emotional resonance and cognitive framing, it is not the only communicative mode available to senior leaders. Visual tools such as infographics, dashboards, and scenario maps offer alternatives. Procedural language emphasizes accountability and execution, yet these often lack the imaginative spark and symbolic power that figurative language provides. Understanding when and why figurative language outperforms - or underperforms - these alternatives is essential for senior leaders seeking to formulate their strategies.

Why Metaphors Matter

Metaphors are more than just persuasive language – we argue they are cognitive tools that can shape how senior leaders perceive, interpret, and act within complex environments. By mapping one domain of experience onto another, metaphors help make the abstract concrete, the unfamiliar familiar, and the chaotic coherent. In strategic contexts, they do not merely describe reality; they construct it. Consider the metaphor of ‘the organization as a machine.’ This framing, common in industrial-era management thinking, emphasizes efficiency, standardization, and control. It suggests that each employee is a cog, each process a gear, and success a function of smooth mechanical operation. While this metaphor may be useful in stable, predictable environments, it can become limiting in dynamic or creative settings. Contrast this with ‘the organization as an ecosystem.’ Here, the emphasis shifts to interdependence, adaptation, and resilience. Employees are no longer parts of a machine but organisms within a living system. This metaphor invites senior leaders to consider diversity, feedback loops, and emergent behavior. It encourages a different kind of strategic thinking - one that is more attuned to complexity and change. Metaphors matter because they guide attention. They determine what is seen as relevant, what is ignored, and what kinds of solutions are considered viable. A company that sees its market as a battlefield will prioritize competitive positioning, defensive competitive advantage, and aggressive tactics. These are not just linguistic choices; they are strategic orientations. Moreover, metaphors influence organizational identity. When senior leaders consistently describe their company as a ‘platform,’ they are not just referring to technical architecture - they are shaping how employees, partners, and customers understand the company’s role in the broader ecosystem. The metaphor becomes a shorthand for strategic intent, cultural values, and business model logic. Metaphors also play a critical role in change management. During periods of transformation, senior leaders often reach for new metaphors to signal a shift in direction. A company moving from hierarchical control to agile responsiveness might describe itself as ‘a jazz ensemble’ rather than ‘a symphony orchestra.’ This subtle shift communicates not just a change in structure, but a change in mindset - one that values improvisation, listening, and distributed leadership. Importantly, metaphors are not neutral. They carry implicit assumptions and normative judgments. A metaphor like ‘war’ implies winners and losers, zero-sum logic, and the legitimacy of collateral damage. A metaphor like ‘journey’ implies progress, learning, and

shared experience. Senior leaders must therefore choose their metaphors with care, recognizing that they do more than explain - they persuade, motivate, and mobilize. In sum, metaphors matter because they shape strategic cognition, organizational culture, and leadership practice. They are not just ways of talking about strategy - they are ways of thinking strategically - and in a world where meaning is contested and futures are uncertain, the metaphors we choose may be among our most powerful tools.

Similes and Strategic Flexibility

While metaphors often serve as foundational frames for strategic identity - defining how a company sees itself and competes - similes offer a different kind of value: cognitive flexibility. Overshadowed by metaphors, a simile, by explicitly stating that one thing is 'like' another, invites comparison without committing to a fixed interpretation. This subtle linguistic shift makes similes particularly useful in contexts where ambiguity is high, experimentation is ongoing, or strategic direction is still emerging. In early-stage ventures, for example, senior leaders frequently face complex decisions with limited data. Rather than prematurely locking into a metaphor that might constrain thinking, similes allow teams to explore multiple analogies in parallel. Saying 'launching this product is like sailing' encourages attention to timing, wind conditions, and course correction - without implying that the business itself is a sailboat. It's a temporary lens, not a permanent identity. Similarly, when a senior leader says, 'competing in this market is like playing chess,' they're signaling the need for foresight, positional advantage, and anticipation of rival moves. The simile invites strategic depth, but it also leaves room for alternative frames - perhaps later reframing the same market as a poker game, where bluffing and probability play a larger role. Similes are also powerful tools for team communication. They can help cross-functional groups align around a shared understanding of a challenge, even when their technical vocabularies differ. For instance, a product manager might say, scaling this team is like gardening - we need to nurture talent, prune processes, and respect seasonal rhythms.' This framing makes abstract organizational dynamics tangible, relatable, and actionable. Importantly, similes can serve as bridges between disciplines. A finance executive might describe capital allocation as 'like portfolio painting,' invoking artistic judgment and balance. A supply chain executive might say, 'our logistics are like a river system,' highlighting flow,

tributaries, and bottlenecks. These comparisons open new ways of thinking, often surfacing insights that wouldn't emerge from traditional strategic language alone. Because similes are provisional by nature, they also encourage reflection. Senior leaders can ask, 'If this situation is like sailing, what kind of vessel are we? What kind of crew do we need?' These questions foster adaptive learning and invite teams to challenge assumptions. Unlike metaphors, which often become embedded in organizational identity, similes remain open-ended - making them ideal for dynamic environments where agility and curiosity are strategic assets. In sum, similes offer senior leaders a way to think out loud, test ideas, and invite dialogue. They are not about declaring what the business is, but about exploring what it might be like, and in a world where strategic clarity must coexist with strategic flexibility, that kind of language is not just useful - it's essential.

Metonymy: Focusing Attention

Metonymy is a form of figurative language that substitutes a related concept or part for the whole and can be a powerful tool for directing that attention. It allows senior leaders to compress complexity, highlight leverage points, and communicate strategic priorities with speed and clarity. Metonymy works by association. When a senior leader says, 'Wall Street is watching,' they are not referring to a physical location but to the collective expectations of investors and analysts. When a middle manager says, 'the front line is frustrated,' they are invoking the experiences of customer-facing employees as a proxy for broader operational challenges. These expressions are not literal, but they are effective. They distil diffuse realities into focused signals that prompt action. Strategically, metonymy can help organizations stay aligned. By invoking a stakeholder group, a geographic region, or a symbolic entity, senior leaders can quickly orient teams around what matters most. 'The board wants clarity' may trigger a review of reporting structures. 'HQ is pushing for speed' may accelerate decision cycles. These shorthand cues serve as cognitive anchors, helping teams interpret strategic intent without needing a full briefing. Metonymy also plays a role in storytelling. When senior leaders narrate change, they often use metonymic references to dramatize tension or urgency. 'The factory spoke' may symbolize resistance to a new process. 'The market responded' may stand in for a shift in customer sentiment. These expressions lend narrative texture to

strategy, making abstract dynamics more tangible and emotionally resonant. However, metonymy is not without risk. Because it simplifies, it can also distort. Referring to ‘Wall Street’ may flatten the diversity of investor perspectives. Invoking ‘the front line’ may overlook variations across roles, regions, or teams. Overreliance on metonymy can lead to strategic blind spots, where nuance is lost and assumptions go unchallenged. To use metonymy effectively, senior leaders should treat it as a lens, not a substitute. It should prompt inquiry, not replace it. When someone says, ‘the customer is confused,’ the next question should be, which customer?’. ‘About what?’ ‘In what context?’ Metonymy should open the door to deeper understanding, not close it. In practice, metonyms are most powerful when paired with data and dialogue. A reference to ‘the field’ becomes meaningful when supported by frontline feedback. A mention of ‘the brand’ gains strategic weight when linked to customer perception metrics. Used thoughtfully, metonymy can sharpen focus, accelerate communication, and reinforce strategic coherence. In sum, metonymy is a tool for strategic attention management. It helps senior leaders signal priorities, mobilize action, and tell compelling stories. But like all figurative language, it must be wielded with care. When used deliberately and interrogated rigorously, metonymy becomes not just a shortcut - but a strategic asset.

To see examples of how metaphors, similes, and metonymies operate in practice, we review next how leading companies have embedded figurative language into their strategic DNA.

Metaphors, Similes, and Metonymies in Action

Table 1 presents a selection of well-known figures of speech adopted by leading blue-chip companies - Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Nike, and Tesla - to encapsulate their strategic philosophies, cultural identities, or innovative approaches. Each company is paired with a metaphor, a simile, and a metonymy that has become emblematic of its internal logic or external messaging.

Table 1: Well-known Metaphors, Similes, and Metonymies from 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'	Relentless customer service, logistical precision, and anticipatory convenience.	'Prime'	Service name as metonym for customer loyalty ecosystem.
Apple	'Walled Garden'	Tightly integrated ecosystem prioritizing control, privacy, and seamless experience.	'Like a designer boutique for technology'	Curated aesthetics, premium feel, and brand intimacy.	'iPhone'	Product name as shorthand for brand identity and cultural ubiquity.
Microsoft	'Growth Mindset'	Borrowed from Carol Dweck's psychology research ¹² , this metaphor shapes its culture of learning and resilience.	'Like the operating system of modern work'	Foundational role in productivity, collaboration, and enterprise infrastructure.	'Windows'	Product metonym for platform dominance.
Nike	'Just Do It'	Action-oriented empowerment, transcending sport into lifestyle.	'Like a heartbeat in motion'	Rhythm, vitality, and emotional drive behind performance.	'The Swoosh'	Logo as metonym for brand ethos and global recognition.
Tesla	'Machine That Builds the Machine'	Elon Musk's metaphor for the automated factory as the true product innovation, not just their electric cars.	'Like a rocket on wheels'	High-performance innovation, futurism, and engineering audacity.	'The Gigafactory'	Facility as metonym for manufacturing innovation.

The use of metaphors reveals how top-tier companies use figurative language not just for branding, but as strategic tools to shape cognition, align teams, and drive innovation. For instance, Amazon's 'flywheel' metaphor - introduced by Jim Collins¹³ - illustrates a self-reinforcing cycle where improvements in customer experience drive traffic, attract third-party sellers, expand selection, and ultimately fuel further growth - creating compounding momentum over time. Apple's 'walled garden' metaphor evokes both sanctuary and exclusivity. A realm where design, privacy, and user experience are tightly controlled. This metaphor doesn't merely describe a technical ecosystem; it conjures a mood of intimacy and aesthetic refinement¹⁴. Microsoft's adoption of the 'growth mindset' metaphor, drawn from psychology, signals a cultural commitment to learning, adaptability, and resilience especially in the wake of its organizational transformation¹⁵. Nike's 'Just Do It' metaphor is deceptively simple - a rallying cry that collapses hesitation into motion. It's not just about sport; it's about identity, agency, and transformation. Tesla's 'machine that builds the machine' metaphor shifts focus from the product (electric vehicles) to the automated factory itself, suggesting that the true innovation lies in manufacturing efficiency and scalability¹⁶. The use of similes helps companies to make the unfamiliar feel familiar. For instance, Amazon's 'like a personal concierge who never sleeps' simile captures the company's relentless customer-centricity and operational scale. It evokes the image of a tireless assistant who anticipates needs, delivers quickly, and simplifies life - reinforcing Amazon's advantage in logistics, personalization, and service ubiquity. Apple's 'like a designer boutique for technology' simile reinforces Apple's strategic positioning not just as a tech company but as a tastemaker - a brand that seduces through elegance. Microsoft's 'like the operating system of modern work' simile positions the company as the invisible infrastructure behind productivity. It suggests that Microsoft's tools are not just software - they're foundational, like an operating system that quietly powers collaboration, decision-making, and digital transformation across industries. Nike's 'like a heartbeat in motion' simile captures this pulse - the rhythm of effort, the emotional pace of striving. Tesla's 'like a rocket on wheels' simile channels the company's fusion of speed, innovation, and futurism. It evokes not just performance, but a sense of technological audacity - reinforcing Tesla's advantage in brand charisma, engineering breakthroughs, and visionary leadership. Finally, the use of metonymies allows companies to use symbols, products, or places to stand in for entire

strategic systems or capabilities. For instance, 'Prime' has become a metonym for Amazon's customer-centric ecosystem. It represents speed, convenience, and loyalty - strategic levers that drive repeat purchases and deepen sustainable competitive advantage through data, logistics, and subscription economics. Apple's 'iPhone' has become a metonym for cultural ubiquity, signaling not just a device but a lifestyle, a status, and a design philosophy. More than a logo, 'Windows' often stands in for Microsoft itself, especially in legacy contexts. As a metonym, it reflects platform dominance, ecosystem control, and user familiarity - strategic assets that have enabled Microsoft to evolve while maintaining relevance. Nike's 'The Swoosh' is pure semiotic power that encapsulates speed, grace, and global recognition. It's not just a logo; it's a symbol of movement, aspiration, and the emotional spark of performance¹⁷. Finally, Tesla's 'Gigafactory' is a metonym for its manufacturing innovation and vertical integration. It shifts focus from the product to the process, signaling that Tesla's sustainable competitive advantage lies not just in electric vehicles but in scalable, efficient production systems.

A Five-Step Process for Strategic Figurative Language

Turning figurative language into a strategic asset requires more than clever phrasing - it demands a disciplined process. We present here a five-step process that offers senior leaders a practical roadmap for designing and deploying figurative language that enhances strategic coherence and execution.

1. Diagnose the Strategic Challenge

Effective figurative language begins with a precise diagnosis of the strategic issue at hand. Whether the challenge involves market disruption, internal misalignment, or a shift in competitive dynamics, senior leaders must first clarify what cognitive or emotional reframing is required. Metaphors can help reimagine the nature of the problem - transforming a stagnant business into a 'sleeping giant' or a fragmented team into a 'broken compass'. Similes offer clarifying comparisons that make abstract tensions more tangible, such as describing a legacy system as 'like a maze with no exit'. Metonymies, meanwhile, can anchor the challenge in a symbol or part that evokes the whole - referring to a struggling product line as 'the rusting gear' or a dominant competitor simply as 'the

blue logo'. Without a crisp diagnosis, figurative language risks becoming decorative rather than directive.

2. Source Cross-Domain Figurative Frames

Once the challenge is defined, senior leaders should seek figurative frames from outside the immediate business context. The most resonant metaphors often come from domains like the arts ('orchestra'), biology ('ecosystem'), or engineering ('flywheel'). Similes can draw on everyday experiences to clarify strategic intent - such as describing a new service model as 'like concierge medicine for logistics'. Metonymies, by contrast, rely on symbolic shorthand: a product name, a location, or a visual cue that stands in for a broader strategic concept. For example, 'the dashboard' might represent data-driven decision-making, while 'the Gigafactory' evokes scale, automation, and innovation. By sourcing widely, leaders build a portfolio of figurative options that provoke insight and resonate across diverse audiences.

3. Pressure-Test for Strategic Fit and Flaws

Not all figurative frames are created equal. Leaders must rigorously test each candidate for strategic coherence and communicative power. A metaphor may inspire but also mislead – 'war room' might energize urgency but unintentionally promote zero-sum thinking. Similes can clarify but also oversimplify; describing a transformation as 'like turning a tanker' may evoke scale but obscure agility. Metonymies, too, carry risk: anchoring strategy in the 'red can' may reinforce brand identity but limit innovation. The key is to understand where each frame illuminates and where it breaks down. Strategic creativity lies in selecting, refining, and sometimes combining frames to balance emotional resonance with cognitive precision.

4. Translate into Strategic Heuristics

Figurative language becomes truly strategic when it guides behavior. Once a frame is selected, leaders should translate it into heuristics simple, actionable principles that inform decisions and align teams. A metaphor like 'flywheel' might yield rules around compounding effort and sustained momentum. A simile such as 'like a Swiss watch' could inspire norms of precision, integration, and timing. A metonym like 'Prime' might

drive focus on seamless customer experience and subscription-based loyalty. These heuristics serve as cognitive shortcuts, helping individuals and teams navigate complexity with shared understanding and strategic intent.

5. Embed in Organizational Rituals and Rhythms

To endure, figurative language must be woven into the fabric of organizational life. This means embedding metaphors in strategic narratives, planning documents, and visual frameworks; reinforcing similes in executive communication, onboarding materials, and brand messaging; and integrating metonymies into dashboards, KPIs, and cultural symbols. A company might visualize its growth strategy as a ‘garden’, describe its leadership style ‘like a jazz ensemble,’ and rally around ‘the red can’ as a symbol of heritage and consistency. Embedding requires repetition, renewal, and sometimes counter-framing - pairing ‘engine’ with ‘ecosystem’, or ‘rocket’ with ‘runway’, to balance emphasis and avoid cognitive rigidity. Figurative language, when embedded well, becomes not just a way of speaking but a way of thinking and acting.

The five-step process is illustrated in Figure 1.

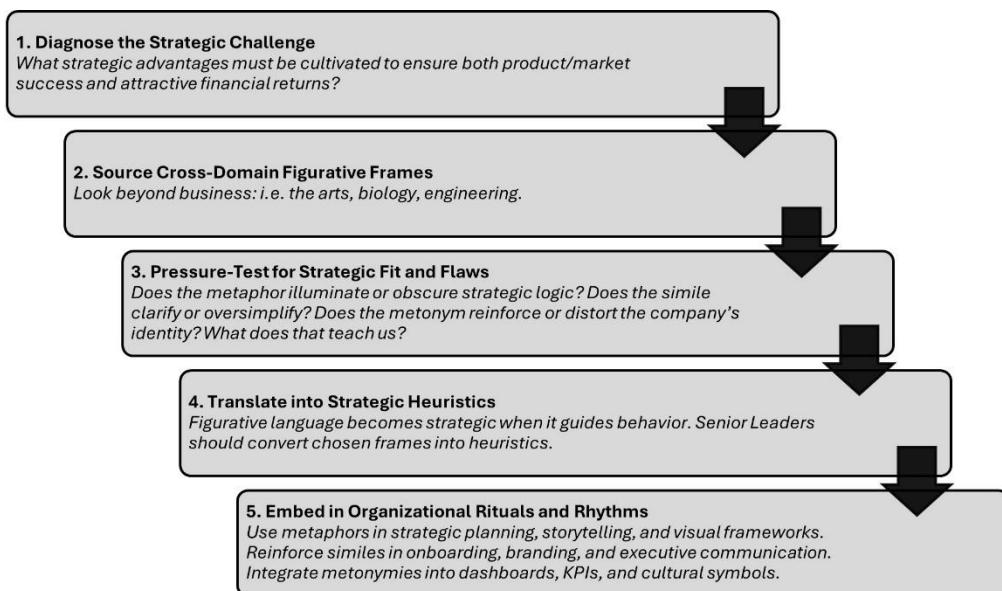


Figure 1: A Five-Step Process for Strategic Figurative Language (Source: Author)

Taken together, these five steps help senior leaders move from metaphor as messaging to metaphor as method. They ensure that figurative language is not just clever - but clarifying, coordinating, and catalytic. In a world where strategy must be both rigorous and resonant, this process offers a way to make language work harder - and smarter - for sustainable competitive advantage.

Conclusions

This article has explored how senior leaders can use figurative language as strategy-as-language - not merely to communicate strategy, but to conceive it, align it, and execute it. Metaphors, similes, and metonymies are not just tools for communication - they're tools for cognition, coordination, and sustainable competitive advantage. They help senior leaders make sense of complexity, align action, and build enduring differentiation. Joan Magretta was right: business models are 'stories'. The best strategies are *told* so clearly that people can see themselves acting them out and the best senior leaders know how to make strategy speak.

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 business models are operationalized by CEOs in business-to-business organizations in pursuit of sustainable competitive advantage. philip.coombes@shu.ac.uk

Endnotes

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