

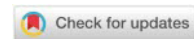
HEALING DISCOURSE IN IT MANAGEMENT: UNVEILING THE POWER OF THE “LEADER IS HEALER” METAPHOR

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Abstract: This paper explores the “Leader is Healer” metaphor in the context of Information Technology (IT) leadership amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Using conceptual metaphor theory as a framework, we investigate how the metaphor of a leader as a healer – viewing the organization as a body, crises as ailments, and leadership as a healing process – can guide IT leaders to foster resilience, well-being, and recovery in their teams. Drawing on examples from the IT industry, we analyze the potential benefits of this metaphor, such as promoting a supportive work environment, enhancing mental health, and facilitating adaptability and growth. We also discuss potential drawbacks, including the risk of oversimplification, boundary violations, overreliance on leaders, and neglect of systemic issues.

The paper suggests that the “Leader is Healer” metaphor offers a compassionate, human-centric lens for understanding and practicing leadership in the challenging landscape of the post-COVID world. Future research could explore the applicability of this metaphor in other industry contexts or compare it with other leadership metaphors.

Keywords: leadership, IT management, conceptual metaphor theory, Leader is Healer metaphor, COVID-19

Field: humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be an inflection point for all sectors of the global economy, with the information technology (IT) industry being no exception. The swift and unprecedented shift towards remote working, the exponential surge in demand for digital solutions, and the profound mental health impact on professionals due to isolation and work-from-home stressors have posed considerable challenges (Bick, Blandin & Mertens, 2020). This has necessitated it leaders to rethink their strategies, ensuring not just the continuity of operations but also the well-being and resilience of their teams amidst uncertainty and disruptions.

In these challenging times, leadership metaphors, as lenses through which we perceive and navigate our realities, can serve as valuable tools for reframing our understanding of the situation and developing apt responses. Grounded in cognitive linguistics, the “Leader is Healer” metaphor offers a particularly relevant perspective for the current context. It enables us to visualize the leader’s role as akin to a healer, tasked with maintaining the health of the organization, or “body”, while addressing issues, or “ailments”, to facilitate recovery and growth.

The present paper aims to explore the application and implications of the “Leader is Haler” metaphor in IT leadership amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to demonstrate how this metaphor can provide a language and framework for understanding, discussing, and implementing leadership strategies that foster resilience, adaptability, and recovery. We intend to analyze the metaphor’s potential benefits and drawbacks and provide real-life examples of its application in navigating the pandemic-related challenges in the IT sector. By doing so, this paper contributes to the broader discourse of healing in language, literature, culture, and translation studies, underscoring the power of metaphors in shaping our responses to crises.

2. METHODOLOGY

The subsequent analysis in this paper is primarily qualitative, reliant on the conceptual exploration of the “Leader is Healer” metaphor within the leadership context in the IT industry. This approach is chosen because it allows for a deep, nuanced understanding of this metaphor’s potential applications and

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implications in managing it teams, particularly amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper relies on a range of literature on leadership and cognitive linguistics. Our interdisciplinary approach allows us to draw insights from various perspectives and apply them to the specific context of IT leadership. This is important because IT leadership has unique aspects that may not be fully captured by general leadership theories or models.

The “Leader is Healer” metaphor is broken down into various components, such as diagnosing issues, prescribing treatment, and facilitating recovery. Each component is discussed in separate sections, exploring their meanings, relevance, and potential applications in the IT leadership context. The use of the metaphor is further illustrated with examples, drawing from both theoretical conceptualizations and real-world situations, to provide a comprehensive understanding of how it leaders might employ this metaphor in practice.

The analysis aims to be critical and reflexive, acknowledging the metaphor’s potential benefits and limitations. This is guided by the understanding that metaphors, while powerful tools for sense-making and communication, are interpretative frames that should not be taken as literal or absolute truths (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Therefore, this paper also discusses the potential pitfalls and oversimplifications that may arise from an uncritical application of the “Leader is Healer” metaphor.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE BLEND OF IT LEADERSHIP, COVID-19 AND CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered seismic shifts in the IT landscape, introducing a raft of challenges while also accelerating the pace of certain transformative trends. As Muhić (2011) points out, (English) language is characterized as being a vehicle of the conceptual domain underpinning the tenor of intuitive use.

The first major shift has been the transition to remote work. To curb the spread of the virus, organizations worldwide have had to adopt work-from-home protocols, a move that has significantly altered the traditional operational mechanics within it firms. This sudden shift has compelled IT managers to devise strategies for managing remote teams, ensuring effective communication, maintaining productivity levels, and fostering a sense of unity and cohesion in a dispersed workforce.

Secondly, the pandemic has brought an unprecedented surge in demand for digital solutions. As businesses across various sectors shifted operations online, there has been an urgent need for robust, secure, and efficient digital infrastructure and services (Soto-Acosta, 2020). IT managers have had to grapple with the dual challenge of scaling up operations to meet this demand while also dealing with resource constraints and remote working conditions.

Finally, the pandemic has cast a spotlight on the mental health of the general population (Xiong, et al., 2020) and IT professionals were no exception. The shift to remote work, coupled with the pressure to deliver in a high-stakes environment amidst personal anxieties and uncertainties, has increased stress levels among professionals. IT leaders, in their role as “healers”, need to acknowledge this impact and adopt measures to ensure the mental well-being of their team members, fostering a culture of empathy, support, and resilience.

The conceptual metaphor theory, introduced in the “Metaphors We Live By” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) posits that metaphors are not merely rhetorical or literary devices, but fundamental modes of thought that shape our perception, understanding, and action in the world. Metaphors map concepts from a source domain (usually concrete or physical) onto a target domain (usually abstract), allowing us to comprehend the latter in terms of the former.

In the context of leadership, metaphors can offer valuable insights into the roles, relationships, and dynamics within a team or an organization. The “Leader is Healer” metaphor stands out for its particular relevance in the post-COVID global situation. Within this framework, the organization is seen as a body, the leader (manager) as a healer, and challenges or crises as ailments. The healer-leader’s role is to maintain the “health” of the organization, diagnose and treat issues, and facilitate recovery and growth.

For instance, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, an IT manager might find their team strained due to the sudden transition to remote work, and increased workload due to the surge in demand for digital solutions. This situation could be metaphorically seen as a “health crisis” within the team. The manager, as a “healer-leader”, would first need to “diagnose” the issues – perhaps communication difficulties in the remote setting, burnout due to overwork, or anxiety due to the overall uncertainty.

They would then “prescribe treatment” – maybe introduce more efficient communication tools, ensure reasonable work distribution and rest periods, or provide resources for mental health support. They could also focus on “prevention” by promoting a supportive and understanding work culture, thus

increasing resilience and reducing the risk of future “health crises” within the team.

Building upon the “Leader is Healer” metaphor, IT leaders navigating the pandemic-infused changes in the professional landscape can find a treasure trove of strategies for fostering a healthier work environment, ensuring mental well-being, and encouraging resilience and adaptability within their teams.

At the heart of the healing process is the establishment of a conducive environment. Similar to a convalescent needing a calm and healthy atmosphere, organizations too require a space that promotes wellness and productivity (Kelly & Snow, 2019). For IT leaders, this could translate into designing and implementing efficient remote working systems, easing the stressors that come with the shift from physical offices to digital workspaces. The metaphor can be extended to cover aspects such as creating “clean air” through clear and effective communication, ensuring “balanced nutrition” with a well-distributed workload, and encouraging “regular exercise” through continual skills development.

Furthermore, the transition to remote work in the wake of the pandemic has brought mental well-being to the forefront of organizational challenges (Giorgi et al., 2020). IT leaders, through the “healer” lens, are equipped to address this by “diagnosing” signs of stress, anxiety, or burnout. This diagnosis can take the form of regular check-ins or surveys to assess the team’s emotional health. The “prescribed treatment” can range from providing counseling services and mental health resources to adopting flexible work schedules that better align with personal responsibilities, thereby reducing the stressors that can lead to burnout.

An integral part of the healing process, as suggested by this metaphor, involves “immune-boosting”, which can be viewed as strengthening the resilience and adaptability of teams. The IT industry, known for its fast-paced and ever-evolving nature, was dramatically accelerated by the pandemic. Healer leaders can “fortify the body’s defenses” by fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. This could involve “immune boosters” such as opportunities for upskilling, platforms for knowledge sharing, and initiatives to promote a growth mindset.

4. BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF THE “LEADER IS HEALER” METAPHOR IN THE POST-COVID IT INDUSTRY HEADING

4.1. BENEFITS

The “Leader is Healer” metaphor can offer a fresh perspective for IT leaders navigating the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the metaphor can guide leaders in nurturing their teams through these difficult times, promoting resilience, recovery, and growth.

The “healer” perspective encourages leaders to consider not just the professional but also the psychological and emotional well-being of their teams. Poor leadership has long been the cause of stress (Seltzer, Numerof & Bass, 1989) and this is especially relevant in the post-COVID context, as IT professionals may grapple with stress, anxiety, or burnout due to the rapid digital transformation and remote work challenges. The metaphor emphasizes that leaders have a role in diagnosing and addressing these issues, ensuring a healthy work environment that supports employees’ overall well-being.

The metaphor can also guide IT leaders in fostering a resilient and adaptable team culture. The idea of “healing” implies recovering from setbacks and emerging stronger, which is crucial in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world exacerbated by the pandemic (Worley and Jules, 2020). The healer leader encourages learning from failures, iterative problem-solving, and agile adaptation - key characteristics of resilient IT teams.

The “Leader is Healer” metaphor emphasizes the leader’s role in facilitating recovery and growth. This is especially true in the post-COVID world, where businesses and organizations need to recover from disruptions and explore new opportunities in the market (Alao & Gbolagade, 2020). The metaphor guides leaders in helping their teams navigate these changes, healing from past traumas and growing toward new directions.

Lastly, the explored metaphor can help humanize leadership, fostering empathy and compassion in IT leaders. This could help build stronger leader-follower relationships, improving team morale, trust, and collaboration in the challenging post-COVID environment.

4.2. DRAWBACKS

While the “Leader is Healer” metaphor offers valuable insights for IT leaders navigating the post-COVID world, it also has potential drawbacks that need to be acknowledged.

This metaphor could lead to an oversimplified understanding of complex organizational issues. It suggests a linear process of diagnosing a problem, applying a “treatment”, and achieving recovery. However, real-world organizational issues often have multifaceted causes and require nuanced, multi-

dimensional solutions (Schoemaker, Heaton & Teece, 2018; Muhić & Kesić, 2013). There’s also the danger of misdiagnosis or prescribing the wrong “treatment”, leading to counterproductive outcomes.

The metaphor also implies a degree of personal involvement and care which, if not managed appropriately, could blur professional boundaries and risk violating privacy. Leaders need to strike a balance between supporting their team members’ well-being and respecting their autonomy and personal space (Gabriel, 2014).

Furthermore, it may foster an overreliance on leaders to solve problems and “heal” the organization, potentially inhibiting the team’s self-efficacy and proactive problem-solving. This may hinder the development of a resilient team culture where members take collective responsibility for challenges and crises.

Lastly, focusing on healing individuals and teams may detract attention from broader organizational or systemic issues that may be contributing to the “illness”. These may include workload management, organizational policies, or company culture, which require structural changes rather than individual “healing” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2017).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explore the relevance and applicability of the “Leader is Healer” metaphor for leadership in the IT industry in the post-COVID-19 world. The metaphor offers a unique perspective, viewing organizations as akin to bodies, and crises or challenges as illnesses that require diagnosis, treatment, and healing. We have also considered the paradigm shift in the IT industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by increased remote work, heightened demand for digital solutions, and significant mental health concerns.

Throughout our discussion, we have identified potential benefits of this metaphor, such as promoting a supportive work environment, enhancing mental well-being, fostering resilience and adaptability, and facilitating recovery and growth. The metaphor’s focus on care and recovery may indeed serve as a guide for IT leaders seeking to navigate the new challenges and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

However, we also acknowledged the potential pitfalls of the “Leader is Healer” metaphor.

These include the risk of oversimplification, boundary violations, overreliance on leaders, and neglecting structural issues. As with any metaphorical framework, the “Leader is Healer” metaphor is not a definitive model but a tool for understanding and navigating the complex realities of leadership.

Future research could explore the application of this metaphor in different industry contexts, compare its effectiveness with other leadership metaphors, or delve into the specific strategies IT leaders have used to “heal” their teams and organizations in the face of pandemic-induced crises.

As we traverse the path of recovery in the post-pandemic era, the “Leader is Healer” metaphor provides a compassionate and human-centric lens through which IT leaders can reflect on their roles and responsibilities, always remembering that the essence of leadership lies not just in driving performance, but in fostering well-being, resilience, and growth.

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