Symbolic Thinking

Idea In Short

Abstract goals such as trust, quality, or purpose do not persuade on their own. People grasp them when a leader gives them a shape they can see and repeat, such as a ritual, a story, a phrase, or a metaphor. Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal built a whole frame of leadership on this insight, arguing that humans create meaning in a chaotic world. Organizational researchers have also shown that metaphors guide how people think about companies. This article explains how symbolic thinking works, why it matters for strategy and culture, and how leaders can use it without sliding into empty slogans.

Walk into any office that takes its culture seriously and you will find symbols. There is a founder's story that people retell, a ritual at the start of the week, a phrase that everyone uses, or an object on display that stands for something. These items rarely appear in a budget, yet they shape how people behave. Symbolic thinking is the skill of choosing and using such forms deliberately. This article explains the idea, reviews the research, and offers practical rules for leaders who want symbols that carry real meaning.

Meaning as the central concern

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal describe the symbolic frame as one of four ways to read an organization. According to the publisher's preview of their book, the symbolic frame focuses on how humans make sense of the chaotic, ambiguous world in which they live, and its central concerns are meaning, belief, and faith. The preview adds that meaning is not given to us and that we have to create it.1

The claim has an important consequence. If meaning must be created, then someone has to do the creating, and leaders are well placed to take part. A mission statement posted on a wall does little. A meaningful practice, such as a leader who personally reads customer complaints on Monday mornings, tells people what the organization values in a way that no slogan can.

A blog summary of the frame lists the tools that symbolic leaders use, which include rituals, slogans, stories, and awards that foster a sense of mission and excitement.2 It also notes that the frame explores how myths and symbols help people find meaning, and that events can matter more for their symbolism than for their outcomes. A farewell party for a retiring technician may do little for productivity, and yet it shows everyone how the company treats its people.

A shift in management thinking

Interest in symbols grew as scholars moved away from a mechanical view of organizations. An encyclopedia entry on management symbolism explains that, during the 1980s, organization and management scholars shifted attention from understanding organizations as rational machines or computer-like information processors toward understanding them as places populated by human beings who search for meaning.3 The entry calls this movement a cultural turn.

The change matters because it enlarged what counts as a management tool. If an organization is only a machine, then structure and incentives are the only levers. If an organization is also a community of meaning, then stories, ceremonies, and language become levers of equal weight.

Many leaders already act on this view without naming it. A founder who tells the same origin story at every orientation is shaping beliefs, and a CEO who eats in the staff canteen is sending a signal about hierarchy. Symbolic thinking asks you to make such choices on purpose and to check what they communicate.

Symbols and strategic change

Symbols become especially useful when a company tries to change direction. Gerry Johnson of Cranfield School of Management wrote a working paper on leadership, symbolic action, and strategic change. He observes that the management literature shows growing awareness of links between corporate culture and strategy, and that writers on leadership see symbolic devices, such as myths and stories, as important in introducing the new.4 He cites Pfeffer's view that language, symbolism, and ritual are important in developing shared systems of belief and meaning.

The reasoning is straightforward. A change in strategy asks people to give up familiar habits, and rules alone seldom persuade them. A story that explains why the old way no longer works, and a visible act that signals the new priority, give people reasons they can hold onto. A leader who closes a flagship product that conflicts with the new direction sends a clearer message than any memo.

Symbols can also fail. If the symbolic act contradicts daily practice, people notice the gap and trust drops. A company that celebrates "customer first" while it penalizes staff for long support calls teaches employees to ignore the slogan. Leaders should test every symbol against the incentives that surround it.

The power of metaphor

Metaphor is the most common symbolic tool, and organizational researchers have studied it in depth. A recent paper in Organization Studies explains the basic mechanism. Properties of a relatively familiar thing, called the source, are used to apprehend and understand something more abstract, called the target, and the process involves a carrying over across distinct elements. The authors add that in organization studies and in managerial practice, metaphors are omnipresent, and they give examples such as describing an organization as a prison.5

Consider how common images shape action. Calling a company a machine suggests that parts can be replaced and tuned. Calling it a family suggests loyalty and obligation, and also hints at difficulty in letting people go. Calling it a garden suggests that leaders cultivate conditions and wait for growth. Each image invites a different set of decisions.

Because metaphors highlight some features and hide others, a wise leader tests them. Ask what the image leaves out, and who would describe the organization differently. Try swapping the metaphor and see which new questions appear. If a team calls a project a "war," ask what a "garden" or a "voyage" would change about priorities, pace, and tolerance for mistakes.

Designing a symbol

Effective symbols share a few features. They are concrete, so people can see or do them. They are tied to a value that matters, so they carry weight beyond decoration. They are

consistent with how the organization really behaves, so people believe them. They are simple enough to repeat without explanation.

A practical method has four steps. First, name the value or idea you want to convey, in one plain sentence. Second, brainstorm concrete forms, including objects, rituals, stories, phrases, and spaces. Third, test the candidates against reality by asking whether current practice supports each one. Fourth, run a small trial and ask staff what the symbol means to them.

Consider a hypothetical engineering firm that wants to signal that safety outranks schedule. A slogan would change little. A stronger move is a ritual in which any employee can stop a job by placing a red tag on it, and the manager must thank that person in front of the team. The tag becomes a symbol with practical force, because it connects to a real right and a visible response.

Using symbols in everyday leadership

Symbolic choices do not need a special occasion. Where a leader sits in a meeting, whose name appears first on a credit line, and which problems get airtime all carry meaning. People read these signals constantly and draw conclusions about what counts. A leader who wants a team to value learning might begin each review by naming one mistake of her own, which turns an abstract value into a repeated, visible act.

Keep a short list of the signals you send in a typical week, and ask a trusted colleague to add to it. The gap between the message you intend and the message that people receive is often wide. Closing that gap is a core task of symbolic thinking.

Cautions

Symbolic thinking has risks that leaders should take seriously. Symbols can hide reality, as when a polished ceremony masks a layoff. People are quick to detect hollow gestures, and the damage to credibility can last years. Use symbols to express real commitments, not to replace them.

Symbols also mean different things to different people. A ritual that feels warm to one group may feel childish or intrusive to another. Ask staff what they see, and pay attention to local

and cultural differences.

Finally, symbols need renewal. A ritual repeated without thought turns into routine, and a slogan that once inspired may fade into wallpaper. Revisit your symbols each year, retire those that no longer carry meaning, and keep the ones that people still use without being told.

- 1Reframing organizations: artistry, choice, and leadership
- 2The symbolic frame of leadership
- 3Management symbolism and symbolic action
- 4Leadership, symbolic action and strategic change
- 5Metaphor and organization studies: going beyond resonance to further theory and practice

Summary

Symbolic thinking gives abstract ideas a form that people can see, repeat, and act on. Bolman and Deal place meaning, belief, and faith at the center of the symbolic frame, and studies of leadership and strategic change point to myths, stories, and rituals as tools for shared belief. Metaphors extend this power by letting people understand a hard idea through a familiar one. The same power can mislead when a symbol hides a reality or when staff see through it. Choose one value that your team shares, find a concrete practice that expresses it, and check whether people believe it.