

For Review only

The
POWER *of*
LEADERSHIP
METAPHORS

**200 prompts to stimulate
your imagination & creativity**

PETER SHAW

For Review only

Dedicated to our grandchildren,
Barney, Daniel, Ruth, Jacob, Lucca, Lucas and Stellan
with thanks for all the joy they give us.

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For Review only

CONTENTS

Foreword

Introduction

Section A: Vision

1. The seed has to die.
2. When one door closes another opens
3. The light at the end of the tunnel
4. The rocks in the way
5. There has to be an ending before there can be a new beginning
6. A bird's-eye view
7. The next mountain to climb
8. Don't jump over the edge without looking how far you might fall
9. Turn the tables
10. Time to blaze a trail
11. Every tide has its ebb
12. Look before you leap
13. Great oaks from little acorns grow
14. Faint hearts never won fair lady
15. A miss is as good as a mile
16. Necessity is the mother of invention
17. One swallow does not make a summer
18. Beware of the battle of the egos
19. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link
20. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

21. A picture is worth a thousand words
22. Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg
23. Look beyond the end of your nose
24. The immediate can drive out the important

Section B: Values

25. Hope springs eternal
26. A close shave
27. Life is a roundabout
28. The dog that didn't bark
29. Keep watch
30. Know when to keep your distance
31. The elephant in the room
32. Bury the hatchet
33. Draw the line
34. Face the music
35. Don't waste a crisis
36. People in glass house should not throw stones
37. We have two ears and one mouth
38. None so deaf as those who will not hear
39. Connect brain to mouth
40. No smoke without fire
41. Once bitten twice shy
42. Silence gives consent
43. Don't feel you have to fill the silence
44. The least said the soonest mended
45. Truth will out
46. Truth has many dimensions
47. Watch getting steamed up
48. Be mindful if you are giving the cold shoulder
49. Actions speak louder than words
50. All that glitters is not gold

For Review only

51. As you sow so shall you reap
52. Watch if familiarity breeds contempt
53. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear

Section C: Value-added

54. A foot in the door
55. The first rocks in the jar
56. Build on rock and not on sand
57. The hoop you have to jump through
58. Three steps forward and two steps back
59. Go slow to go fast
60. Be careful what you wish for
61. Steering not rowing
62. Armed to the teeth
63. Lion-hearted
64. Wait till the clouds roll by
65. Soaring and swooping like an eagle
66. Keep your powder dry
67. Nip in the bud
68. The early bird catches the worm
69. Strike while the iron is hot
70. Keep the pot boiling
71. Take the bull by the horns
72. A cat may look at a king
73. Make hay while the sun shines
74. Know the ropes
75. Half a loaf is better than none
76. Fortune knocks once on every door
77. Two heads are better than one
78. Too many cooks spoil the broth
79. A stitch in time saves nine
80. Be alert to the domino effect

81. Put your best foot forward
82. Seek to ensure both ends meet
83. Among the blind the one-eyed man is king
84. Better late than never
85. Discretion is the better part of valour
86. Be on the balcony and on the dance floor
87. Use the long screwdriver occasionally
88. A germ of truth
89. Conversations in the grey space
90. Three strikes and you are out
91. Be ready for the wake-up call

Section D: Vitality

92. Put a tiger in your tank
93. Don't hit your head against a brick wall
94. A walk in the park
95. Walk before you run
96. Take deep breaths
97. What goes up comes down
98. Show a clean pair of heels
99. Hold your tongue
100. Chew the fat
101. Turn over a new leaf
102. Go on all fours
103. Take forty winks
104. Still small voice of calm
105. Absence makes the heart grow fonder
106. Any time means no time
107. Leave well alone
108. He laughs best who laughs last
109. A penny saved is a penny gained
110. No pain no gain

For Review only

111. Still waters run deep
112. Beware going into overdrive
113. Watch the chip on the shoulder
114. Watch if your heart is in your boots
115. Keep your distance
116. A cat has nine lives
117. An idle brain is the Devil's workshop
118. An ounce of protection is worth a pound of cure
119. A task begun is half done
120. Beauty is only skin deep
121. Better to wear out than rust out
122. Cross the stream where it is at its shallowest
123. Laugh and the world laughs with you
124. Bottle the positives

Section E: Risks to watch: beware lest you

125. Turn up your nose
126. Live from hand to mouth
127. Act the goat
128. Ride the high horse
129. Play with fire
130. Let the cat out of the bag
131. Rush from pillar to post
132. Create a storm in a teacup
122. Are the fly in the ointment
134. Clutch at straws
135. Are left high and dry
136. Nurture a pet lamb who becomes a cross ram
137. Grasp all and lose all
138. Run into a brick wall
139. Flog a dead horse
140. Slide down a slippery slope

141. Be alert to when you have cold feet
142. Expect everything to be copper bottomed
143. Are a wet blanket
144. Get carried away with excitement
145. Are viewed as being as blind as a bat
146. Are seen as a peppery individual
147. Are always sat on the fence
148. Are seen as playing fast and loose
149. Get into hot water
150. Throw in the sponge too early
151. Put the cart before the horse
152. Are burning the candle at both ends
153. Jump the gun
154. Are always throwing cold water
155. Are seen as blind to behaviours
156. Are seen as a flash in a pan
157. Bite the hand that feeds
158. Count your chickens before they hatch
159. Judge a book by its cover
160. Disappear without trace
161. Be captive to your former self
162. Jump in where angels fear to tread
163. Shoot the messenger
164. Be a slave to ambition

Section F: Lessons from Shakespeare

165. Delays have dangerous ends
166. Blown with the windy tempest of my heart
167. My salad days when I was green in judgement
168. From hour to hour we ripe and ripe. And then from hour to hour we rot and rot
169. Brevity is the soul of wit

For Review only

- 170. By indirections find directions out
- 171. The wheel has come full circle
- 172. There is no virtue like necessity
- 173. More in sorrow than anger
- 174. Hoist with his own petard

Section G: Our attitude of mind

- 175. Let a thousand flowers bloom
- 176. The road not taken
- 177. See life as a marathon and not a sprint
- 178. Take the lid off
- 179. Look through the other end of the telescope
- 180. Watch getting caught in the vortex
- 181. Watch dwelling on broken dreams
- 182. Beware getting caught in a huddle of anger
- 183. The blame-game is easy and self-destructive
- 184. The puzzled shrug of the shoulders

Section H: Eternal truths

- 185. As you make your bed you must lie on it
- 186. Cut your coat according to your cloth
- 187. Withdraw gracefully
- 188. Don't carry all your eggs in one basket
- 189. Every cloud has a silver lining
- 190. Experience teaches fools
- 191. Pride comes before a fall
- 192. Turkeys don't vote for Christmas
- 193. Remove the beam from your eye first
- 194. Fire is a good servant and a bad master
- 195. He who pays the piper calls the tune
- 196. It's a long lane with no turning
- 197. Sauce for goose is sauce for the gander

- 198. Life is not a dress rehearsal
- 199. We never miss the water until the well runs dry
- 200. Where there is a will there is a way

Acknowledgments

Books and booklets by Peter Shaw

About the Author

Index of metaphors

For Review only

Foreword

As a leader you have to create a context for dialogue. You need to know where you are going and what it is realistic to achieve, but you also have to create the environment where people want to travel with you.

You need to put in place a structure which encourages people to tell you what they think, to tell you when you are wrong and be willing to engage with you to find a workable way forward. You need to keep listening to concerns that are spoken and unspoken; far too many leaders listen to those who tell them what they want to hear and forget the lesson of “the Emperor’s new clothes”. You also have to decide which battles to fight and when to stand back and let issues play out. Key is deciding which issues you want to pursue and then to communicate clearly the reasons for your decisions.

There are times as a leader when you are patiently waiting for opportunities. On other occasions you know you need to intervene in order to steer, shape or nudge a way forward. At times the decision-making and resources are in the hands of others, but you must, when appropriate, use your voice and influence. You are ready to make a suggestion or express a concern when the right moment arises.

When I was Lord Chief Justice with responsibility for the Judiciary in England and Wales the Judges looked to me to take a lead and set a tone. I engaged with a wide range

of different interests including the City and business, Government ministers, civil servants, the legal professions, public interest groups, the media and judges throughout the world. They all brought particular concerns and were looking to me to work together within our respective responsibilities to find pragmatic ways forward.

Metaphors were a very powerful tool for me. Examples I particularly recall are the themes behind “time to blaze a trail” and “faint hearts never won fair lady”. They were particularly apt in dealing with modernising the court system and taking advantage of the digital revolution; and, in a very different context, in getting the judiciaries of different nations to work together and support each other. But it is always necessary to have in mind each of the metaphors collected under the heading of “Eternal Truths” – they can save you from many a mistake.

Metaphors encapsulate the wisdom of collective experience in a few words. A metaphor which captures the visual imagination of an individual or group can help move a conversation forward in a creative way. This book provides an eclectic set of metaphors. Some are new and others are well known. Each of them is worth a few moments thought. Many will apply to leaders in a range of different contexts. I encourage you to let your imagination take forward the metaphors and then to reflect on the questions at the end of each section.

I have known Peter Shaw for over fifteen years during which we have had many stimulating conversations about leadership. More importantly he gave the judiciary very considerable assistance in developing leadership skills in discharging the judiciaries’ new responsibilities, as he has done in other

countries. He brings a wealth of experience from his time as a Director General in the UK Civil Service and then working with a wide range of leaders and leadership teams across six continents as an executive coach and University Professor.

I commend this book highly as a source of rich prompting for leaders thinking through how best they steer and influence in a wide range of different situations.

Lord John Thomas

Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales 2013-2017

President of the Qatar International Court

For Review only

Introduction

A story or picture is worth a thousand words. A story, picture or metaphor can help us crystallise what we need to do next. A phrase such as 'the seed has to die' or 'the light at the end of the tunnel' or 'the risk of not seeing the wood for the trees' can sum up in a poignant way truths that we as leaders need to recognise.

As we explore a metaphor next steps can become clearer. A metaphor can stimulate our imagination and allow us to think afresh about an issue. Reflecting on a problem using a metaphor can help us unblock our thinking and open up the possibility of new solutions. It can enable us to 'cut to the heart of an issue', clarify situations, provide insights or show us where we are stuck. They can enable us to face into the reality that we need to abandon a project, make a fresh start or change direction.

I often use metaphors in coaching conversations and find they lead to creative and stimulating dialogue. Some are well known metaphors and others are ones I have picked up from a myriad of sources, and some either I or someone I work with has devised. Sometimes in the midst of a coaching conversation a phrase comes to mind that encapsulates an idea or way forward. The metaphor that is memorable allows an idea to stick in the memory and be a constant reminder that there is a way forward which may be different to what we had previously anticipated.

I include in this book 200 metaphors that ring true for me. I am using the word metaphor loosely as some of the phrases included in the book might be described as proverbs, idioms or aphorisms. Writing one on each page allows the reader to absorb quickly the applicability of the metaphor and then to reflect at leisure on its relevance for them. I prompt the reader through a paragraph about each metaphor followed by a short illustration of its relevance to a leader and then three prompts or questions for reflection. Within each section the short illustrations relate to a hypothetical leader whose experiences draw from my own observations in both leadership roles and coaching conversations. These hypothetical individuals are Ben, Gillian, William, Saira, Harry, Carol, Brenda and Rashid.

The underlying approach I use in coaching is to encourage people to reflect on the four Vs of leadership: namely vision, values, value-add and vitality. This was the framework I originally set out in the book of this title published by Capstone in 2006. A Praesta Insight with this title was published in 2019 which set out the continuing relevance of this approach for individuals and teams and included perspectives from leaders who have found the framework helpful.

The first part of this book groups the metaphors under the themes of vision, values, value-add and vitality. A subsequent section includes metaphors about risks to watch. Ten poignant metaphors written by Shakespeare provide evocative reminders, although there are many more that there was not space to include such as 'all the world's a stage and all men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances.' The final section identifies other metaphors as eternal truths.

As a result of the Covid 19 pandemic we are living in a very different world with profound economic and social changes where we need to think in new ways about leading and engaging. Some metaphors like 'bottling the positives' have been poignant over the pandemic period. The use of metaphors can be a useful way of opening up ways of addressing future unprecedented challenges.

The book is intended as a prompt for thought. My hope is that in every situation there will be a metaphor that holds your imagination and enables you to see an issue from a different perspective. Allow your imagination to play with each metaphor and open up the possibility of a new insight or possibility. Perhaps out of the darkest moments there can be new possibilities which might surprise and enthuse you.

Peter Shaw
Godalming, England

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SECTION A

Vision

The seed has to die

An idea or belief has to die before new life and hope can break out.

You have kept up your resolve by being frustrated with the world around you. Your belief in your abilities has helped you be successful up to a point, but you begin to recognise that life cannot go on in quite in the same way. You need to calm down and let your belief that you are right diminish. You begin to recognise that you need to accept that new life and hope can break out when you allow others to flourish and allow your desire to prove yourself right diminish.

Ben was a skilled project manager who had built his reputation by being a good judge of what was needed in any situation. Ben began to recognise that others were deferring to him too much and were not making the decisions that they were capable of making. He needed to stand back more and not seek the limelight. He needed to ensure that others were in the lead so that they became increasingly enthused and positive about the future.

Reflections

- What self-belief or preoccupation needs to die so you can move on?
- What frustrations need to be diminished so they don't cloud your judgment?
- How best to you leave behind an outdated preoccupation?

When one door closes another opens

When one route forward is closed off you might see possibilities that had not been visible to you before.

You are keen to push forward and seek wider responsibilities. You observe an opportunity and want to see if it is an opening that you can take forward. As you ask questions or offer to help you begin to recognise that the opening is not for you as you don't match what is needed. You are disappointed and realistic at the same time. You begin to look at what else might be possible future options. When you thought through the initial possibility you clarified some of your ideas on what you can contribute. Other possibilities begin to shape in your mind.

Ben had explored moving to another project which did not happen. The application process had helped him crystallise his strengths. When the vacancy arose to lead the current project he was far better equipped to apply for it. Going for the job that did not materialise had shaped the way he now led his current team.

Reflections

- When do you stop pushing on a door that is not opening?
- How do you look out for new doors that might be opening?
- When you look back how grateful are you that some doors were firmly closed in your face?

The light at the end of the tunnel

When you allow yourself to peer forward there can be a glimpse of light far in the distance.

You are engrossed in an immediate issue. You feel stuck and are wary of looking too far ahead as this could mean you become depressed by the gloomy prospect of continuing darkness. It feels relentless with no possibility of better times ahead. You tell yourself that you have been in this type of situation before and the darkness has abated. Imagining what the light will be like when you reach it gives you hope that darkness can gradually diminish.

Ben was leading a project that was moving slowly. No one was delivering in the way expected. He had to be relentless in reminding participants of their commitments. Eventually there was unanimity about next steps and Ben allowed himself to believe that there was progress. When he peered into the future, he could glimpse the prospect of light at the end of this seemingly very dark tunnel.

Reflections

- What has helped you on previous occasions recognise that there will be light at the end of the tunnel?
- How best do you visualise light at the end of the tunnel without deluding yourself about the current issues?
- How might you describe to others what light at the end of the tunnel might look like?

The rocks in the way

The landscape needs to be surveyed carefully to assess what are the rocks in the way and how might they be overcome.

We see huge boulders ahead that are going to be difficult to climb. We don't feel equipped. How can we possibly get round them or over them? We know that we need to assess what is the shape of the rocks in the way. Are they scalable? Have we colleagues who have experience in dealing with such rocks? Are they more manageable than we had initially thought? What might be the routes around the rocks? Which rocks do we need to climb and which ones can we circumvent?

Ben saw one overriding issue as a big rock in the way. It seemed a problem that was going to be hugely difficult to resolve. He decided to look at the issue from different angles and draw in the view of people with different perspectives. A hugely daunting problem gradually became a difficult but manageable project. The rock blocking the way became an obstacle which could be overcome.

Reflections

- Who can help you see the rock from a different perspective?
- What expertise can you draw on to help put in proportion how much of an obstacle the rock is?
- What is the satisfaction will you get from overcoming the rock?