

Blue Leader One: A Metaphor For Invitational Education*

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I see trees of green, and skies of blue,
They're really people saying, I love you.
And I say to myself, what a wonderful world.

Oscar Hammerstein, II

"It's A Wonderful World,"

East Wind, 1931

Leaders enlist others in their visions because they are capable of sharing their thoughts in vivid colors and compelling metaphors. Metaphors invite people to think to fresh ways and to create new paradigms.

Color symbolism is one of the most universal of all types of symbolism (Cirlot, 1962), and has been used extensively in liturgy, heraldry, art, and literature. This article presents a blue and orange metaphor that can be used to positively influence interactions between and among

faculty, staff, and students. The blue and orange card metaphor presents a guide for understanding the symbolic meaning of what really happens in and around schools. Although the focus of this article is on schools, the blue and orange metaphor is useful in many settings.

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*The concept of the blue and orange cards was originally presented by Purkey and Stanley (1990) in the *Journal of Counseling and Development*.

Why Metaphors?

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Metaphors are often used to communicate concepts. People use metaphors to paint a picture of a concept, to highlight the significance of an idea, and to involve a person at both the emotional and intellectual level.

Metaphors are not absolutely true or accurate pictures. Rather, they provide a pictorial analogy that communicates the significance of an idea or concept. Metaphors are not "hard data," or the product of scientific experiments. Their purpose is to facilitate understanding. Most internationally respected scientists have created metaphors because they were in need of a communication system to describe awesome ideas for which there are no concrete or literal terms. Sam Keen in *The Passionate Life* (1983) described a metaphor in the following way:

All maps of human life are composed of metaphors. All metaphors are revelatory and inaccurate. To profit by another's experiences, we must become adept at the art of playing with metaphor, translating images, listening for the meaning beneath the nonsense of just-so stories of myths. Consciousness is poetry. We mix our metaphors in order to avoid orthodoxy, literalism, tyranny.

Studies in semantics (Bateson, 1987; Hayakawa, 1990), cognitive psychology (Beck, 1988; Meichenbaum, 1977), and counseling theory and practice (Grinder & Bandler, 1981; Gladding, 1992) have demonstrated the significance of metaphor in human experience and functioning.

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The Blue and Orange Card Metaphor

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The blue and orange metaphor presented here represents a highly simplistic version of the symbolic signals that occur between and among everyone who lives and works in a school. This signal system is both verbal and nonverbal and includes both language and paralanguage traits, such as tone and quality of voice.

The Filing System

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With remarkably few exceptions, each person born is equipped with a magnificent card-filing system, called the brain. This tiny, slightly alkaline device runs on glucose and oxygen and contains around a hundred billions logical elements called neurons. The entire system weighs less than two pounds, but in a lifetime its data storage capacity can handle 2.8×10^{20} bits of information....data cards. If each card was the size and weight of a dollar bill: 20 billion would weigh 80,000 tons. Stacked on top of each other, 20 billion cards, each with the thickness of a dollar bill, would stretch 5, 428 miles into space. This is the storage capacity of an average person in an average lifetime. Nothing on earth has more awesome power than the human brain.

In highly simplistic terms, as soon as a child is born he or she begins the life-long task of collecting cards for his or her filing system. Countless cards, each containing a bit of information, are permanently filed. The ever increasing store of cards informs the emerging child what the world is like and how things fit together.

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Blue and Orange Cards

In the marvelous card collection process there are only two kinds of cards: blue cards and orange cards. No matter what information is placed on a card, the card itself is either blue or orange. What is written on a card represents *content* (the lyrics); the color represents the *context* (the melody).

Blue Cards. Blue cards carry a message that the person is able, valuable, and responsible. They encourage the individual to see the world as a good place to be, where there are many things to love that will love in return. Regardless of content, the context of each blue card encourages the best in self-esteem, excitement for living, and the finest qualities of trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. Orange cards are exactly the opposite.

Orange Cards. Orange cards inform the individual that he or she is unable, worthless, and irresponsible. An orange card warns the person to beware: beware of one's own feelings, of relationships, of life. Orange cards are so painful that individuals will do almost anything to escape the hurt. A major power of drugs and alcohol is that they turn orange to blue, but the effect is illusory. They only camouflage the pain.

The orange and blue colors for the cards were not chosen to honor or demean a football team or suggest that office fabric be replaced. Blue comes in every color, orange comes in every color. Each time a person is caring, respecting, optimistic, and loving with oneself or others, personally or professionally, he or she is dealing blue cards. Conversely, each time an individual is racist, sexist, ethnocentric, insulting, humiliating, uncaring, or thoughtless with oneself or others, personally or professionally, he or she is dealing orange cards.

The 12 to 1 Ratio

Each person requires at least twelve blue cards for every one orange card just to "make it through the night." This ratio indicates the strength of orange cards and the actions needed to counteract them. To be fully functioning probably requires a much more positive ratio. When too few blue cards are received, or too many orange, the ratio falls "below minimum" and terrible things begin to happen. Individuals begin to lose self-esteem, optimism, and hope. This loss is coupled with the appearance of pessimism, hostility, and terrible anger. "Nobody likes me, respects me or cares about me, so I don't like, respect, or care about others either."

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A Matter of Life or Death

It will be helpful to pause here and contemplate the deeper meaning of the blue and orange card metaphor. It's not about being "nice," giving "warm fuzzies," giving "strokes," forming "hug stations," or walking around with "IALAC" (I Am Lovable and Capable) posters. While these are worthwhile activities when used caringly and appropriately, they are insufficient to describe the awesome nature and potential power of every human action. Sticks and stones break bones, orange cards kill.

Often it is temptingly easy to go orange—to "let people have it—to tell them off—to give them a piece of one's mind." It may be more difficult to go blue, but it is far more beneficial. Those who behave in caring and appropriate ways are those who have received blue cards. They are most able and likely to continue the process.

The reason the blue and orange card metaphor is valuable is that it serves as a constant reminder that everything people do and every way they do it is either positive or negative, beneficial or lethal, inviting or disinviting. As documented elsewhere (Purkey and Schmidt, 1987; Purkey and Stanley, 1991), everything counts. The way a phone is answered, a letter written, a word spoken, an office painted, a colleague treated, a policy established, a program implemented is either helpful or harmful. Because this is so, those who wish to deal in blue cards carefully monitor the quality of programs, places, processes, policies, and the nature of every human interaction.

Maslow (1970) captured the essence of the blue and orange card metaphor when he wrote:

Let people realize that every time they threaten someone or humiliate or hurt unnecessarily or dominate or reject another human being, they become forces for the creation of psychopathology, even if these be small forces. Let them recognize that every man [sic] who is kind, helpful, decent, psychologically democratic, affectionate, and warm, is a psychotherapeutic force even though a small one.

It is increasingly clear that everything we do and every way we do it is orange or blue.

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Summary

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Leaders in invitational education make choices in everything they do. The blue cards they give to themselves and others personally and professionally may not be enough to outweigh the orange, but each one counts. Therefore, it is vital to the invitational educator to "color code" *everything* in the school—either blue or orange.

Leaders, have a responsibility to share their vision of an organization—to find ways to communicate what may be possible when everyone works together. Communication of this vision can be enhanced by use of the blue and orange card metaphor.

Just as scientists from every discipline use metaphors to describe concepts and events for which there are no literal terms, leaders in invitational education can use metaphors in sharing a vision. The emotional impact of a metaphor can provide impetus for people in organizations to try new ideas and new approaches. The blue and orange card metaphor is one way invitational theory can be communicated in a vivid and colorful way.

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