Management Metaphors

- the beginning of "non-linear" leadership

According to a survey of 150 U.S. companies, 80% of the executives interviewed meant that innovation was important, but only 4% meant they were good at making innovation happen (reference 1). In this way innovation seems to be a serious management problem. The problem is caused by two factors:

1) A creative deficit in western culture since the age of Enlightenment.

2) The management philosophy up until now was developed under market conditions much more stable than those of today.

As a result focus has been on production and efficiency rather than on innovation and creativity. This tendency has been reinforced by the fact, that most managers are engineers, technicians, economists etc. - which are not especially professions, that reward fantasy and crazy ideas, but instead tend to encourage rational values.

The poor language of management

Just as society up until today has been driven by materiel values, the language of management has been best for discussing production, economy and planning. The management language has been richest in terms of operational matters and adjustments and very poor in terms of development. Strategies formulated in "hard" terms can supply an excellent rational alibi for activities, but they are insufficient for everyday management communication, because they:

o Are non-personal and therefore "none of my business"

o Have no appeal to imagination, emotion and creativity

o Supply no images for perception and recognition

o Are unusable for oral communication.

That the management language is so poor (i.e. one-sided analytical) is due to a strategic thinking process based solely on left-brain conditions. A creative and holistic leadership language requires a creative and holistic process for strategy development.

The magic metaphors

A metaphor is an image of something, mostly a link between a well-known figurative object (the "image-part") and some unknown or abstract matter (the "meaning-part"). We can thus describe something so that the image-part plays the role of a "stand-in" for the unknown or abstract concept.
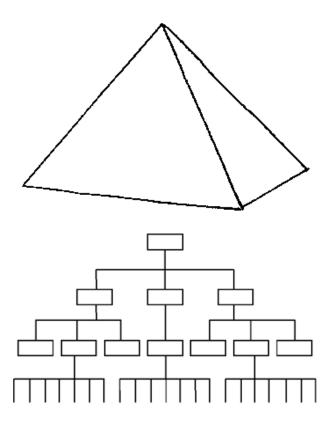
Metaphors play an important role for our ability to understand. Every time we meet a new concept, we ask: "What does that mean?". The answer following will typically be something like "Well, you see, it's like..." - the rest is then a comparison with objects or concepts, that we are supposed to be familiar with. In this way we let the well-known concept function as "stand-in" for the unknown. Thereby we achieve a feeling of understanding the unknown because psychologically there is no difference between the feeling of understanding something, and the feeling of being familiar with it (reference 2).

Many of our management metaphors are either characterized by a technical/production mindset or they are banal, like for instance the metaphors of sports: We are a team with a coach, we want to win the game etc.
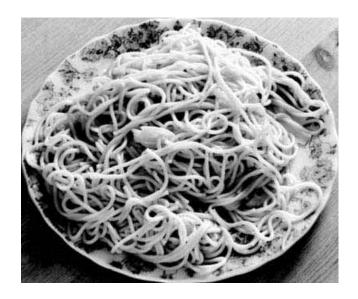
Let's now have a look at some of the metaphors that normally are used or understood in management language - and also some of the metaphors that might be used.

Management metaphors

The traditional hierarchical organization is often characterized by the metaphor of a pyramid:
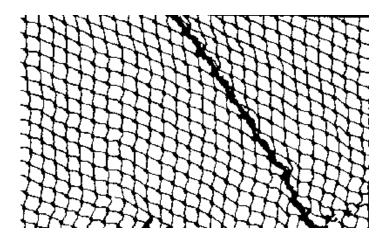

The opposite of a hierarchic organization is sometimes called a "spaghetti"-organization:
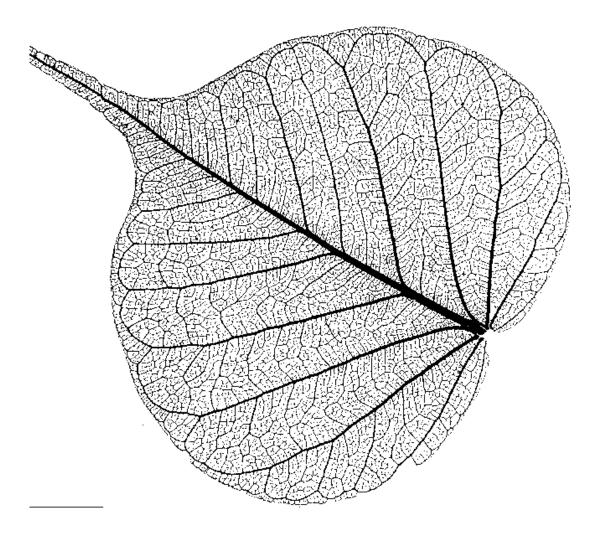
"Spaghetti" is really a rather poor metaphor of an organization, as spaghetti has no organization - it's just some "jelly", getting its shape from the plate containing it. An organization must have a certain self-preservation or autonomy.

The opposite of hierarchy is also often called "network":

The picture above shows a detail of a fishing-net. But we also find network in nature. For instance, all cells in a leaf are connected with each other through a fine network of transportation tissue:
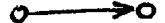
As you can see in the picture above, the cells are connected in a network of transportation channels, but the structure of the leaf is obviously hierarchic: From the branch there is a connection through the stem to the leaf, where the main transportation channel branches into a number of sub-levels. So network and hierarchy are not in opposition in nature!
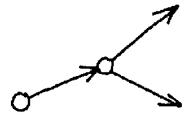
In western culture we have a basic metaphor of an axis of time; we make time "spatial" by imaging a period as a horizontal line or axis of time, going from left to right:
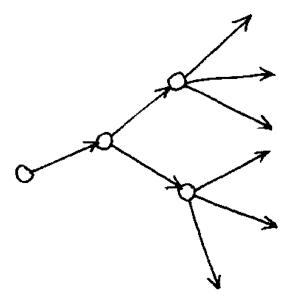

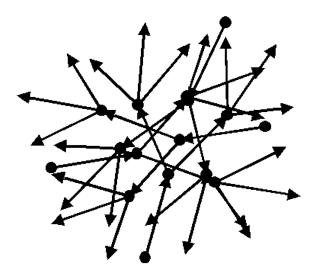Therefore we can show a process or evolution as a line or an arrow:

Evolution processes often branch, i.e. the evolution implicates more possibilities, which are tested:

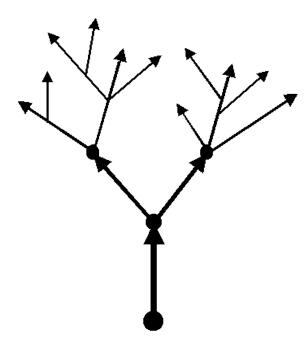Thus an evolution process can be seen as an ongoing branching off or differentiation:

If these processes follow arbitrary directions, their pattern will give us no meaning, they form no "gestalt" (see note 3):

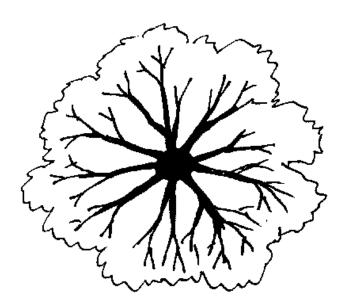It's like "spaghetti-network". But if the processes follow the (natural) hierarchic principles, they will form a figure, namely a formalized tree:
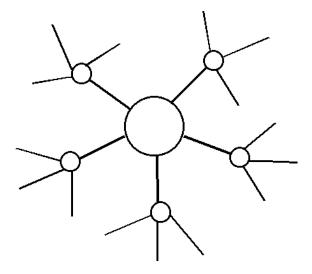
The branches of trees can form a huge network as shown on this photo:

But if we look schematically on a single tree - seen from atop - we recognize the same structure as in the leaf:

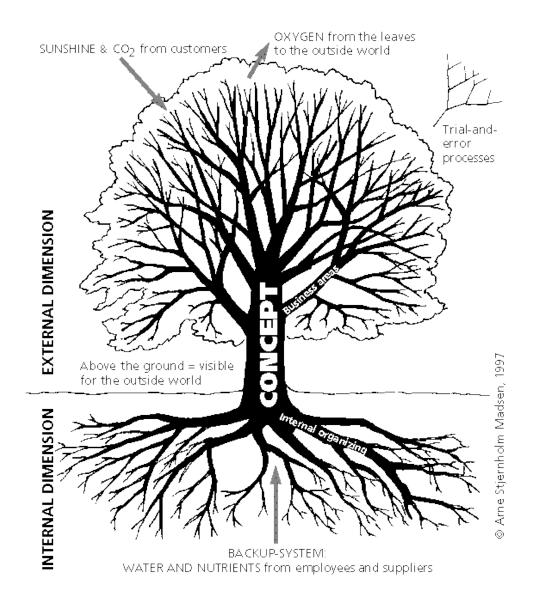We could choose to draw our organizational charts in the same way:

Actually the tree is a very fertile metaphor of an organization or its management processes.
Management implies two main dimensions:

· The external dimension: "Are we doing the right things in relation to the market?" It's the part of the management process, which is visible from the outside - you can compare it with that part of a tree, which is above the ground.

· The internal dimension: "Do we do the things we do in the right way, when we work together in the organization?" This part of the management process could be compared with the tree's root system.

The branches of both the crown and the root system symbolize the various "trial-and-error"-processes. Some of the branches turn out to be false tracks, they die and will later fall off. Others grow into strong branches that will produce many new shoots.

But the "tree" only becomes a "tree" if the various trial-and-error processes are bound together by a trunk, i.e. the basic concept of the activity or its mission. Thus the stem makes the trial-and-error processes into a "gestalt", that is: gives the organization its identity.

The leaves are the market place, in which the energy exchange happens in the "moment of truth", the photosynthesis: The sun "pays" with light and the atmosphere with carbondioxide, which together with water and nutrients from the backup system in the ground transform into the materials, which the tree needs for its growth. In return the leaves supply the outside world with the life-giving oxygen.

It's all shown below.

SUNSHINE & CO_2 from customers

OXYGEN from the leaves
to the outside world

Trial-and-error processes

EXTERNAL DIMENSION

CONCEPT

Business areas

Above the ground = visible
for the outside world

© Arne Stjernholm Madsen, 1997

INTERNAL DIMENSION

Internal organizing

BACKUP-SYSTEM:
WATER AND NUTRIENTS from employees and suppliers

Practical use
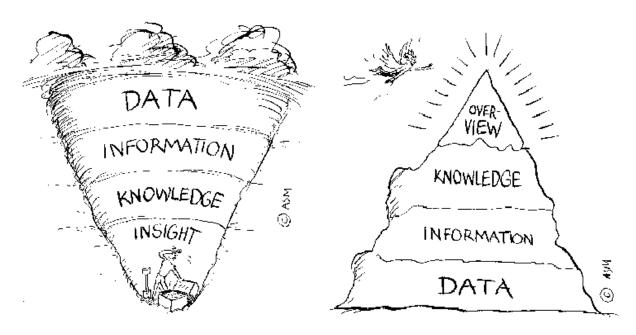
I have used the tree metaphor several times in the context of management workshops for business development. In such creative sessions it has also proved to be a fertile way to seek new metaphors for the concept of the company. New metaphors can give a magic feeling of seeing a thing from a new point of view (as for instance the first time you see yourself on a video). The metaphor is nothing

more or less than a model, playing the same role for our understanding as a map is, when we are trying to find our way through an unknown landscape. In business development the unknown landscape is the future. Metaphors provide new ways of over-viewing the landscape. Especially image metaphors can be useful to visualize the invisible future and make the abstract matters more concrete. Suzanne Merritt, former director of Polaroid's Creativity Lab, thus said in an interview: "I'm focused now on the role of imagery in creativity because I've found that whenever I introduced those approaches I was getting higher quality ideas and thinking" (reference 4). And for me as a graphic designer it is a pleasure to use my background for creating metaphorical images of strategy and vision.

But are strategies or visions expressed in metaphors exact? Or are they just some kindergarten games that can never replace good analysis, solid reports and detailed budgets and plans? - Yes and no. In Denmark, during recent years, we've had a number of scandals, in which the accounts of big companies turned out to be false. The language of accounts and economy is only exact in the sense, that every single statement can be measured and weighed. Still, the message as a whole can be fundamentally wrong, among others because you don't catch the very important immaterial factors in accounts, since they can hardly be counted and measured. One of my teachers at business school said: "One can count things, that can be measured - but one can't measure things that really count". It's all about two ways of thinking, two ways of solving problems. The analytical way (left brain) is the way, if you want solid and detailed insight in an issue or if you need to break down an overall objective into concrete quantities. But you should always remember that analysis is based upon hard data. Therefore you begin your work with statically or even outdated material, because it takes time to generate hard data. (Reference 5).

If you on the contrary want to understand a situation as a whole, want an overview - especially in relation to something complex and unpredictable - it's the right brain, that works most efficiently; intuition can work on the basis of very little (or even without) "hard" data and can catch emotions, moods and trends. Intuition can present a solution even before the problem occurs (and that is indeed being proactive!).

The road of analysis - *"the heavy way down"* - *gives detailed knowledge, but based on statically data.*

The creative road - *"on the wings of imagination"* - *results in immediate general understanding.*

Non-linear leadership

There is nothing new in the above comparison between intuition and analytical thinking. The news about it is the fact that these thoughts are accepted within management, together with the use of creative methods in practical management.

I think it is related to a corresponding shift of paradigms in science. I am, of course, thinking of the "chaos theory", which began in physics and spread to other sciences, for instance biology, with its concept of self-organization. The chaos theory is a revolt against the classical scientific view of the world (with roots back in the age of Enlightenment), which contains some fundamental assumptions:

· the world can be understood through studies of isolated phenomena in laboratories

· matter as a whole was to be understood from studies of details, synthesis should be a result of analysis

· if you discovered the laws of nature, you could then predict the course of events.

These assumptions form the paradigm of reductionism. Chaos-researchers claim, that the world is far more complicated, that complex systems cannot be understood from analyzing isolated details. In complex systems development is indeed often unpredictable, nothing follows linearity. That is why the chaos-paradigm is called "non-linear dynamics".

The new philosophy of leadership, which is likewise growing up, we could surely call "non-linear leadership". The use of metaphors and creative methods in strategy formation are thus concrete answers to a request for a "non-linear leadership philosophy". At the same time it is opening up

management towards cooperation with persons with creative backgrounds: Musicians, poets, artists, designers and so on. Indeed it is the meeting between these two worlds, which is one of the important conditions for innovation in the leadership process. And innovation pays: According to the U.S. survey, I mentioned earlier, the innovative companies are far better off than the low-innovative companies: Their growth in sales were nearly double (10.8% versus 5.7%) - their difference in profit growth was even more significant (51% increase versus 14%), and more of the innovators reported an increase in market share than the low-innovators (59% versus 14%). - The creative challenge is, so to speak, knocking on the door as pure necessity!

-Arne Stjernholm Madsen, Copyright 1998 & 2001.

References / notes:

1. The survey was done in 1994 by the Synectics Corporation amongst 750 executives in 150 U.S. companies. Source: Jeff Mauzy: "Innovation Linked to Bottom Line Success" - "MindPlay", Volume 1, Issue 3, October 1994.

2. My understanding of metaphors is based on the American psychologist Julian Jaynes, who has build up a very complex theory about the nature of metaphors in his book: "The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind"
(Boston - Houghton Mifflin 1976 - ISBN 0-395-20729-0).

3. The German word "gestalt" means "form" or "figure". The gestalt psychology studies the human perception of stimuli as entities, e.g. sounds as melodies.

4. In "MindPlay", Volume 2, Issue 4, July 1995.

5. About the limits of analysis and hard data, read Henry Mintzberg: "The rise and fall of strategic planning", Prentice Hall 1994 - ISBN 0-13-781824-6.