

## Follow the Language: Our Science Terms Appearing as Business Metaphors

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This is the age of intellectual cross-fertilization in fisheries and livestock production. In our university programs and companies, we have in large part escaped the limiting “silos” of the past to make the most of insights from a broad range of scientific disciplines. We also borrow best practices from applied fields such as supply chain management, “big data” analytics, and consumer behavior.

It is refreshing, therefore, to note that this exchange of valuable information is indeed two-way: key terms from fisheries and livestock production are beginning to appear in business literature as useful metaphors for understanding the nature of organizations and the management of human resources.

Take, for example, the new book *Service Reborn* by the co-founder of DHL Asia, Po Chung (Lexingford, 2012). Chung majored in Fisheries Management at Humboldt State University in Northern California before his career led him to the pinnacle of leadership success with DHL. But along the way, he applied his insights from fishery sciences to the broader world of business. He writes, “My main career centers on DHL, and it may seem like a long swim from fisheries to a global delivery giant. But I assure you they are deeply related. As you get to know how fisheries and fish farms work, your eye is first caught by the fish themselves. It’s enjoyable for almost anyone to watch them gathering for food, scrapping for the biggest bite, and at times almost flipping them out of the water entirely. But I soon realized that I could do nothing to care for the individual—a tiny fingerling or an especially beautiful fish, let’s say—without first taking care (and I mean exquisite care!) of its habitat. As a student I plunged into a thorough understanding of incubators, egg-taking, mating conditions, reproduction, water sampling, disease detection, nutrient cycling, tagging, estimation of population size and dozens of other topics affecting the *environment* in which the fish lived. In this way, I was extending my interest beyond the welfare of the *individual* to the welfare of the *group*.”

As DHL developed to serve virtually all of Asia under Po Chung’s leadership, the idea of a healthful habitat became a productive metaphor for the company. According to Chung, “maintaining a healthful habitat includes knowing and trusting the people I work with. I carried away from these years a profound regard for the importance of the environment in which people attempt to do their work. I realized that a constricting, emotionally or physically unhealthful work environment could kill the motivation of even the brightest employee. In the process of connecting the dots about what I had learned about the wellbeing of fish with the aspirations of my future career in leadership, I recognized the enormous challenge of dealing successfully with people in all their complexity.”

Chung goes on to explain that “the habitat is the habit,” in the sense that one’s work environment gradually becomes internalized for each of us in the form of learned behaviors and expectations. To ignore the habitat of one’s business or work group as a manager is dangerous to all stakeholders. Corrupting influences within the habitat can quickly turn a productive and supportive work team into a bickering, dysfunctional collection of individuals each out for their own interests.

Chung uses another science term, “virus,” as his metaphor for these habitat-destroying influences: “Moral viruses spread quickly because unethical people exploit the trusting nature of a healthful business

habitat. By a ‘trusting nature,’ I mean that a productive work environment is not designed like a police state, with elaborate shields and detectors deployed in expectation of unethical and criminal behavior. Luckily, the habitat of an organization can exercise a renovating effect on many people whose Personal Operating System (POS) has been corrupted. A healthful habitat restores the moral fiber of its inhabitants.”

I quote at length from Po Chung’s recent book because it represents, for me, the kind of synergistic thinking that allows business to see itself in a new light, thanks to concepts and metaphors drawn from science. At the same time, Chung’s approach reminds scientists that their conceptual work has potential meaning beyond the laboratory, fishery or livestock production facility.

“Crossing fishing lines” has for more than a century been a way of expressing the downside of intruding on another person’s domain. But in *Service Reborn*, Chung shows the many positive results of reaching beyond our professional comfort zones by reading outside our usual journals and magazines, talking to experts and practitioners in fields other than our own, and thinking deeply about the implications of what we learn in these exploratory visits to new intellectual territory. Crossing fishing lines does not have to produce a problematic tangle. As Chung demonstrates in by his own stellar career, reaching across traditional boundaries and fields of study can draw together the best insights of many perspectives and lead to advances that no single point of view could produce.

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