

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter will discuss the available literature on images and performance management. In so doing it will attempt to provide a rationale for the current research as well as a greater understanding of images and their use; and of performance management. Significant aspects will be highlighted and topics further elaborated where it is deemed appropriate. This chapter will focus predominantly on the literature relating to call centres; call centre research; images; linguistic tropes; metaphors; the role of metaphors; types of metaphor; limitations of metaphors; the use of metaphor in previous research; research from various fields; the application on metaphor in organisation; and the role of what Morgan (1986) terms 'imaginization'. It will also explore relevant literature in the area of performance management; performance measurement systems; performance appraisals; and the role of HR, team leaders/supervisors and management in these systems.

### **2.1. Call centres**

The call centre environment, also referred to as the contact centre environment, forms the context for the current research. For the purposes of this research, the term call centre is used and the IMCI (2003, p.3) definition is employed whereby a call centre may be defined as "a co-ordinated system of people, processes, technologies and strategies that provides access to organisational resources through appropriate channels of communication to enable interactions that create value for the customer and organisation".

Numerous other definitions of call centres exist, thus the following definitions from Sprigg, Smith and Jackson (2003, p.1) are also deemed appropriate in the current research:

- CALL CENTRE: a “work environment in which the main business is conducted via a telephone whilst simultaneously using display screen equipment (DSE). The term call centre includes parts of companies dedicated to this activity such as internal help lines as well as whole companies”;
- CALL HANDLERS: “employees whose job requires them to spend a significant proportion of their working time responding to calls on the telephone whilst simultaneously using DSE”

The rapid growth of call centres has been evident throughout the world, from the USA, Europe, East Asia and Australia (Bagnara, 2000) to South Africa. South Africa’s international profile in the call centre industry is on the rise, being seen as having the ability to deliver competitive performance based on quality, performance and affordable prices (Searle, 2005). According to the Gauteng Economic Development Agency (GEDA) report the vast majority of call centre sites in South Africa are to be found in the greater Johannesburg area, with approximately 79, 000 call centre employees working in call centres in South Africa. The South African call centre community has experienced significant growth from 1997 to 2005, transforming it into a large, mature and sophisticated industry. Call centres can thus not be ignored and their significance in research and business functions comes as no surprise.

When it comes to the customer service experience call centres are involved in many business functions and have been identified as playing a role that is becoming increasingly important. They are used in virtually all fields and often serve as the primary method of contact with customers for some organisations (Miciak and Desmarais, 2001). An increasingly strategic function is being played by call centres in service companies, from simple functions to sophisticated services and functions. Due to the significant and expanding number of people employed in call centres, research in call centres has greatly intensified in the

past decade (Armistead, Kiely, Hole, and Prescott, 2002). The research presented in the current report hopes to add value to this previous call centre research, however before this can be done it is important to note where it fits in, in relation to previous call centre research.

### **2.1.1. Call centre research**

Previous call centre research, such as that of Holman (2003) has focused largely on the negative aspects of working in call centres. Call centres have been identified as stressful work environments and assigned numerous negative labels by critics due to the perceived unwholesome nature of the call centre environment. They have been compared to battery farms and elements of Taylorism, as well as being referred to as “factory sweatshops” or “dark satanic mills” (IDS, 1997; Fernie, 1998; and Arkin, 1997 as cited in Armistead et al, 2002).

The negativity associated with call centres appears to not only be seen by people externally, but to be experienced by employees within the call centres themselves. According to Wallace, Eagleson and Walbersee (2000), previous studies conducted in call centres have revealed that stress levels appear to be high with agents voluntarily making negative comments. Stress felt by agents as well as a decrease in job satisfaction have been linked to a lack of control (Ivancevich and Matteson, 1980 as cited in Holdsworth and Cartwright, 2002). Taking the effects of stress a step further, previous research has attributed emotional burnout in call centre to an inherent lack of supportive elements in the work design (Wallace et al, 2000).

Due to these negative connotations associated with call centres, it is no surprise that high turnover in call centres has emerged as an area of concern. In research it has been attributed to the stress agents are reported to experience. According to Burchman and Schmitt (2001), most managers of call centres list turnover as one of the top managerial challenges. With rates of turnover being

high, it is crucial for companies to ensure that they are not losing top performers, and also that the performance management system in place is holistic, encompassing factors such as rewards that may serve as motivators for employees not to leave the organisation.

It seems obvious that it is very important for managers to focus on performance management. An emergent area of concern in literature for management is with regards to the measurement of performance via service levels, abandon rates and call monitoring has also received attention (Miciak and Desmarais, 2001), illustrating the attention that has been directed to the area of performance. The research of Marr and Parry (2004) which took the form of a Fujitsu case study focused on the redesign of a call centre performance management system in order to move away from focusing on metrics and efficiency, and rather focusing on customer needs and intangible value creation. The Fujitsu case study entailed the application of sense and respond, a new customer-centric approach to performance management, which considers the centre of the business operation to be responsible for customer demand. Through the implementation of this new approach Fujitsu were able to identify the causes of costs and remove them, thus their overall findings were that service levels, customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction were all greatly improved. (Marr and Parry, 2004)

Where the focus of performance management should lie in call centres is debatable, with managers and employees having differing priorities and opinions. It would be interesting to note if employees' perceptions of performance management continue to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of call centres or if they will differ from previous research and have a more positive perspective. This research thus aims to take a novel approach into delving deeper into the use of images and better understanding perceptions of performance management within call centres.

Having looked at call centres in research, the focus now turns to images. Images form the primary focus; however metaphors in particular are the chosen tool for accessing peoples' perceptions of performance management in the current research.

## **2.2. Images**

To start off the exploration of images, a definition is necessary as to what exactly is considered to be an image. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, an image may be defined as: "the character of a thing as generally perceived; semblance or likeness; a person or thing that closely resembles another; a simile or metaphor; or mental representations, in other words an idea or conception" (Allen, 1990, p.588).

The use of images is not limited to literary research, it translates to organisations whereby individuals form images of their environment based on perceptions and experiences. The use of images is considered to be valuable and applicable to the current research as the images individuals use in order to describe the organisation they work in affects the ways in which they interact with the organisation as well as with others in the workplace (Poston-Anderson, 1996). This illustrates how images may be used as tools for exploration within the organisation. In order to clarify how images will be used in the current research, and in particular where metaphors fit in, a brief discussion of different linguistic devices is presented, followed by a discussion of the use of metaphors in organisational research. This is as the current research utilises linguistic tropes, predominantly metaphors, in order to access employee images of performance management in call centres.

### **2.2.1. Linguistic tropes**

In discussing linguistic tropes, particularly metaphors, confusion may exist with regards to terminology as tropes are traditionally used in linguistics and literature. Tropes are a conceptual grouping composed of non-literal uses of a word. Metaphor, anomaly, irony, and paradox, are figures of speech, which are among the four major forms of trope, although there are various other different linguistic tropes such as metonymy, comparison, analogy, allegory, and synecdoche. In its simplest description a trope may be considered to be a rhetorical figure of speech that is made up of a play on words in which a word is used but not literally or in its' exact manner. (Marshak, 2003)

Metaphor is the linguistic trope chosen for this study. It is considered to be a rhetorical trope which essentially means that a direct comparison is made between two subjects that seemingly appear to be unrelated. It is generally proposed that tropes have within them the ability to produce 'imagery' through the connotations that they hold that go beyond 'literal' meaning that they have (Chandler, 2001). The ability of metaphor as a trope is employed literally in this study whereby the images used to describe performance management will be evaluated to extract the themes and connotations they hold.

A metaphor is composed of two main parts, namely the tenor, which is the subject that the metaphor is applied to, and the vehicle, which is the metaphorical term that serves as the medium through which the tenor is applied (Koskinen, 2005). When the two parts, tenor and vehicle, converge they reach what is known as ground or a point of similarity (Koskinen, 2005). Metaphor is not limited to rhetorical or linguistic cases, although the majority of illustrations of metaphor originally come from speech or language, metaphor does not have to be verbal; any mode or form can serve the function of a metaphor (Chandler, 2001).

Once considered to be nothing but simple figures of speech, metaphors have been drastically altered to serve as a respectable and widely used approach for organisational analysis (Wood, 2002). Metaphors are considered powerful tools in communication due to the combination of a high content of information as well as their concrete nature that is picture-like; they thus allow for the visual transmission of an entire story by utilising one image, they are also easily remembered due to how concise they are (Sackmann, 1989). Metaphors were thus chosen for the current research as a new and creative method for exploring the perceptions held and images used with regards to performance management.

### **2.2.2. Metaphors**

It is necessary to take a closer look at metaphors, as they are to play a crucial role in the current study. Metaphors are widely used and considered to be a part of our everyday speech as well as our everyday thoughts (Davies, Chun, da Silva and Roper, 2001). Using a dictionary definition, a metaphor is “a picture or image denoting one object in place of another and suggesting an analogy between the two; an implied comparison” (Ricketts and Seiling, 2003, p.36). A metaphor may be viewed as a figure of speech in which a particular phrase or term is applied, that has a literal meaning, to a context that is different in order to suggest a likeness. In using the figurative comparison, additional information is provided about the content, structure as well as the meaning of any situation. (Sackmann, 1989)

Traditionally, metaphors have been seen as merely illustrative devices; however, this view is currently regarded as too narrow. Metaphors are now commonly seen as essential in understanding thinking and language use, as well as being key for creativity and the development of approaches to new emerging research objects (Alvesson, 2002).

Goodwin (1996, p.15) defines metaphor as “a way of knowing...a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. It is a way of cognition in which the identifying qualities of one thing are transferred in an instantaneous, almost unconscious flash of insight to some other thing that is, by remoteness or complexity, unknown to us...” Black (1962) refers to a substitution view of metaphor, which occurs when a metaphorical expression is used to replace a literal equivalent expression. Similarly according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.5), “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”. They put forward the idea that several kinds of metaphor form the foundation of most of our fundamental concepts. They also note that it is possible for metaphors to vary across different cultures but by nature they are not random or arbitrary as they are created from the experiences one encounters, be they physical, social or cultural.

Lawley and Tompkins (2000) agree with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) definition of metaphor as they believe it recognises that: metaphor is about capturing the essence of an experience; metaphor is an active process that is at the centre of understanding ourselves, others and the world about us; and that metaphor need not be limited to verbal expressions. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) propose that people define their reality based on metaphors and then act on the basis of the metaphors in all aspects of life. Based on how they consciously and unconsciously structure their experience using metaphor, they are able to draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans. In thinking and talking about complex phenomena metaphors are considered to be essential organising devices (Alvesson, 2002). The current research aims to employ metaphors in the abovementioned capacity, as tools to creatively give insight into perceptions.



### **2.2.3. The role of metaphors**

To fully understand the value that metaphors bring to any research, it is necessary to evaluate the role of metaphors. The research of Öztel and Hinz (2001) and Mignot (2000) suggests that the use of metaphor can be clustered according to three functions: the first function reflects a conscious analytical process, which may be used for creative understanding and sense making; the second function is the emotional dimension, whereby they generate experiential meaning and are associated to the feelings of individuals; the third function relates to the ability metaphors have to promote action,.

Metaphor generates meaning, the meaning that is associated with different phenomena, whether they are literal or figurative, is not intrinsic; it is created and obtained from processes, interactions, and associations that are social, cultural and mental. Metaphor serves to interpret and form the structure for the ways in which we think, talk and act (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

Metaphor produces a way of understanding the reflexive relationship between human actions and social systems; it creates a way of engaging with both human agency and social structure (Mignot, 2000). Additionally metaphors give insight, and assist in coming to terms with unfamiliar things, they serve as a method of clarifying confusions (Adams, 1977) and it is possible to have many metaphors, some effective whilst others are not; ultimately creativity and insight is necessary in constructing metaphors (Smith 1981).

Current theories of metaphor propose the following (Lakoff, 1993, p.244-5 as cited in Marshak, 2003, p.11):

- Metaphor is the predominant way in which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning
- Vast and varying subject matter can only be understood through the use of metaphor

- Fundamentally metaphors are conceptual and not linguistic
- Metaphorical language in itself is a surface manifestation of conceptual metaphor
- Metaphor assists by helping individuals to understand an abstract or unstructured subject matter in terms of another subject matter that is more structured and concrete.

According to Sackmann (1989), metaphors may be considered helpful tools in communication as they have the ability to: shed new light and refocus the familiar; provoke a vivid image that may make future actions more definite; and also to imply meanings on a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural level in a manner that is holistic. Metaphors are thus the mental pictures used by individuals in order to conceptualise as well as understand and explain phenomena that may be unclear or unfamiliar. Sackmann, (1989) went on further to say that metaphors allow for the communication of a large amount of information holistically, as rather than individual, isolated concepts, they involve entire systems or domains of meaning. One metaphor may within itself suggest a whole host of meanings that are interrelated, and using a particular metaphor may suggest feelings and actions that are related based on the original context, background or circumstance (Sackmann, 1989).

#### **2.2.4. Types of metaphor**

Various types of metaphors exist and are applicable to organisations. Morgan (1986) put forward the premise that metaphors form the basis for our theories and explanations of organisational life and they ultimately lead us to see as well as understand different organisations in ways that are both distinctive yet partial. Metaphors thus play a crucial part in our understanding of organisations and processes occurring in them. There are metaphors that are considered to have the ability to describe an organisation or any other elements within that organisation; five such metaphors that have been identified by Morgan (2001)

are: firstly the machine metaphor, which highlights efficiency, planning, control and overall smooth operations. The machine metaphor demonstrates strength, unity of purpose, as well as predictability and rigidity. Secondly the organism metaphor, it emphasizes organic relations as well as responsiveness to and functioning with the environment, fluidity and growth. Thirdly the brain metaphor, this emphasizes information processing aspects, learning and decision making. Fourth is the culture metaphor, highlighting the importance associated with the creation and negotiation of meaning; and lastly the political systems metaphor, it serves to stress the pursuit of interests (Sackmann, 1989; Inkson, 2002; and Morgan, 1986).

Three further major types of metaphors that were used by Morgan (2001) in order to identify metaphors in data and may thus prove to be valuable in the current research are: orientational metaphors which usually concern space and are based on cultural experiences, they organise a whole system of concepts with one another; ontological metaphors, they allow for the understanding of experiences via objects as well as substances, so that experience is quantified, grouped and categorised to the extent that they appear as a straightforward description; and lastly structural metaphors, they allow for the building of meaning of one concept based on and in terms of another.

The various types of existing metaphor are both descriptive and prescriptive, and in a concise and memorable package they are able to carry a substantial amount of abstract and intangible information due to their ability to be vivid, compact and expressive (Lawley and Tompkins 2000). Metaphors have been portrayed as having the ability to play numerous roles, such as creating insight as well as having the ability to distort, they have been acknowledged as having the ability to be contradictory in that they both strengths and limitations in that by creating ways of seeing; they also create ways of 'not seeing', thus ultimately no single theory or comprehensive metaphor can exist (Lawley, 2001).

In choosing a metaphor, one particular aspect or perspective of the situation is emphasized (Sackmann, 1989). Individuals choose metaphors that have personal meaning for them and highlight aspects that they feel are important. The perceptions of and feelings about particular actions are considered to be influenced by the implied meanings that are associated with a particular metaphor. This therefore means that the same behaviours may be experienced in ways that are very different depending on the chosen metaphor, with different employees being able to experience identical activities and situations very differently. It is thus recognised that the use of different metaphors can result in different behaviours (Sackmann, 1989). So far metaphors have been portrayed in a very positive light, however this may not always be the case, this leads to the discussion of possible metaphor limitations.

#### **2.2.5. The previous use of metaphor theoretically and in research**

The growth in popularity of metaphor is evident in the extensive literature in the form of theory and research from various disciplines related to metaphor. In order to show the flexibility and diverse applicability of metaphors previous theory and research in various fields will now be reviewed. The various propositions and findings will be considered in order to determine the applicability of metaphor for evaluating performance management in a call centre. Literature from various fields will be touched on but the main focus will ultimately be with regards to metaphors in the organisation.

The relationship between metaphors and knowledge is an interesting area of research. Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant (2002) consider the creative potential tropes such as metaphors have in the process of reasoning through the use of analogy, focusing on metaphors but also looking at the so-called lesser tropes, being anomaly, paradox and irony. They suggest that in arguing similarity from one respect to another, metaphors are best suited as a method of elaborating and explaining existing knowledge. Schmidt (2004) on the other hand evaluated

how, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, culture-specific ways of thinking play a role in organisational and management theory. Schmidt (2004) proposed that cognitive linguistics, namely metaphor analysis, has the ability to give insights into culture-specific knowledge; this is illustrated in a comparison of central verbal and non-verbal image-schemata in two different cultures, namely German and Swedish organisational theory. Theoretical research on metaphors further extends to metaphoric boundary objects, as is proposed in the conceptual paper of Koskinen (2005). Through a literature survey the study proposes that boundary objects are believed to potentially play a significant role as a co-ordinating mechanism when it comes to the knowledge sharing of a company's innovation process.

Metaphor influences people from different fields, they may be used in various descriptions, from those of the nature and character of the self (Hoskins and Leseho 1996), to demands placed on individuals (Arnett, 1999), as well as to the future (Ragsdell, 2000). The use of metaphors emerged in the field of engineering whereby Ragsdell (2000) invited engineers to use metaphors in order to explore the engineers' visions of the future and what they desired their future organisation to be, sometimes engineers drifted into using metaphors during their descriptions.

In certain areas, certain metaphors dominate or are reoccurring. In popular and academic portrayals of retailing and distribution the warfare metaphor pervades, Whysall (2001) explores the nature of the warfare metaphor in depth and illustrates its widespread use. In services marketing literature metaphor plays a vital role, researchers have used metaphors to clarify service delivery and encounters, and Morgan's approach has and can be applied in the analysis of service metaphors (Goodwin 1996). This depicts the applicability of the use of metaphors in the current research in terms of the fact that the call centre environment has a very strong service delivery focus, it is hoped the value of metaphor use will extend also to performance management.

Beyond theory and into research using metaphor, metaphor use extends to facilitating learning and developing understanding. The vital role metaphors have the potential to play in facilitating learning is illustrated via a Disneyland Paris case study, a series of metaphors reveals various insights relating to cultural and political realities (Aupperle and Karimalis 2001). Richardson and McKenna (2000) conducted a qualitative study of British academics. The research took the form of tape-recorded, focused, in-depth interviews, which were between one and three hours in length. The sample consisted of 30 British expatriate academics employed in New Zealand, Singapore, Turkey and The United Arab Emirates universities. Their research suggested that metaphor has the potential to be a useful tool for developing the understanding of self-selecting expatriates. Four metaphors emerged from the study falling under two categories, metaphors for motivation to expatriate, being the expatriate academic as explorer and as refugee. The second category consisted of metaphors for how expatriation is experienced, being the expatriate academic as outsider and as tightrope walker. Richardson and McKenna (2000) proposed that the metaphors might be employed in the facilitation of better management practices.

Research illustrates that metaphor provides one unifying possibility at a time when organisations are struggling to present an identity that is consistent to multiple as well as overlapping publics (Boyd, 2003). In employing the metaphor of relating things to war, it was demonstrated that metaphor pervaded one organisation's way of talking which resulted in the presentation of a consistent identity to stakeholders (Boyd, 2003). According to Oswick, Keenoy and Grant (2003) if individuals within organisations did not resort to extensive and routine use of conceptual metaphor, organisational communication would almost be impossible. From an analysis of publications that are recent, Goodwin (1996) found that previous research has studied the concept of business metaphors from different perspectives, such as metaphor use among business leaders, the influence of metaphors used by organisational consultants and change agents,

how use by members reflects their assumptions, and also researchers have used metaphors to express ideas.

In their research, Öztel and Hinz (2001) sought to determine how individuals in organisations socialised, developed shared meanings and communicated among themselves. This was achieved via a consultancy project designed to reduce accident rates in four Danish sugar factories. They present examples of metaphor use in the project and hypothesise that the use of metaphor formed part of the explanation for a steady decrease in accidents over time. They put forward the idea that more than formal conceptual learning, consultants use images, stories, narratives, and fairy tales with regards to change.

According to Stark and Marcus (2000), there has been an evolution of an increasing amount of high-quality research that has been conducted over the past decade. This research has been focused on managing organisations in the natural environment; metaphors are thus making a significant impact on research within organisations.

Several events are likely to occur within any organisation such as experiencing an interview and dealing with organisational behaviour, organisational change and technical change. It is thus not surprising to find that research has explored the relationship between metaphor and these events. In Alvesson's (2003) research eight metaphors are presented as offering reconceptualizations of the interview, they draw on theoretical language trends, the subject, and discourse; the research further discusses several new metaphors for interviews. In relation to organisational behaviour, the value of metaphor has been considered as a means of understanding organisational behaviour. Fenley (1998) achieved this through the application of different metaphors to describe and prescribe distinct management conduct types in disciplinary situations. With regards to organisational change, when it comes to understanding the circumstances, clarifying the direction, and resolving the problems, it has been shown that

metaphors are highly effective aids; great debate exists however as to what the best metaphor or set of metaphors may be (Abel and Sementelli 2005). Lastly, in relation to technical change, analysing the metaphor associated with a technological change provided understanding for the way in which new technology is conceptualised (Marshak, 2003).

In research there appears to be no fixed number or appropriate metaphor, according to Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001) after controlling for gender, team function, and total words in an interview, the employment of teamwork metaphors varies across countries as well as organizations. The number of metaphors that may be used in any situation is extensive; in their research alone Poston-Anderson (1996) collected 57 metaphors. Super and Harkness (2003) identify root metaphors forming the basis of current perspectives on human development and propose that they play a role in interpretations of child behaviour by both parents and mental health professionals.

Metaphor has been used in order to generate theory from across a series of studies (Lennon and Wollin, 2001) and it is evident from previous research that use of metaphor may be applied to various fields, with limited research of metaphors in call centres existing. Metaphor was thus deemed as an appropriate evaluative and illustrative tool for use in the current research.

A substantial amount of organisational literature has focused its attention on metaphor as a guide for understanding various aspects of organisations. A strong advocacy of the use of reframing by utilising organisational metaphors as one of the skills of the “new” manager has existed since the mid-1980s, with the underlying message being that it allows for both analysis and action (Palmer and Dunford 1996). Lawley (2001) proposes that the implicit images or metaphors which persuade us to see, understand, and imagine situations in partial ways form the foundation of all theories of organisation and management.



Organisational literature may at times refer to organisations having a personality; here the personality metaphor may serve as a way to understand the complex nature of both image and identity (Davies et al, 2001). Each image serves to demonstrate different qualities of a particular organisation, with each metaphor embodying a unique truth, thus metaphors should be used as complements to each other, as no single metaphor comes close to expressing the whole truth (Inkson, 2002). It seems logical that no one metaphor can be expected to describe a situation in its entirety as there are so many different elements to any situation, including performance management.

Alvesson (2002) explored the concept of organisations as cultures. He proposed the notion that culture plays a crucial role in organisational life and thus organisational culture is an important issue in any organisation. Alvesson (2002) explored the distinct differences between viewing culture as a variable in contrast to viewing culture as a root metaphor. In discussing the implications of second-level metaphors he considered eight metaphors for culture extracted from current literature. The eight metaphors being culture as: exchange-regulator; social glue; sacred cow; affect-regulator; disorder; world-closure; compass; and blinders. Five different dimensions of metaphors are also considered necessary in evaluating organisational culture, these are: functionalism vs. non-functionalism; objectivism vs. subjectivism; cognition vs. emotion; free will vs. determinism, and pro-management vs. anti-management. These dimensions are proposed to give an opportunity for the comparison of varying metaphors of organisational culture. For this research, although viewing metaphors according to culture is not the aim, it will be interesting to note if any cultural metaphors do emerge.

Many organisational leaders seek to influence and effect directly the development of their organisation based on the language they employ and pictures of hope and inspiration they create by consciously using socially constructed components which serve the crucial function of setting the stage for change processes to be more effective and enduring (Ricketts and Seiling,

2003). Employees will thus have their own perceptions of various organisational issues based on their environment, experiences, personal characteristics, as well as language and pictures used within the organisation. One method that may be utilized in order to gather perceptions is to analyse emergent metaphors (Morgan, 2001). Metaphors that are well placed are thought to have the power to both focus as well as redirect the energy of the people within a particular organisational setting, with stories often serving to underlie implied assumptions in the workplace, the translation of language; metaphors; and stories serves as a catalyst in order to make sense of the experienced world (Ricketts and Seiling, 2003).

Recent phenomena in organisations have resulted on emphasis being placed on the use of metaphors in the workplace environment. This new perspective calls upon organisational leaders and researchers to extend learning through the use of metaphors and to thus listen very consciously to the metaphors currently being utilised in organisations (Ricketts and Seiling, 2003). In various settings individuals in organisations develop a culture through the use of symbolic forms such as story, myth, ritual and language; metaphor forms one important part of this social glue (Poston-Anderson, 1996). Language, metaphors and stories play a role within the organisational context from a social constructionist point of view; “languages” are developed within organisations, they mirror patterns of unique vocabulary that design practice. If a metaphor is well positioned it has the power to impact on people within an organisation, redirecting and focusing its energy; whilst stories within the workplace community often underlie the implicit assumptions. If translated language, metaphors, and stories may be used as catalysts for making sense of the world as experienced by individuals, as well as learning and cultural instrumentation. (Ricketts and Seiling, 2003)

Metaphors can be considered to be potentially powerful tools for obtaining attitudinal data as they are often far from being literary devices that are neutral or impulsive. Oswick and Montgomery (1999, p. 516) propose that “the ability of

metaphor to give a voice to what were previously tacit perceptions, combined with the tendency to project an accompanying attitude, makes them a particularly valuable instrument for exploring organisations.” In organisations metaphors are able to provide an important, dynamic offering as a creative iterative tool; they allow for better understanding and speed up learning; they additionally have the ability to shock and provoke, enlighten and also help to explain (Aupperle and Karimalis, 2001). A metaphor is a tool of perception, not only a decoration; with metaphors that have within them the capability to guide also containing the potential to have within them the capability to keep people going in an organisation during calm times of routine as well as times of crisis (Arnett, 1999).

In discussing the applicability and use of metaphors the focus now turns to imaginization as it describes the practical application of metaphor to the organisational context.

#### **2.2.6. The role of imaginization**

Morgan (1986) proposed the notion of imaginization, which is devoted, to practically using metaphor in order to analyse organisations and for creative management. According to Morgan (1986) imaginization is an interpretative process, whereby through different images a situation is considered; imaginization provides the opportunity for greater variety of interpretations and reinterpretations of situations.

Through the development of the researcher’s imagination and by helping to shed light on certain concepts metaphors add value to research; the development of imagination necessitates that the researcher apply metaphors that already exist to newly selected situations and also to present metaphors that are new to previously studied areas that have received limited research (Goodwin, 1996). In essence, in order to make sense of metaphors interpretative effort is required and sometimes metaphors may become used habitually (Chandler, 2001).

The definition of metaphor, its origin, previous research and applicability have been evaluated, it therefore seems logical that the next step should be to look at what exactly the use of metaphor will be applied to in the current research, thus the discussion will now turn to performance management.

### **2.3. Performance management**

Performance management is made up of all the performance-related activities within an organisation, it includes the following: determining how performance is appraised; establishing organisational procedures related to performance appraisal information; remuneration systems; training and development systems; career development systems and assessment systems (Fisher, Katz, Miller and Thatcher, 2003).

Job performance, according to its simplest definition, relates to determining what is considered to form poor, adequate and good performance levels, this applies to each task and the whole job (Fisher et al, 2003). Literature suggests that managing performance is a continuous process, whereby the organisation clarifies the necessary performance levels in order to meet strategic objectives, transform them into unit and individual objectives, and also to manage them on a continuous basis to ensure that they are not only being achieved, but also that they stay consistent and relevant to the overall strategic objectives (Lockett, 1992).

In strategic management systems, areas such as clarifying and translating the vision and strategy; communicating and linking strategic objectives and measures; linking rewards to performance measures; planning, setting targets, and aligning strategic initiatives; and; enhancing strategic feedback and learning are highlighted as crucial elements of performance management (Kaplan and Norton, 1996).

The logic behind performance management lies in the idea that performance within an organisation is likely to improve if it were to be managed better (Fisher et al, 2003). How the performance systems will be used is crucial, this is as it will determine the necessary incentive structure as well as practical arrangements for handling the information generated. This is in order to allow for the development of a set of good practices, which leads to the ultimate goal of transforming performance measurement to performance management. (Amaratunga, and Baldry, 2002)

Performance management provides the opportunity for management to refine and improve development activities within the organization, with performance management programmes providing feedback on specifics based on certain objectives from the desired outcomes of performance measures, and not merely generalizations. The process of performance management is proposed to develop participation, awareness, a decision-making process that is decentralised, and the responsibility of achieving formulated goals. (Amaratunga, and Baldry, 2002)

When it comes to performance management within the call centre environment, the training of agents and customer satisfaction are two key aspects. Top-performing call centres have in common the fact that they invest in customer service representatives through training which correlates to customer satisfaction (Miciak and Desmarais, 2001).

Benchmarking is also a key factor often used in the call centre environment to assist in analysing performance. It is essential that realistic measures and attainable targets are set, with the challenge facing call centres being to find a balance between call quality and call quantity. It is believed that by comparing a call centres Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to the established industry standard, areas of improvement will be determined; however comparisons need

to be made between call centres that are similar. In obtaining individual performance measures of agents it is essential however that organisations need to ensure that excessive performance management does not occur whereby agents feel as if they are required to automatically produce results as this may ultimately negatively impact on employee morale (Diemont, 2005).

In the management of performance, measures need to be taken in order to gauge performance in terms of strengths and weaknesses which will highlight areas necessitating training, growth, and development, as well as where rewards are deemed appropriate. It therefore stands to reason that good performance management would require the implementation and use of appropriate performance measurement systems.

In summary evaluating performance management as a whole, ultimately refers to all the various methods used by managers that allow them to determine and ensure that the activities and outputs of employees are congruent with the goals of the organization (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2003).

From the extensive literature available on performance management, it can thus be concluded that there are numerous differing ways to define and discuss the elements of performance management, commonalities are encompassed in the use or emphasis of one or more of the following 8 constructs: control; alignment with organisational strategies; the achievement of overall goals and objectives; rewards; training; development; appraisal and motivation (Fisher, Katz, Miller and Thatcher, 2003; Amaratunga, and Baldry, 2002; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2003). These constructs are considered to be the essence of performance management, thus for the current research they will form the foundation for defining performance management and images held by employees will be evaluated according to these eight constructs.

The literature on performance management seems to perceive performance management as a very positive strategic tool for organisational functioning. However, it is debatable whether employees will define and perceive it as such a positive tool based on how they have or are currently experiencing it.

In managing performance the measurement of performance plays a crucial role so as to gauge how individuals are performing, be it for development, incentives or to align with organisational strategy (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2003). When the notion of performance management is discussed, individuals may automatically think of performance measurement, particularly performance appraisals, as this seems to be what is most familiar to them. Due to this fact, performance measurement and performance appraisal are now to be discussed in detail so as to shed light on these concepts thus clarifying how they differ and relate to one another.

### **2.3.1. Performance measurement systems**

A simple definition of measurement generally means, “the assignment of numbers to properties (or characteristics) of objects based on a set of rules”, with interest lying in quantities that have meaning (Becker, Huselid and Ulrich, 2001, p113), whilst a more literal definition of performance measurement is that it is “the process of quantifying action, where measurement is the process of quantification and action leads to performance” (Neely, Gregory, and Platts, 1995:80). Performance measurement thus differs from performance management in that performance management is a more holistic concept, whilst performance measurement forms one part of the performance management system, that of measuring actual performance.

Historically, the development of performance measurement systems occurred as a way to both monitor and maintain control within the organisation. This is considered to be the process of making sure that an organisation pursues

strategies that will result in the achievement of overall goals and objectives (Nani, Dixon, Vollmann, 1990 as cited in Amaratunga, and Baldry, 2002). It seems logical that performance measurement alone will not achieve the above but rather having in place a performance management system that will put the measures obtained to use in obtaining goals and objectives.

Performance measurement may be regarded as an essential agent of change when attempting to change an organisation's focus (Brignall, 1992 as cited in Amaratunga, and Baldry, 2002). In management, the development of performance measurement has been due to the emphasis on improved quality and service, in addition to meeting cost parameters (Becker et al, 2001).

Two fundamental dimensions of performance are effectiveness and efficiency with all performance measurement systems being composed of numerous individual performance measures that may be categorised in various ways. Literature in the field of performance measurement is very diverse, as different authors have focused on differing aspects of the system design. (Neely, Gregory, and Platts, 1995)

Evaluations of performance measurement have focused on various aspects such as quality, time, cost and flexibility (Neely, Gregory, and Platts, 1995). Likert (1972) proposes that constant measurements reporting on performance and on the organisation are a necessary tool; this is to ensure that performance is at an optimum level. This is of particular relevance to the current study on call centres where constant measurement plays a large role. Call centre managers use numerous metrics that may or may not be accurate reflective indicators of service quality. In call centres service quality is a crucial factor as call centres serve as the medium through which the organisation and customers interact. When these indicators are used in order to determine measures of service quality performance, management is doing this without the perceptions and feedback of



employees (Miciak and Desmarais, 2001), who may provide immense value and have considerably critical input to add.

Through performance measurement a basis is formed for organisations to assess how it is progressing, its strengths and limitations, as well as future initiatives with the ultimate goal being to improve the organisations performance. Measurement is a tool for more effective management, for organisations to effectively use performance measurement requires a transition from measurement to management whereby organisations are able to anticipate the required changes in strategic direction and have the appropriate methodology to effect the required strategic change (Amaratunga and Baldry, 2002).

Senior management acknowledge the fact that inadequate and inappropriate performance measurement can hinder change and improvement (Amaratunga and Baldry, 2002). Often linked to performance measurement and of relevance to call centres is performance monitoring. A managerial perspective views performance monitoring as both a supportive and development process (Armistead, Kiely, Hole, and Prescott, 2002).

The primary function of any performance measurement system is considered as a means to control organisational operations, it allows for the describing of expectations and performance, and forms a base for discussions on how each individual can contribute to fulfilling the organisation's vision (Amaratunga, and Baldry, 2002). Whether or not performance measurement systems fulfil their function is at times questionable.

Various parties at different levels within the organisation may be involved in performance measurement with differing opinions as to the overall effectiveness of any performance management system. The most commonly known and predominantly employed method of measuring performance is that of performance appraisals.

### **2.3.2. Performance appraisals**

Formal programmes exist in most large organisations whereby supervisors evaluate subordinates work and subsequently complete “performance ratings” or “performance evaluations” at regular intervals for each individual. The subordinate is typically told how they were rated and why and a discussion may occur between supervisors and subordinates to resolve any misconceptions (Sutermeister, 1976). Frequent appraisal of employee performance affords the organisation an opportunity to identify employees who perform to exceptional standards, thus they may be rewarded, motivated and retained. This also allows for the identification of under performers and facilitates the opportunity for improvement. (Fisher et al, 2003)

Performance appraisals serve to inform employees as to how well they are progressing towards achieving their goals. Managers can achieve the provision of structure for employees through goal setting, performance appraisal, and the provision of feedback; all these factors are thought to contribute to higher productivity (Nash, 1985). Prescriptive literature in performance management as well as contemporary performance management systems emphasise the “control” aspect of appraisal, this is done by specifying as well as measuring an individual employee’s contribution to the organisation (Simmons, 2002). Through specification of requirements and how one is to be measured, control is purported to give clarity to employees and power over their performance management. The appraisal system and individuals’ contributions are in this way aligned to corporate strategy so as to ensure that the philosophy and practice of the appraisal are derived from the business objectives of the organisation and ultimately contribute to it. The effectiveness of such appraisals and the genuine influence that employees actually have may be questionable at times, as even this occurs within the parameters of what the organisation stipulates as acceptable and within line with their goals and objectives. (Simmons, 2002)

Performance management in itself encompasses many different aspects and may be operationalised in different ways. Managers, supervisors and employees are all involved in performance management and would therefore have their own way of perceiving and defining performance management, for this reason this research finds it necessary to evaluate images held of performance management from employees at different levels within the organisation.

### **2.3.3. HR, team leaders/supervisors and management**

The next step after defining performance management is implementing the necessary performance management system, which is the duty of HR, team leaders/supervisors and managers. Who implements the performance management system will ultimately be dictated by the chosen method of performance management, organisational structure and organisational functioning.

The roles of HR, team leaders/supervisors and management differ and thus each wield different forms of influence with regards to the performance management system as a whole and are perceived differently by employees. Whether it is directly or indirectly, Armistead, Kiely, Hole, and Prescott (2002) found that HR considerations pervade the majority of managerial issues in their organisational study. The role of team leaders is also identified as crucial in the development and maintenance of customer-service quality, as well as for the maintenance of agents' morale and motivation. Team leaders and supervisors are a critical part of managing interpretation, meaning and performance; they are required to have the ability to identify the training needs of agents, they must be able to have beneficial dialogues with agents as well as coaching session, and they also need the appropriate technical skills to deal with any problems that agents may refer to them (Armistead, Kiely, Hole, and Prescott, 2002). The influences of these senior positions and how they interact with call centre agents as well as how they are

perceived is very important as this will play a role in shaping the attitudes and images call centre agents hold with regards to performance management.

The duty of managers in structuring is to take the objectives of the organisation and turn them into action plans, set measures of achievement, and also establish the necessary timetables. It is essential to set goals in initiating structure, as an organisation that lacks a set of goals is like a ship sailing without a destination. (Nash, 1983; 1985)

Management and supervisors thus jointly have an important role to play in putting performance management into action and also to motivate employees to perform, be it via good leadership or incentives. Generally motivators are those influencers that serve to uplift an individual's attitudes or their performance. In understanding motivation it is necessary to recognise that people respond to others, situations, or issues not as they are, but rather as they are perceived (Sutermester, 1976). In exploring the images held by employees about performance management, the research aims to determine the perceptions that they have of performance management in their organisation. In this way it is hoped that a greater understanding will be gained as to how employees are motivated or on the contrary discouraged by the performance management system in place.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

Call centres need the combination of technology, process, and human talent in order to succeed; this is due to the fact that they are complex operations. Within call centres, managers tend to produce many measures of performance, the majority of which are metrics related to the telephone technology (e.g. average talk time, abandon rates, etc.) in use, as well as to the adherence of employees to the standards of practice (e.g. occupancy rates, calls per hour, etc.) (Miciak and Desmarais, 2001). Performance management plays a significant role in call

centres where performance measurement via various methods such as the previously mentioned metrics is considered to be a standard requirement by some; this in itself has formed the basis of controversial debate (Holman, 2003)

Within the call centre environment, where great pressure is placed on employees to perform to a certain standard, and where performance management is common, this research seeks to explore the images employees actually do have of performance management and how they relate to how performance management is defined, especially employees at different levels within the organisation. As stipulated earlier this method of investigation is fairly new having not been done before in previous research, making this an exploratory case study.

## **2.5. Summary and aims**

This chapter was an in-depth literature review, which dealt with defining the concepts of call centres, images and performance management. Call centres and call centre agents were defined, previous research in call centres was also evaluated and it was determined that this research has been predominantly negative.

The focus then turned to images, they were defined and their origins discussed. This touched on the notion of tropes and metaphors as tropes. The role of metaphors, types of metaphors and metaphors in previous research was subsequently discussed, with particular emphasis on metaphors in the organisational context and their practical application. Great motivation was made for the applicability of using metaphors for evaluating performance management in a call centre.

Attention then turned to performance management; it was defined as well the eight constructs considered as defining performance management. The

confusion as to using performance management, performance measurement and performance appraisal was touched on and the three topics differentiated.

The majority of the literature advocated for the use of metaphors, identified the negative connotations associated with call centres and depicted that there are numerous definitions existing for the term performance management. It also revealed that although extensive literature has been focused on metaphors as well as performance management and although call centres are an emergent area of focus, no research has examined the images that call centre agents have of performance management. When it comes to looking at the images employees' hold of and use to define performance management based on the eight constructs identified and believed to define performance management there appears to be no research. This research thus aims to explore this topic further thus contributing to research on call centres, images and performance management.

This study is not aimed at setting a precise image of what performance management is, but at rather getting an idea from the images presented of how it is perceived; of which elements of performance management are emergent and most prevalent in descriptions of performance management by agents.

The following chapter will involve an in-depth discussion of the aims and methodological steps employed in the current research.