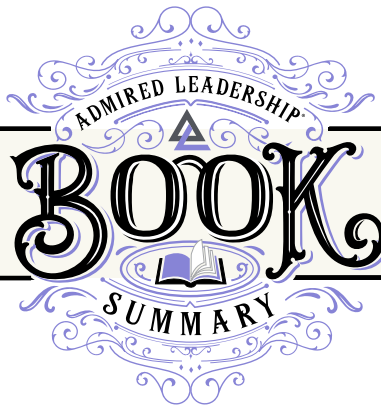




Eight Minutes, Not Eight Hours



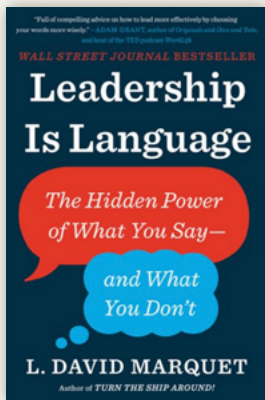
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Leadership Is Language

The Hidden Power of What You Say – and What You Don't

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In his book, *Leadership Is Language*, former U.S. Navy Captain and author of *Turn the Ship Around!* L. David Marquet demonstrates the power of language to create a better organizational culture. Using a playbook metaphor, Marquet highlights the inadequacies of Industrial Age-style leadership and proposes a New Leadership Playbook. Changing the way you communicate – what you say and what you don't say – is a fundamental tool for improving your leadership and achieving better outcomes. Marquet's “playbook” details how to lead for better results in our changing environment.

Key Quote

“Changing the way we communicated changed the culture. Changing the culture transformed our results. Changing our words changed our world” (p. 6). — L. David Marquet

Key Points

Losing El Faro. Communication records from a sunken container ship, *El Faro*, show that collaboration and communication were not fostered onboard. The crew's concerns – which could have saved the vessel had they been heeded – were never given serious consideration. The tragedy is Exhibit A of the strictly top-down leadership style that needs to be retired in many arenas today.

The New Playbook. In a playbook that changes the language and approach of how we work together, all the team members work together in both decision-making and doing. Discussion is open, and workers are involved in evaluating and guiding goals and processes alongside leaders. For the book's purposes: **bluework** is defined as decision-making work, and **redwork** is defined as “doing” work.

Exiting Redwork: Control the Clock. Pause and take the time to discuss, evaluate, and field opposing viewpoints – with an eye to “doing it right, not twice” (p. 84).

Into the Bluework: Collaborate. “Let the doers be the deciders” (p. 105). Asking open-ended questions, seeking minority and dissenting viewpoints, and voting **before** a discussion encourages collaboration and avoids coercion.

Leaving Bluework Behind: Commit. Commitment is fostered when collaboration has occurred. Commitment is implemented best when both learning and action are valued and tasks are performed in manageable “chunks.”

The End of Redwork: Complete. Your language should center around reaching the goal, not endlessly slogging along the conveyor belt **as is**, even if things are not working. As the work continues – and options diminish – there will be less bluework and more redwork. “Rest and celebrate” when a goal is achieved.

Completing the Cycle: Improve. Improvement “comes from egoless scrutiny of past actions, and deep reflective thinking about what could be better” (p. 189).

The Enabling Play: Connect. “Flatten the power gradient” to encourage caring, open connections between people so that the rest of the principles above can be achieved (p. 244).

Applying the Redwork – Bluework Principles in Workplace Situations. Language changes can turn effective bluework on – or off. Craft your language to make it clear that you want discussion and collaboration. Use the principles above to move fluidly between decision-making and doing.

The Red – Blue Operating System. “Strict Goals + Steep Hierarchies = Unethical Behavior” (p. 284). “Remember, the redwork, prove-and-perform mindset is superior in the short run for achieving results, but the bluework, learn-and-grow mindset is more adaptive in the long run” (p. 285).

Saving El Faro. Had they been enabled by “the power of connection,” the crew and captain of **El Faro** would have used language more effectively and constructively, and the outcome would have been entirely different.

Key Concepts:


INTRODUCTION

In a fast-paced age of innovation, we need new leadership strategies, starting with language. “After all, what is leadership but language?”


As a U.S. Naval officer, Marquet was suddenly put in charge of the nuclear submarine **Santa Fe** – a sub with poor morale and performance. In attempting to get things back on track, he found that changing his language was a catalyst for changing everything, and the submarine crew’s morale and performance were transformed.

A new approach to leadership emphasizes the strategic use of communication and “oscillates between action and reflection, doing and deciding” (p. 10). Language is key to implementing the six key plays in Marquet’s New Leadership Playbook. Found on pages 10-11, Marquet’s plays are:

- 1) **Control the Clock** instead of obeying the clock.
- 2) **Collaborate** instead of coercing.
- 3) **Commitment** rather than compliance.
- 4) **Complete** defined goals instead of continuing work indefinitely.
- 5) **Improve** outcomes rather than prove ability.
- 6) **Connect** with people instead of conforming to your role



Pause and take the time to discuss, evaluate, and field opposing viewpoints – with an eye to “doing it right, not twice.”




“Let the doers be the deciders”

Losing El Faro


In September 2015, a container ship named **El Faro** set sail from Florida to deliver goods to Puerto Rico. The ship maintained its usual route, despite warnings from the crew about treacherous conditions caused by Hurricane Joaquin. The dangerous waters were insurmountable. **El Faro** sank off the coast of the Bahamas.

The transcription from the conversations between crew members serves as an example of the failure of language. The organizational culture failed the crew members and led to their demise. “Encouraging people to speak up, or even ‘empowering’ them with statements like ‘don’t hesitate to change course’ in an environment of top-down decision-making, simply does not work” (p. 25).

Share of Voice is “the proportion of words attributed to each person in a conversation and is an excellent indicator of the power gradient within an organization” (p. 32). Share of voice can be indicated using a tool called the Team Language Coefficient (TLC). With this tool, individual contributions in team conversations are measurable and observable. The TLC can provide data to help a team achieve a balanced share of voice, resulting in “more team thinking and better decision outcomes” (p. 33).



Improvement “comes from egoless scrutiny of past actions, and deep reflective thinking about what could be better.”



THE NEW PLAYBOOK

The **El Faro** and many workplaces operate with a playbook left over from the Industrial Age, which focuses on coercion, doing (not thinking), reducing variability, complying, and conforming to roles.

Marquet defines **redwork** and **bluework** as the two types of work. Redwork involves doing, executing, and reducing variability (p. 43). Bluework involves thinking, decision-making, and embracing variability (p. 43).

To achieve the best outcomes, organizations must balance both redwork and bluework.

Language makes the division between redwork and bluework evident. Redwork says things like, “Make it happen. Bluework says things like, “How do you see it?” (p. 45).

In the Industrial Age, there were blue-collar workers (redworkers) and white-collar workers (blueworkers).

In the New Playbook, everyone is a thinker **and** a doer. What follows is a description of these “plays” from Marquet’s leadership playbook.

EXITING REDWORK: CONTROL THE CLOCK


The Control-the-Clock Play resists the Industrial Age Play of Obey the Clock. It enables the shift from redwork to bluework. Marquet lists four principles (below, in bold) of The Control-the-Clock Play:

Make a pause possible – to allow for questioning, confusion, or vulnerability. Leaders should not preempt a pause by making it challenging for individuals to question a decision. Making a pause possible sounds like: “We have time to do this right, not twice” (p. 84).

Give the pause a name – to make sure employees know how to call a pause. The pause could be called a “time-out,” saying “hands-off,” or raising a yellow card or a hand (p. 91). A pause is “practicing resilience.” And “there are no unnecessary pauses. Regardless of whether it turns out the pause was justified, every pause is necessary to establish a culture in which people are comfortable raising their hands” (p. 92).

Call a pause – which is the leader’s responsibility. Workers have been programmed for immersion in redwork, making them too focused on work to call a pause. Leaders must create a culture where calling a pause is acceptable, and the best way to do that is to call a pause themselves. Leaders should be attuned to their teams and should know when to call a pause (pp. 95-99).

Preplan the next pause – to prevent getting too immersed in redwork. To preplan a pause, set a timer or set a date for a check-in. Preplanning a pause is similar to agile management structures, which use a set pattern of bluework, redwork, bluework (pp. 100-101).



*Make a pause possible –
to allow for questioning,
confusion, or vulnerability*

INTO THE BLUEWORK: COLLABORATE

The Collaborate Play is set up by The Control-the-Clock Play. The Collaborate Play eliminates the separation between redworkers and blueworkers. The Industrial Age relied on coercion – blueworkers getting redworkers to work. Now, the goal is to “let the doers be the deciders” (p. 105). Marquet lists four principles of The Collaborate Play:

Vote first, then discuss – to increase variability, which enables innovation and better decision-making. Psychological safety refers to how safe individuals feel to share their thoughts and feelings without judgment. This “vote first, then discuss” approach requires individuals to feel safe enough to dissent.

Be curious, not compelling – about what dissenters know that others may not. Leaders should speak last and be driven by curiosity. They should want to know and understand the opposite position. Practice this by encouraging team members to argue for the other side (pp. 117-118). Leaders should ask good questions and avoid the “seven sins of questioning” (pp. 119-125).

Invite dissent rather than drive consensus – because collective knowledge produces better outcomes. Leaders should seek dissenting opinions, and the whole team must welcome dissent (p. 125).

Give information, not instructions – to let people choose and experience the consequences (p. 130).

The Collaborate Play runs in bluework – thinking and decision-making. Collaboration should produce a hypothesis that can be tested during redwork.

LEAVING BLUEWORK BEHIND: COMMIT

The Collaborate Play sets up **The Commit Play** in which team members commit to action as decided upon during bluework. Commitment is internally motivated. Commitment is about choice. It is opposite to the Industrial Age Play of compliance, which is forced. Marquet lists three principles of The Commit Play:

Commit to learn, not (just) do – in order to test the hypothesis established in The Collaborate Play. This frames redwork as a learning experience, not (just) a doing experience (p. 143).

Commit actions, not beliefs – because not everyone needs to agree with the decision, but everyone must support it through their actions (p. 145).

Chunk it small, but do it all – means setting a specific time period for the upcoming redwork. Shorter bursts of redwork are effective learning experiences when uncertainty is high. As certainty increases, people can work in longer chunks of redwork. Planning to chunk redwork into small pieces also avoids attachment to decisions and the continuance of erroneous work (pp. 146-147).

The “decision-makers” should not be the “decision-evaluators.” This avoids over-attachment to a decision, known as escalation of commitment (pp. 155, 156).

THE END OF REDWORK: COMPLETE

The Complete Play comes at the end of a period of redwork and is the opposite of the Industrial Age's Continue Play. The Complete Play is a reset, an entrance to bluework for reflection and celebration. Marquet lists four principles of The Complete Play:

Chunk work for frequent completes early, few completes late – because the beginning of a project involves more significant uncertainty and requires more time for bluework. As the project becomes more defined, longer periods of redwork will increase production (p. 169).

Celebrate with, not for – to avoid evaluating or judging accomplishments. Celebration is integral in The Complete Play, because it reinforces good behavior, allows individuals to feel accomplished, and creates a detachment from work in order to move on. To celebrate with, not for, use descriptive statements like “I see that you’ve organized the presentation into three sections – I’ve got your points organized in my head now” (p. 177).

Focus on behavior, not characteristics – since people can control and improve behaviors (pp. 178-179).

Focus on journey, not destination – to allow individuals to share the steps they took to reach a goal. This reinforces successful behaviors (pp. 179-181).

COMPLETING THE CYCLE: IMPROVE

The Improve Play “links the mental activity we do during bluework to the desired outcome – improving redwork” (p. 189). The Improve Play requires an attitude geared toward learning and growth. Marquet lists four principles of The Improve Play:

Forward, not backward – means focusing on growth, learning, and how to change behaviors.

Outward, not inward – requires focusing on others to avoid protective behaviors. Ask: “What could we do to better serve our customers?” or “What changes would the board want us to make here?” (p. 204).

On the process, not on the person – because focusing on the process prevents defensiveness about past behaviors and personal characteristics. Ask: “What improvements could we make to the process?” (p. 205).

On achieving excellence, not avoiding errors – because error avoidance leads to inaction (p. 205).

THE ENABLING PLAY: CONNECT

The Connect Play is the “enabling play” for all the other plays. “The Connect Play is about caring – caring what people think, caring how they feel, caring for their personal goals. Instead of judging from a position of power, we walk alongside from a position of encouragement” (p. 219).


Marquet lists four principles of The Connect Play:

Flatten the power gradient – to create a culture in which people feel safe enough to dissent, to be confused, and to admit mistakes. The power gradient is “the amount of social distance there is between one person and another” (p. 220) and manifests through the censoring of information.

Admit you don’t know – because it allows the team to admit they do not know (pp. 231-232).

Be vulnerable – to “create a culture where being vulnerable and exposed feels perfectly safe” (p. 234).

Trust first – because people will work better, harder, and longer when they feel trusted. Create a culture where dissent is acceptable (pp. 234-235).



Pause and take the time to discuss, evaluate, and field opposing viewpoints – with an eye to “doing it right, not twice.”



“Let the doers be the deciders”



APPLYING THE REDWORK-BUEWORK PRINCIPLES IN WORKPLACE SITUATIONS

“Make a statement one way and you’ll get one response that leads to an outcome. Say it slightly differently and you’ll wind up with a different response and a different outcome” (p. 248).

When teams are prone to continuing, plan a pause and run The Complete Play. This will allow teams to switch to bluework. They can assess their redwork and decide to continue or not (pp. 252-254).

To deal with change, run The Control-the-Clock and Commit Plays. Approach the change as a test with a set timeline and get the team to commit through actions (pp. 254-257).

When a team lacks new ideas, Control-the-Clock and Collaborate. Once ideas and plans have been developed in bluework, it is time to run The Commit Play (pp. 259-260).

If one person’s ideas seem off, run The Collaborate Play. The leader should “recognize and celebrate the divergent thinking” that “could be the source of innovation and improvement” (p. 261).

All communications, both internal and public messages, should reflect The Connect Play (pp. 268-269).

If the boss is wrong, “Control the Clock, Collaborate, Connect, and hopefully Commit” (p. 273).

THE RED-BLUE OPERATING SYSTEM

The redwork-bluework operating system requires individuals at all levels of an organization to be thinkers and doers. Leaders can influence the system in three ways:

- 1) Balance redwork and bluework. More bluework might be necessary at the beginning of the project; whereas more extended periods of redwork are acceptable toward the end.
- 2) Bluework is for everyone, not just leadership.
- 3) Redwork is about setting goals and taking action.

“In a complex, fast-changing world, long-term survival is more about adaptation than achievement” (p. 287). The red-blue operating system gives organizations and leaders the tools to adapt.

SAVING EL FARO

What if things had gone differently for *El Faro*? Here is the story, retold as if Marquet's New Playbook had been in operation. Aboard the *El Faro*:

The Connect Play creates a culture where people can be vulnerable, can dissent, and feel cared for.

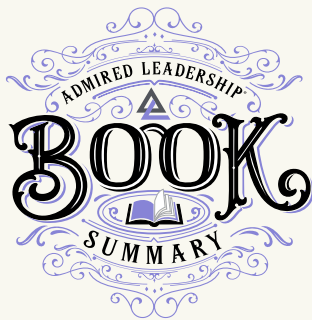
Controlling the Clock allows crew members to raise concerns. They view the journey as a series of decision points, to assess the conditions and respond accordingly. While on the journey, they decide to take a safer route.

Collaborate separates the decision-maker from decision-evaluator. The captain is the decision-evaluator and does not let his opinion sway the team.

Crew members commit to actions with the goal to improve.

They all make it safely to Puerto Rico.

Marquet, L. David (2020). *Leadership Is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say – and What You Don't*. New York: Portfolio/Penguin.



*“Strict Goals + Steep Hierarchies
= Unethical Behavior”*

*The Improve Play requires
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The Latest and Greatest Books for Leaders

We work hard to stay abreast of the current writings on leadership, especially those books our clients are reading or have been recommended to read. As a benefit to our clients and to facilitate our own learning, the Admired Leadership team has long maintained a tradition of summarizing the newest books of interest to leaders. Better to read a summary for eight minutes before investing eight hours in the entire book.

After reading a good summary, we believe leaders are able to make better choices as to what to ignore, what to peruse and what to make the time to read closely.

