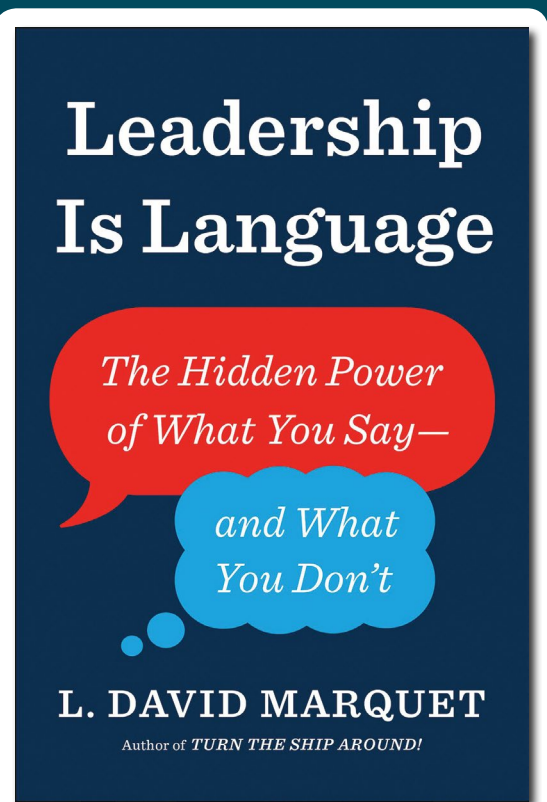


REVIEW ESSAY

Leadership Is Language

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



L. David Marquet, Penguin Books, New York, 2020, 352 pages

Lt. Col. Michael Bundt, U.S. Army

Author of *Leadership is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say and What You Don't* and *Turn the Ship Around! A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders*, L. David Marquet served in the U.S. submarine force; his career culminated in the command of the USS *Santa Fe*. When Marquet took command, the submarine was rated last in operational readiness and retention. By the end of Marquet's command, the USS *Santa Fe* was not only ranked first in both categories but had also achieved the best evaluations ever recorded within the U.S. submarine fleet. More importantly, the submarine's success continued long after he left, and his subordinates were promoted and commanded at much higher rates.

In *Leadership is Language*, Marquet explains how to implement intent-based leadership (IBL), which is a concept he developed while commanding the USS

Santa Fe and introduced in *Turn the Ship Around!* Using several historical examples, his own experience, and the foundational research of others, Marquet argues that today's leaders are products of the industrial age. Because of the influence of the industrial age on American culture, leaders tend to naturally focus on deadlines, the separation of workers and management, and execution rather than thinking.

He defines leadership as “[e]mbedding the capacity for greatness in the people and the practices of an organization and decoupling it from the personality of the leader.”¹ Marquet defines IBL as “a system of leadership that pushes authority to those with the information. The goal of IBL is to create an organization where people are healthier and happier because they have control over their lives.”²

Marquet would have readers believe that these concepts are a clear departure from the current

leadership ideas and systems. Arguably, the above definitions closely resemble the U.S. Army's concept of mission command, the idea of psychological safety, and a learning organization. Marquet merely offers one way to achieve IBL. Minus the book's introduction and conclusion, the chapters align with six new plays or techniques that, if used consistently and in conjunction with each other, will help leaders enact IBL.

Control the clock, not obey the clock. Marquet describes how to implement the observe-orient-decide-act loop process while getting everyone involved. Is the leader the first to talk? When discussing or directing employees/soldiers, who does most of the talking? When an employee stops work to bring an issue to a leader's attention, the first response should be gratitude. The "control the clock" play is confronted with deadlines. Leaders will often say things like, "You're ready, right?" or "Can you be ready by noon?" These questions are closed-ended (yes or no). The question also encourages a yes answer. As a general rule, Marquet wants leaders to ask questions starting with the words "how" or "what." A leader practicing IBL would say, "How ready are we to start the training?" or "What is preventing us from being ready?" The use of the words "how" and "what" conveys that there is time to discuss the operation/issue. The constant use of the words "us" and "we" help create a sense of psychological safety and positive organizational climate.

Collaborate, not coerce. Intent-based leaders must balance mental work with the physical work of their organization. Too much directing leads to action without thought. Too much collaboration and dissent leads to inaction. The right balance of collaboration and dissent will result in a stronger hypothesis with clearly definable metrics to allow positive change while maintaining commitment. How often is the boss given the opportunity to share his or her opening comments in a meeting? When a leader speaks first, it creates a bias, and the entire group is now anchored to the leader's comments.

Simply use the words, "I am curious what you think about X," rather than self-affirming questions like, "Are we all on board?" Intent-based leaders "inoculate themselves against the arrogance of thinking they are right" and allow the psychological safety for the organization members to say that they do not know the answer; because, as leaders, we say it ourselves.

Commit, not comply. Compliance saves time but gives a pass on responsibility. Commitment and motivation are personal and come from within. The key to commitment and motivation with organizational employees is empowerment. Employees need to believe they have the power to provide relevant input or make decisions that will lead to positive change. Leaders need to refrain from making daily operational decisions. If the decision authority is pushed to the lowest level of organizational commitment possible, morale and motivation will increase. Leaders should also detach themselves from decisions. The decision-maker is emotionally tied to the decision. Decision-makers have a hard time evaluating decisions to which they are emotionally tied.

Complete, not continue. The current environment requires most organizations to be adaptive and innovative. The speed of an organization's effective adaptivity is a big part of sustained success. Intent-based leaders do not hold to an "if it isn't broke, don't fix it" mentality. Definable, achievable cycles are established to give the organization the necessary time to pause and reflect on improvements/innovations.

Improve, not prove. Intent-based leaders invite a mental focus that is forward thinking. *How* could this be done better? Employees and leaders focus on the process, not the person.

What improvements could we make in the process? IBLs are also focused on achieving excellence rather than avoiding errors.

Connect, not conform. Empathy is the key to trust. "The connect play is about caring. Instead of judging from a position of power, leaders walk alongside from a position of encouragement."³ Creating a climate of psychological safety is easier said than done. Marquet describes the seven sins of questioning. Not avoiding the sins creates a hostile working environment

Lt. Col. Michael Bundt, U.S. Army, is an instructor for the Department of Distance Education – Advanced Operations Course Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He previously served as a brigade combat team trainer at the National Training Center. A career field artillery officer, he has served in command and staff positions in Iraq, Africa, Washington, Texas, and Fort Carson, Colorado. Recently, he served as the deputy commander for 4th Infantry Division Artillery, Fort Carson, Colorado.

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that is not conducive to learning; avoiding the sins speaks truth to power and to decision-making at the lowest possible level.

- ◆ **Avoid question stacking.** Avoid asking multiple questions without allowing an answer. Leaders should ask one open-ended question and allow the organizational member to tell his or her story. The leader can then use a follow-up question that demonstrates curiosity by using language that incorporates the words *how*, *what*, *we*, and *us*.
- ◆ **Avoid leading questions.** Most organizational members perceive a teaching moment as annoying or as a display of arrogance by the leader. Asking questions with known answers simply for affirmation or to test the employee will alienate the employee. The idea that putting people on the spot will inspire them to build their knowledge is outdated. This type of motivation and inspiration manipulates people and will only force compliance rather than commitment and learning.
- ◆ **Avoid “why” questions.** “Why” questions put organizational members on the defensive. Instead of saying, “Why did you do that,” say “How did that work?”
- ◆ **Avoid dirty questions.** Dirty questions are leading and imply the organizational member made a mistake. Do you have the courage to continue?
- ◆ **Avoid closed-ended questions.**
- ◆ **Avoid self-affirming questions.** Intent-based leaders do not want to coerce agreement. Organizational members are always in a position to educate their leaders; leaders just have to give them the chance. Instead of asking, “That was pretty good, right?,” say “How could we get better?”
- ◆ **Avoid aggressive questions.** Aggressive questions such as “What happened here?” puts the organizational member on the defense. Instead, be curious and inviting. “What have you observed today,” or “How do you see it?”

Although Marquet presents an eloquent how-to manual on IBL, it will be helpful if the reader is familiar with the underlining concepts of psychological safety, emotional intelligence, and a culture of learning that are presented in Edgar Schein’s book *Organizational Culture and Leadership* and in Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence*. This culture of learning will provide the readers with the foundational source knowledge needed to implement Marquet’s ideas for postindustrial age leadership. ■

Notes

1. L. David Marquet, *Turn the Ship Around! A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders* (New York: Portfolio, 2013).
2. L. David Marquet, *Leadership Is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say—and What You Don’t* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 318.
3. Ibid.