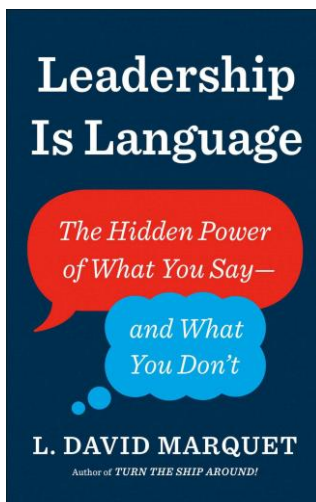


THE CENTRE FOR ARMY LEADERSHIP Book Review No.16 May 2020	 <i>The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and so further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience.</i> Book Reviews are written by and for serving soldiers and officers, summarising a wide range of notable leadership-related books.
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Leadership Is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say – and What You Don't by L. David Marquet

Reviewed by Sgt Phil Mitten REME



L. David Marquet, a top graduate of the US Naval Academy, commanded the nuclear powered fast-attack submarine USS Santa Fe from 1999 to 2001. Since retiring from the US Navy he has worked with businesses as a leadership consultant and delivers presentations around the world about his acclaimed first book, 'Turn the Ship Around: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders'. He lives in Florida with his wife, Jane.

To open with a bold statement, of all the thousands of leadership books out there, every single one of them should be supplemented with Leadership is Language by L. David Marquet. In spite of some expectations to the contrary, what is leadership if it is not language? A powerful thing about leadership is that if you think about the words you choose to use, as is the focus of this book, you can change the world around you.

Leadership is Language drives home the idea that leadership is about people, and the author argues that leaders cannot lead effectively without a suitably balanced interplay using

words. A quick assumption about this book might be that it perpetuates overly soft, sympathetic, sensitive leadership approaches. It does not. Rather, it is about the leader detaching themselves from notions of invulnerability, certainty, coercion, and conformity. In terms of leadership interactions, whether person to person, digital, handwritten, or verbal; Marquet argues that if you want to be a truly effective leader, you need to think about the words you choose to use and how you employ them.

The book offers us six 'plays' that we can employ in order to lead effectively and enhance the performance of our teams, all of which ultimately combine to bolster morale, trust, and performance. They are summarised as:

1. **Control the clock, don't obey the clock.** Be able to 'pause' at any time to be mindful and deliberate with actions. Facilitate collaboration, broaden perspective.
2. **Collaborate, don't coerce.** Consider letting the doers be the deciders, you be the decision evaluator; encourage the sharing of ideas, be vulnerable, and recognise and accept that others can contribute to thinking and understanding.
3. **Commit, don't comply.** Commitment will always prevail over compliance because it unlocks discretionary effort in people. In complex, cognitive, custom teamwork 'discretionary effort is everything'.
4. **Complete, don't continue.** Break tasks down into sizeable chunks and complete them one by one. Celebrate successes, focus on behaviours not characteristics, focus on the journey not the destination.
5. **Improve, don't prove.** Collaborate to get better, focus on achieving excellence in favour of avoiding errors.
6. **Connect, don't conform.** Demonstrate vulnerability and admit to not knowing everything. Care about what people think, how they feel, and their personal goals. 'Connect is love', trust is the outcome.

You will quickly discover that Marquet is motivated to change the language used by modern leaders. He wants to evolve the sometimes dangerous, even fatal, Industrial Age 'command and control' leadership language that stifles curiosity, decision-making, and performance. These stubborn cultures of compliance and control only serves to distort common sense, encourage coercive behaviours, and instill fear. The Industrial Age leadership approach is out of date and ineffective, and this is why *Leadership is Language* is a significant book. The author argues that if you change the way you communicate, you will positively

change your workplace culture, and by changing the culture you will transform your team's performance.

Leadership is Language makes it abundantly clear that teams need to interact and people need to share their anxieties, ideas, and opinions if they want to continuously improve and succeed. This is vital since the leader needs to know whether they are evaluating the best possible decisions after weighing up the best possible courses of action, informed by all the relevant information. Marquet gives the reader the contextual foundation and practical guidance needed to do this. The book goes some way to help us internalise numerous subtle and not-so-subtle changes in our language, allowing us to 'reinforce and rewire our thought processes in a more adaptive, learning, growth-orientated way'.

Of the many areas explored in this 336 page book (or 10hrs 40min audiobook), some pertinent topics that are worthy of extended exploration for leaders in a hierarchical organisation are:

- **Power Gradient.** The hierarchical distance between people. Steep power gradients can stifle creativity, communication, share of voice, and variability.
- **Share of voice.** The proportion of words that each person in a conversation speaks. Marquet argues that leaders should say the least in conversations, and talk last.
- **Variability.** This can be considered in the same way that we think of diversity and cognitive diversity.
- **Curiosity.** The desire to learn more about how other people see, what they think, or what they propose as a course of action.

With these in mind, noting that the above list is only a small selection from the book, Marquet clearly strives to remove barriers of interaction between leaders and the led. He also seeks to vastly increase curiosity and strongly encourages the leader to get their teams to *think*, not just *do* and not just *react*. Of importance, he makes it explicitly clear that a 'rhythmic dance' between the leader and followers' thinking and doing cycles must be well balanced.

Some readers might argue that a lot of communication is non-verbal, a widely accepted idea that appears to be overlooked in the book. However, it is not necessary to explicitly declare that you are open to constructive dissent because leaders control the culture. This openness and interdependence should be readily felt by the team without the need to state it.

Additionally, leaders should harness the ‘eyes, ears, and minds’ of their people in order to lead them. Furthermore, readers are encouraged to think about leadership as the hard work of ‘taking responsibility for how our actions and words affect the lives of others’. Hence, how leaders behave and communicate, verbally or otherwise, so often characterises how their teams work and perform together.

When I read a leadership development book I normally ask myself two questions. Firstly, how can I apply what I’ve learned from this book when embodying the Army Leadership Code behaviours? Secondly, how can I use what I’ve learned from this book to better support the principles of Mission Command? *Leadership is Language* delivers genuinely striking responses to these questions. It is in fact hard to see how a leader’s well-considered language does not directly compliment the two frameworks.

Leadership is Language doesn’t claim to have all the answers. To aptly borrow from Field Marshall Sir William Slim, leadership is ‘just plain you’. The answers are in the language the leader chooses to employ when they interact with people. Marquet makes it feel simple to the reader: ask questions in different ways to get different answers. Be curious. He delivers a crystal clear understanding that language creates the environment where teams are able to assertively state their queries, concerns, problems, and anxieties — and that they can perform highly as an outcome.

Marquet’s six plays can equally be applied at the tactical, operational, or strategic level. To that end, and since leadership is above all about communicating with the people you lead, this is a highly recommended and suitable book for quite literally any leader or aspiring leader. Your people will work together in a more meaningful way, they will bounce ideas off one-another, identify issues, collaborate on solutions, and have the confidence to propose them to you. You and your team will experience a cultural shift, be better able to make the right decisions — and you will own this. After all, your interaction and the words you choose to use have a direct influence on how the people around you perform.

L. David Marquet

Leadership Is Language

Portfolio Penguin, 2020

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