Brief Summary of

Leadership is Language

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

By David Marquet

- For David Marquet, language was the starting point of all the positive changes that happened aboard Santa Fe.

- Language was the way one could measure empowerment and collaboration as well as improve it.

- The language changed in three ways

  o Replaced a *reactive* language of convince, coerce, comply and conform with a *proactive* language of intent and commitment to action

  o Replaced a language of "*prove and perform*" with a language of "*improve and learn*"

  o Replaced a language of *invulnerability and certainty* with a language of *vulnerability and curiosity*.

- Six Leadership plays – that oscillates between action and reflection, doing and deciding

  o Control the clock instead of obeying the clock

  o Collaborate instead of coercing

  o Commitment rather than compliance

  o Complete defined goals instead of continuing work indefinitely

  o Improve outcomes rather than prove ability

  o Connect with people instead of conforming to your role

- Doing and Thinking are the basic building blocks of all human activity – the right balance of doing and thinking keeps an organization adaptive and agile, innovative and entrepreneurial.

  o Doing is the physical interaction with the world – it doesn't mean that you aren't thinking, but the brain operates much more automatically

  o Thinking is the deliberate, curious, open exploration of information, beliefs, stories and assumptions in order to interpret the world around us.

  o The doing self is fully present in the moment, acting upon the world, and reacting to stimuli dynamically. The thinking self observes and reflects upon the doing self from a detached and level-headed perspective.

- David goes on to give a case from a 2015 incident in which a container ship, El Faro, with all the modern radios and navigation equipment sailed directly into a hurricane and sank. With the transcripts available of all the conversations on board the ship, he came to a conclusion

that had the captain acted differently or played a different leadership playbook, the ship could have been saved.

- Doing is important, but action must be balanced with thinking – too much activity without thought results in wasted or erroneous actions and bad decisions, and too much thinking without action results in inaction and frustration.

- Thinking benefits from embracing variability – doing benefits from reducing variability. Greater variability in possible actions means greater innovation, greater creativity and more options. It is about being open, curious, probabilistic, and improvement focused – the language of curiosity and vulnerability.

- The language of reducing variability is focused and goal driven – it means strict compliance with rules and adherence to process - it is the language of control and compliance.

- Thinking, decision making, embracing variability – is termed as "Bluework". Doing, execution, reduce variability is termed as "Redwork"

- Bluework benefits from a broadening of focus, quiet reflection, curiosity about what others see and thinking and development of possible alternatives. Blue work is the cognitive work of making decisions – this may not require lifting a finger, but it is mentally taxing. In Bluework, you see questions like:
  - How do you see it?
  - How ready are we for it?
  - What can we do better?
  - What did we learn?

- Redwork is doing. Redwork is clockwork and consists of a battle for efficiency and getting work done against the clock. The mindset in redwork is a prove and perform mindset.

- Reducing variability, reducing waste, improving quality and efficiency is more suited for redwork.

- While bluework and redwork exist in every organization today, blueworkers and redworkers do not have to.

Redwork	Bluework
Avoid variability	Embrace variability
Prove	Improve
Do	Decide
Repetitious	Dissimilar
Blue collar	White collar
Physical	Cognitive
Individual	Team
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
Production	Reflection
Performance	Planning
Process	Prediction
Compliant	Creative
Conformity	Diversity
Simple	Complex
Hourly work	Salary work
Narrow focus	Broad focus
Steep hierarchy	Flat hierarchy

- Stress affects each type of work differently - deadlines, incentives, and other forms of external pressure have a positive or at least a neutral effect on redwork, but the same factors can quickly diminish our effectiveness at bluework.

- There are two sides to a performance mindset – We either try to *prove* competence (I can do the project) or *protect* ourselves against evidence of incompetence (I don't want to be discovered as incompetent. The prove mindset is motivated to demonstrate something positive, the protect mindset is motivated to hide something negative. E.g.

    o *Prove* mindset – I did it, we need to show we can do this, Nailed it etc

    o *Protect* mindset – Wasn't me, No I'm fine, we did the best we could with the time we had

    o *Improve* mindset – How can we make it better? How could I do better? What have we learned?

CONTROL THE CLOCK

- Control the Clock is the start of the cycle – it is when we exit redwork and shift to bluework.

- Controlling the clock is about the power of the pause – the power of our ability to control the clock rather than obey the clock, being mindful and deliberate with our actions and broadening our perspective.

- Controlling the clock sets us up to collaborate.

- There are four ways to run the Control the Clock play

    o Make a Pause possible

    o Give the pause a name

    o Call a pause

    o Pre-plan the next pause

- *Make a Pause possible*

    o It was the conditioning of the Industrial age, which made pauses as waste and produces negative results.

    o With leaders constantly egging on their team to do more work, the members were finding it hard to call time out or pre-empting a pause.

    o Examples from El Faro, space shuttle Challenger and Boeing 787 Dreamliner rollout testify to the fact that not having a PAUSE – they were deliberately trying to set the team to prove and perform mindset and made it hard for team members to state dissenting opinions or raise objections

- *Give the Pause a Name*

    o When the team goes into a period of redwork, we tend towards a performance mindset (prove or protect)

    o We feel the urgency of the clock and the pressure to get the work done.

    o To protect ourselves from being under the influence of redwork, leaders use some signals the team can use to create an operational pause – things like "Time out", "Hands off", Raising a yellow card, Andon cord, Raising a hand etc.

- *Call a Pause*

    o If you are on a team and see something unexpected, it is your responsibility to call a pause. But it could be difficult as the team might feel the stress of the clock, intensely focused on the work and a pause could mean calling attention to a problem.

    o Stress is dangerous as it inhibits one's ability to recognize when you need to exit redwork.

- o Leaders need to be sensitive to signals from their teams that it is time to call for a pause – or take a time out. It is in these times that one has to exit redwork and get into bluework and ask questions such as
  - It seems like you think we might not be ready. What are you thinking?
  - Lets get the team together and revise our thinking.
  - Let's hold here and take a look. What does everyone think?
  - Is there anything else?

- *Pre-plan the next pause*
  - o We can safeguard ourselves against the tendency to get carried away with redwork by preplanning the next pause – by setting a timer to go in 45 minutes or take a break after 2 weeks of work (Agile – Planning, Sprinting, Review, Retrospective …)
  - o Knowing that a pause is coming allows teams to focus 100% of their efforts on the work and allows leaders to resist the trap of offering unsolicited advice.

COLLABORATE

- The COLLABORATE play is initiated after controlling the clock.
- For collaboration, we need to let the doers be the deciders.
- Collaboration requires us to share ideas, be vulnerable, and respect the ideas of others - and we ask questions such as "What" and "How"
- Collaboration happens through the questions we ask and requires that we admit that we don't have the whole picture.
- Collaboration is really coercion in disguise – we use words such as motivate, inspire to convince, cajole, bribe, threaten redworkers to do the work
- Coercion is using influence, power, rank, talking first, talking more to bring people around to my way of thinking
- The objectives of Collaborate play are to broaden our perspectives, embrace variability, make visible the collective knowledge and thoughts and ideas of the group.
- Collaborate play can be run in four ways
  - o Vote first, then Discuss
  - o Be Curious not Compelling
  - o Invite Dissent, rather than drive Consensus
  - o Give Information not Instruction
- *Vote first then Discuss*

- o In the "Wisdom of the crowds", James Surowiecki gives an example of how a group of people collectively guessed the weight of an ox – almost to its actual weight.

- o To get diversity and variability of thinking, invite participants to express what they think independently before anchoring the group by discussion.

- o These could be through conducting anonymous blind electronic polling, asking probabilistic questions instead of binary ones, use of voting techniques such as dot voting, fist of five and embracing the outliers (checking with the outliers the reason for their scores)

- *Be Curious, not Compelling*
  - o Be curious about what they say you don't see and what they think that you don't think
  - o Seek first to understand, then be understood
  - o Break up the meeting into small groups and have frank discussions with a curious and open mindset listening to all perspectives.
  - o Avoid the seven sins of questioning – question stacking, leading questions, "why" questions, dirty questions (like a leading question), binary questions, Self-affirming questions ("We are good to go, right?") and Aggressive questions (What should we do?)

- *Invite Dissent, rather than drive Consensus*
  - o The wisdom of the crowd (group think) can be undermined by anchoring and social conformity.
  - o It is important to make it safe and easy for people to dissent – one of the ways to do it is through use of black and red cards.
  - o Black and Red cards are distributed and the rule is if you have a Red card you have to dissent – and having the card makes it safe for one to dissent.
  - o The feat is that dissent equals disharmony is to be avoided.
  - o Dissent creates a sense of excitement and energy – a feeling of "This could be the start of something interesting and new"
  - o Instead of arguing with the dissenter, asking curious questions such as "what's behind what you are saying", "can you tell us more on that" – will open up a whole new perspective.

- *Give Information, not Instructions*
  - o Instead of giving instructions, it is better to provide information and let people know of the consequences of their behaviour and let them choose.

- o Some examples could be
  - Instead of "Park there", try "I see a parking spot there"
  - Instead of "Add these stories", "try The Product Owner has some new user stories for our product"
  - Instead of "double check the numbers", try "it is important that these numbers are correct, and I see something does not add up for me"
- o Establish the right hypothesis
  - One of the most powerful purposes of collaboration for teams is to establish your hypothesis before launching into the period of redwork.
  - Consider every phase of redwork as an experiment – which typically starts with a hunch, termed as hypothesis.
  - The primary purpose of every bluework phase is to establish the hypothesis and the primary purpose of every redwork phase is to test whether the hypothesis is valid.
  - With coercion the best we can hope for is compliance. With compliance, we get effort, but not discretionary effort. The output of collaboration is a commitment to move forward – and this commitment signals the end of bluework(embracing variability) and start of redwork(reducing variability).

COMMIT

- Commitment comes from within where as compliance is forced by an external source
- Commitment is more powerful because it is an intrinsic motivator and invites full participation, engagement and discretionary effort.
- Compliance, a consequence of the Industrial age, may have worked for simple, physical, repetitive, individual tasks, but it does not work for complex, cognitive, customer, team tasks.
- Just as teams in redwork have a tendency to stay in redwork, teams in bluework will have a tendency to stay in bluework – the transition point is when we run the COMMIT play.
- We also need to inoculate ourselves against escalation of commitment – where we tend to attach ourselves to past decisions and continue to invest in a losing course of action.
- Three options for executing the COMMIT play are
  - o Commit to Learn, not just Do
  - o Commit Actions not Beliefs
  - o Chunk it small, but Do it all
- *Commit to Learn, not just Do*

- o Developing hypothesis requires making decisions not only about what we do, but what to learn. The idea of hypothesis is that it puts us in a learning and improving mindset.
- o Setting a commitment to learn will help us avoid acting badly to setbacks and detours
- o A question to ask at the end of a bluework meeting would be not only, "What are we going to do", but also "What are we going to learn"

- *Commit Actions, not Beliefs*
  - o When we make commitments, one mistake we do is try to get people on board – trying to get people align their actions and behaviours and also make a mindset change.
  - o Trying to convince people that they need to align their mindsets adds a burden that delays moving forward and requires them to admit they were wrong.
  - o Once a decision is made, don't try to convince dissenters and outliers that their decision is wrong – you could have them test their hypothesis after the period of redwork and then base your decision.

- *Chunk it Small, but Do it all*
  - o Eating a multi-layer cake – it is best to take a deep scoop touching all the layers rather than eating the cake layer by layer.
  - o In cases such as innovation or new product design, we need to chunk the work into small discrete bite size pieces but each one should result in a complete product – testable in the market.
  - o Shorter periods of redwork increase learning but reduce production output and vice versa. In environments of high uncertainty and unpredictability, we need to shorten redwork periods.
  - o Making a commitment to a small increment frees us up to be completely absorbed in the work – we don't need to reserve part of our brain to monitor whether we are on track because we know we have a pre-planned interruption soon enough.
  - o The commitment statement should include a resolve to do the redwork and a plan to shift back to bluework based on meeting some condition or after some duration of redwork.
  - o In the "What" and "How" questions, we have the probabilistic how and the inquisitive how.

- The Probabilistic how sounds like "How sure are you" or "How likely is that assumption to be true"
- The Inquisitive how sounds like "How does ---- affect …..?" or "How do you see that" .
- The Aspirational How could be "How could we start", "How could we test that quickly", "What would that look like" – the aspirational how shifts people's thinking from worrying about obstacles and barriers to considering what we can do with the time and resources we have.

COMPLETE

- Completion marks the end of a period of redwork and is a signal that we go back to bluework.
- Before we get to the collaboration of bluework, we rest and celebrate.
- Completion is a sense of progress and accomplishment.
- Running the COMPLETE play means thinking of work in terms of smaller chunks of production work and frequent intervals of reflection, collaboration, improvement and hypothesis creation.
- Executing the COMPLETE play gives us a sense of psychological detachment from our previous actions and the sense of "moving on" and "letting go" enables us to look dispassionately at our past actions and decisions with an eye at getting better.
- Complete means – we are done with collecting data, now we analyse it or We are done with the software release, now we improve it.
- Completion is an important step since
    - Failure to treat completion as a deliberate step in the process translates into a failure to see the work in discrete elements – this failure carries risks – such as escalation of commitment – longer production runs, longer operational cycles etc.
    - Failure to complete takes a toll on the humans in the organization – no completion moments means we don't feel a sense of progress and there are no celebration moments.
    - Complete serves to proactively control the clock exiting us from redwork and launching us into bluework. Controlling the clock gives us the operational pause we need to reflect and improve our processes.
- Complete serves to reset ourselves mentally from our past decisions and Celebration gives us a sense of closure of previous activities, feeling good about what we have done and allows us to move on

- The four ways to execute the COMPLETE play are
    - Chunk works for frequent completes early, few completes late
    - Celebrate With not For
    - Focus on Behaviour, not Characteristics
    - Focus on the Journey not the Destination

- *Chunk Works for Frequent Completes Early, Few Completes Late*
    - Early in a project, the redwork-bluework rhythm should be biased towards bluework, emphasizing learning. This means many bluework interruptions to the redwork and focus on growth learning and improvement.
    - As the project continues, the decision space closes down – the emphasis shifts to more doing, the redwork can get longer and the bluework interruptions less frequent.
    - The predominant mindset during the life of a project shifts from an improve and grow mindset early to a prove and perform mindset later.
    - Following the end of the project, we have a larger period of bluework, thinking about improving the project as a whole.

- *Celebrate With, not For*
    - Celebrate gives us a sense of accomplishment, allows us to detach from the past and move on to the next thing and reinforces the behaviours that made us successful.
    - When we pause to celebrate, we acknowledge the work we do see, and the workers feel valued – and that motivates people to contribute.
    - Celebration does not mean "praising" – we have been conditioned that way.
    - To celebrate with not for – *appreciate* not evaluate, *observe* don't judge, *prize* don't praise.
    - Celebrating could sound like "I see that you have organized the presentation into three sections – I got your points organized in my head now" or "I saw that your proposal went out yesterday, thank you. That will allow the client to look at it before the weekend"
    - Descriptive statements can start with "I see", "I noticed", "It looks like".

- *Focus on Behaviour, not Characteristics*
    - Psychologist Carol Dweck found that praising someone for an attribute "You are smart/talented" – leads them to identify with that attribute. And once it becomes part of their identity, they tend to avoid scenarios that challenge that attribute.

- o As a leader, you need to be conscious about how positive feedback can have negative consequences if delivered improperly.
- o To improve performance, celebrate what people can control, their efforts, not the things they can't – the outcomes.

- *Focus on the Journey not the Destination*
  - o We may not have sight of what the individual did during the period of redwork – hence we need to ask, invite them to tell their story.
  - o Prompt them with questions like "Tell me what key decisions you needed to make", "What were some of the hurdles your team had to overcome", what was the toughest part of the project", "What made this project fun or rewarding"
  - o When people tell their stories, try to see the turning points in the process – listening to key phrases like "so we decided to", "we hit a roadblock", "we were at crossroads"
  - o This is the cue to dig deeper and asking further "what" and "how" questions
  - o When people think of their achievements in terms of mile markers in a journey, they are more likely to continue the behaviours that resulted in them reaching the goal.

IMPROVE

- Improvement comes from egoless scrutiny of past actions and deep reflective thinking about what could be better.
- The IMPROVE play requires open minded inquisitiveness and curiosity from everyone on the team
- Contemplation and self-reflection are key components of learning, creativity and innovation – but contemplate alone is not enough.
- To set up the IMPROVE play, we need to relax our minds, and remove the pressure of the clock
- Run the IMPROVE play after a planned end of redwork. Or after a significant error in the process that needs to be understood.
- We need to leave the PROVE mindset behind and think of ourselves as detached observers of what we have previously done. We call that self who wants to hang on the previous work as the "be good" self – this needs to be tamed in order to activate the "get better" self
- One speaking from the "be good" self sounds like "I didn't do anything wrong", "I would do the same the next time", "We have always done it that way"
- One speaking from the "get better" self would say "Tell me more about this", "How might we see it differently", "How could I have done better"

- To motivate people to adopt the "get better" mindset instead of the "be good" mindset – we look at the Self-determination Theory by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Deci and Ryan have identified three fundamental components of intrinsic motivation
  - Competence – feeling of mastery
  - Relatedness – sense of connecting with human beings
  - Autonomy – sense of being in control of the things that matter in one's life
- The four ways to execute the IMPROVE play are
  - Forward not Backward
  - Outward not Inward
  - On the Process, not on the Person
  - On Achieving Excellence, not Avoiding Errors
- *Forward not Backward*
  - There is a strong link between believing we can grow and having control over our behaviours. This is key to invoking the "get better" self.
  - We can activate this with questions like "what do we want to do differently the next time around", "What worked well that we want to keep and not change", What do we want to remember about this for next time"
- *Outward not Inward*
  - Focusing on others instead of oneself is another way to short circuit our desire to protect ourselves and others on the team from being told how something might have been done better"
  - Phrases like "If some one else had to take over the project, what would you say to them to make it more successful" "What could we do to better serve our customers" or "Lets focus on what's going on right here that we can build on"
- *On the Process, Not on the Person*
  - A process focus dilutes the motivation to get defensive about what was done in the past – shifting attention from the person to the person's decision or action
  - Phrases like "Thinking about the work, what do we think could be improved", "what improvements can we make to the process"
- *On Achieving Excellence, not Avoiding Errors*
  - Avoiding errors results in a bias for inactivity and roots us in the "be good" self.
  - Few people are inspired by the negative goal of being less bad at something then before. But people are inspired and moved by the possibility of achieving something great, something excellent.

CONNECT

- The CONNECT play is the antidote to fear – Connect makes it safe to say what we see and think even if no one else sees or thinks the way we do.

- Connect creates cultural conditions that encourage diversity of thought and variability of opinion

- It allows us to move from paralysis to action – and underpins our ability to get stuff done in redwork.

- The CONNECT play is about caring – caring what people think, caring how they feel, caring for their personal goals. Instead of judging them from a position of power, we walk alongside from a position of encouragement.

- It does not mean accepting what ever the person thinks or does, does not mean shielding them from the consequences of their own behaviour – all it means is to remove unnecessary and artificially induced workplace inhibitors to feeling safe – about psychological safety.

- Connect is a special play that does not fit into the red-blue-red cycle - it is the underlying basic building block that enables other plays.

- There are four options for executing the CONNECT play
    - Flatten the Power Gradient
    - Admit You Don't Know
    - Be Vulnerable
    - Trust First

- *Flatten the Power Gradient*
    - The Power gradient is the amount of social distance there is between one person and the other.
    - The steeper the power gradient the harder it is to tell your boss something that they don't want to hear. The censoring of information is directly proportionate to the power gradient.
    - Some of the proxies to understand the steepness of power gradient are office size, salary, reserved parking slots, seating location etc
    - In steep power gradients we are also limited to "one step at a time" communications where jumping the chain of command is a big no no.
    - The rule of the power gradients is that the steeper the gradient, the more difficult it is for information to flow upward.

- o In flatter power gradients, people will speak truth to power, tell it like it is, admit mistakes, and deliver bad news and will be able to tame the "be good" self in order to embrace the "get better" self.
- o Power gradients are sometimes bluntly enforced reminding people that bosses are in a more powerful position than they are. Sometimes we also find people try to invoke another authority – "The boss said do it – I am only a messenger"
- o Some of the ways of flattening the power gradient are
  - Instead of creating separation, physical or emotional, create connection
  - Instead of doing things *to* or *for* people, do things *with* people
  - Instead of reinforcing authority, reduce it
  - Instead of judging, observe and describe
- o Language that flattens the power gradient and enhances participation sounds like some of these
  - "Your fresh eyes will be valuable on this"
  - "When it comes to improving, different perspectives are helpful"
  - "I have done these many times. It's hard to see it objectively"

- *Admit You Don't Know*
  - o When leaders admit they don't know, they allow the team to admit that they don't know – this is especially important when discussing decisions
  - o Phrases like "lets look it up", "how can we test it", "lets run an experiment" help create the space
  - o A leader might express uncertainty of knowledge or decision by saying things like, "I don't have experience with this", "We are in unchartered waters", "I can see arguments from both sides" – admitting that you don't know as a leader requires being vulnerable.

- *Be Vulnerable*
  - o Leaders, higher up on the ladder or those in charge tend to have an aura of invulnerability around them.
  - o Vulnerability is not weakness – it is a powerful tool for creating connection
  - o The key is to create a culture of being vulnerable and exposed feels perfectly safe.

- *Trust First*
  - o Trust does not mean you are always right – it only means that your actions are being guided to support the best interests of the organization.

- When someone makes a mistake, ask this question – were they trying to do the right thing and made an error or were they motivated by something other than the best interests of the organization?
- Trust people first because your trust in them will affect their behaviour – they will work harder, stay longer and unlock more effort when they feel trusted

The Redwork-Bluework Operating System

- There are two modes of human activity – thinking and doing.
- Thinking is called bluework – it is cognitive, complex, creative and uncertain. Variability is an ally to bluework. Here we collaborate, seek to improve, make decisions and develop hypothesis
- Doing is called redwork – it is physical, skill based, focused and deliberate. Variability is an enemy to redwork. During redwork, we work, seek to prove and perform our jobs
- Implementing a redwork-bluework operating system means deliberately practicing the rhythm of redwork followed by bluework.
- Leaders have three domains to influence the system.
    - The first domain is determining the overall balance between red and blue – with more bluework at the beginning of the project when there is more uncertainty and the focus is on learning. Then they extend the length of redwork periods, spacing our bluework later as the focus shifts towards production and major decisions have been taken.
    - The second domain is within the bluework periods – getting everyone involved in bluework with a goal of embracing variability.
    - The third domain is within the redwork periods – setting goals and a focus for the team. This is the domain leaders will be most familiar with – and tools such as Lean assist leaders in this domain.
- The rhythmic oscillation between redwork and bluework can be applied at strategic, operational and tactical levels – and to individuals and teams
- The outcome of the redwork-bluework rhythm is learning – learning at work, at home and at life.

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