

The New Playbook for Leaders



From these...

To these

Our current leadership playbook comes from the design of Industrial Age factories. Our "natural" language stems from the way we managed assembly line workers. Today, the impacts are bad products, lost sales, wasted time, or simply not feeling useful. Sometimes, running the wrong plays kills people, plain and simple.

Obey the clock

- Pressure from the clock to get work done in a focused, follow the procedure, reduce variability mindset.

Coerce

- Bosses coax, goad, influence, motivate, and inspire people to do what they decide needs to get done. Coercion creates followers.

Comply

- No thinking, only following directives, instructions, and orders until told to stop. Compliance is imposed externally.

Continue

- Continue to comply with coerced orders from boss until something happens making it impossible to proceed.

Prove

- Prove and perform mindset that protects the "be good" self. The defensive "Not my fault" language.

Conform

- Conform to hierarchy. We conform to our roles: Manager - employee. Avoid and discourage human connections. Devoid of emotion.

The new playbook creates a different pattern: rhythmic dance between doing and deciding, between redwork and bluework.

Control the clock

- Exit redwork. Call a pause to allow bluework. Remove the pressure of the clock to allow thinking, gather information, and broaden perspectives.

Collaborate

- Bluework. Let the doers be the deciders. Make visible the collective knowledge, thoughts, and ideas of the group. Leaders speak last.

Commit

- Signals end of bluework. Commit to redwork (actions) to test ideas from previous bluework period. Commitment comes from within. Internal decisions launching us into a period of redwork.

Complete

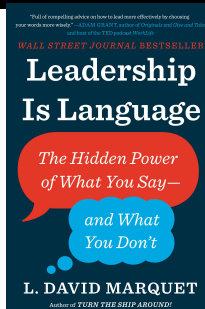
- Exit redwork. Celebrate the work we've completed. Tell stories about our journey. Analyze the work and ask "How could we improve this?"

Improve

- Improve redwork. Learn and improve mindset that supports the "get better" self. The curious "How can I do this better next time" language.

Connect

- Antidote to fear. Connect makes it safe to say what we see and think. Allows effective bluework and decision making. Healthy emotions, caring what people think, feel, and their personal goals.



The “Control the Clock” Play

HOW TO CONTROL THE CLOCK: Control the clock is the start of the cycle when we exit *redwork* - the doing, action, process, production work and enter *bluework* - the thinking, cognitive, creative, deciding work. Control the clock is the new play where we are able to call a pause or time-out in order to exit the pressures of *redwork* and shift into the thinking of *bluework*. The traditional organizational response is to encourage people to speak up, to invest in lectures, posters, and assertiveness classes. None of these address the root causes that make it difficult for people to speak up. All they encourage us as leaders to do is drive harder at the barriers - them not speaking up. Instead, we need to remove the barriers. As leaders we do this by controlling the clock instead of obeying the clock and by giving our teams the tools to control the clock as well.

1. Instead of preempting a pause, make a pause possible.

“We’ll just have to tough this out.”	⇒	“We have time to do this right, not twice.”
“We need to make quota today.”	⇒	“How ready are we to shift to production?”
“We can’t miss this deadline. Let’s all have a safe day.”	⇒	“This is a big milestone, but if it can’t be done safely, I will postpone.”

2. Instead of hoping the team knows what to say, give the pause a name.

“Don’t let the pressure scare you, this is a fast-paced environment.”	⇒	“When we see a need for stopping, say time-out.”
“Let me know if you need anything.”	⇒	“To signal a pause, raise your hand to alert us of a problem.”
“If you see something, say something.”	⇒	“We use these yellow cards to signal a need to pause. It’s a signal to have a conversation.”

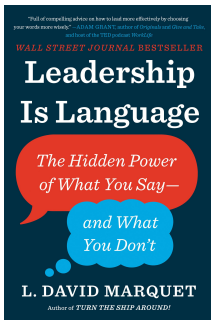
Use box 1 and 2 as a language swap-out guide.

3. Instead of pressing on with *redwork*, call a pause.

“Are you sure we are ready?”	⇒	“Sounds like you think we may not be ready. What are you thinking?”
“There is a lot going into this. Lots of added complexity.”	⇒	“Let’s hold here and take a look. What does everyone else think?”
“Something seems off about this.”	⇒	“This is a big milestone, but if it can’t be done safely, I will postpone.”

Use box 3 as a guide for more helpful responses to others.

Learn more about the control the clock play in chapter 3 of *Leadership Is Language* by L. David Marquet



Ask Better Questions. Avoid these Seven Sins of Questioning.



Being curious about what someone else thinks is the foundation of asking good questions. There is such a thing as a bad question: one that is less curiosity driven than others. Here are some examples. We call these the seven sins of questioning.

1. QUESTION STACKING. Example: “So, how much testing has been done? I mean, do we really have all the bugs identified? Yeah, I just really think it’s important to know that— are we good to go?”

Question stacking is asking the same question repeatedly in different ways or asking question after question without a pause. IMPROVE by asking one question once. ONE AND DONE.

2. LEADING QUESTIONS. Example: “Have you thought about the needs of the client?”

This comes from a place of thinking we have the answer, the “right answer,” but don’t want to just say so we try using the Socratic method as a “teaching moment.” IMPROVE by asking questions that assume the other person might be right, not you. Try “Tell me about that.”

3. “WHY” QUESTIONS. Example: “Why would you want to do *that*?” This puts people on the defensive and reveals that you think “*that*” is a bad idea. IMPROVE by saying “Tell me more about that.” Another option is to ask “What is behind your decision?” or “How do you see the issue?”

4. DIRTY QUESTIONS. Example: “Do you have the courage to stand up to them?”

A dirty question carries subtle and often unconscious biases and anticipates a particular answer. IMPROVE by allowing the person to develop their own response uncontaminated. Ask “What do you want to have happen?”

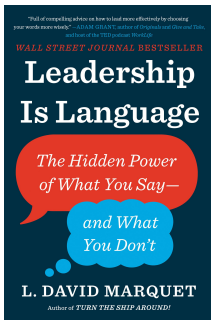
5. BINARY QUESTIONS. Example: “Are we good to launch the product?” or “Will it work?”

Binary questions narrow the available responses to two: yes or no. They are convenient for the one asking but put the one answering in a bind. IMPROVE by starting your question with “what” or “how.” “How ready are we for the product launch?” or “What might go wrong?”

6. SELF-AFFIRMING QUESTIONS. Example: “Everything’s good, right?” or “You know what I’m saying?”

These questions are often binary questions with a special motivation: to coerce agreement and make the one asking feel good about the decision they already made. IMPROVE by making it easier to bring up disconfirming views “How well is this going?” or “What am I missing?”

7. AGGRESSIVE QUESTIONING. Example: Straight to “What should we do?” after hearing about a problem. This might seem aggressive for some because it provokes them to make assessments about the future before they are ready. IMPROVE by asking questions that gradually move from known to unknown--present, past, then future. Present: “What do you see?” Past: “What happened before this?” Future: “What should we do?”



Move from Compliance to Commitment

In Industrial Age structures, where we separated work by class—blueworkers and redworkers—the blueworkers were responsible for improvement and the redworkers were responsible for production. Redworkers were not asked to evaluate themselves. Now we need people to do both redwork and bluework. This means being able to improve work we ourselves have done.

WHEN TO USE THIS TOOL: Incrementally, after a period of redwork.

WHY TO USE THIS TOOL: To improve we need to tame the “be good” self in order to activate the “get better” self. The “be good” self wants to feel competent, effective, credible—a good worker. It wants to protect its reputation, not only among the group but also with itself, in terms of self-esteem. Threats to the “be good” self are taken seriously and defended against. The “get better” self is the part of us that seeks to learn and grow. The defending behaviors of the “be good” self actively inhibit and crowd out the seeking behaviors of the “get better” self.

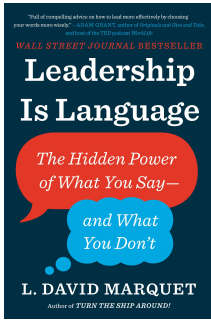
HOW TO USE THIS TOOL: When you hear yourself use the language of the “be good” self, pause and restate your language to one of the “get better” phrases.

The “Be Good” Self sounds like:

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”
“We did the best we could.”
“I would do it the same next time.”
“I assumed that’s what you wanted.”
“We’ve always done it that way.”
“I’ve been doing this a long time.”
“You think you know better than me all of the sudden?”
“You’re new. You’ll learn why we do it this way.”

The “Get Better” Self sounds like:

“Tell me more about that.”
“How do you see it?”
“What do you think happened?”
“How might you see it differently?”
“How could I have done it better?”
“What could we do differently next time?”
“What is one thing we could change to make this better?”
“What does this look like from your perspective?”



THE COMPLETE PLAY:



Be Agile – Chunk the Work

HOW: Chunk work for frequent completes early, few completes late.

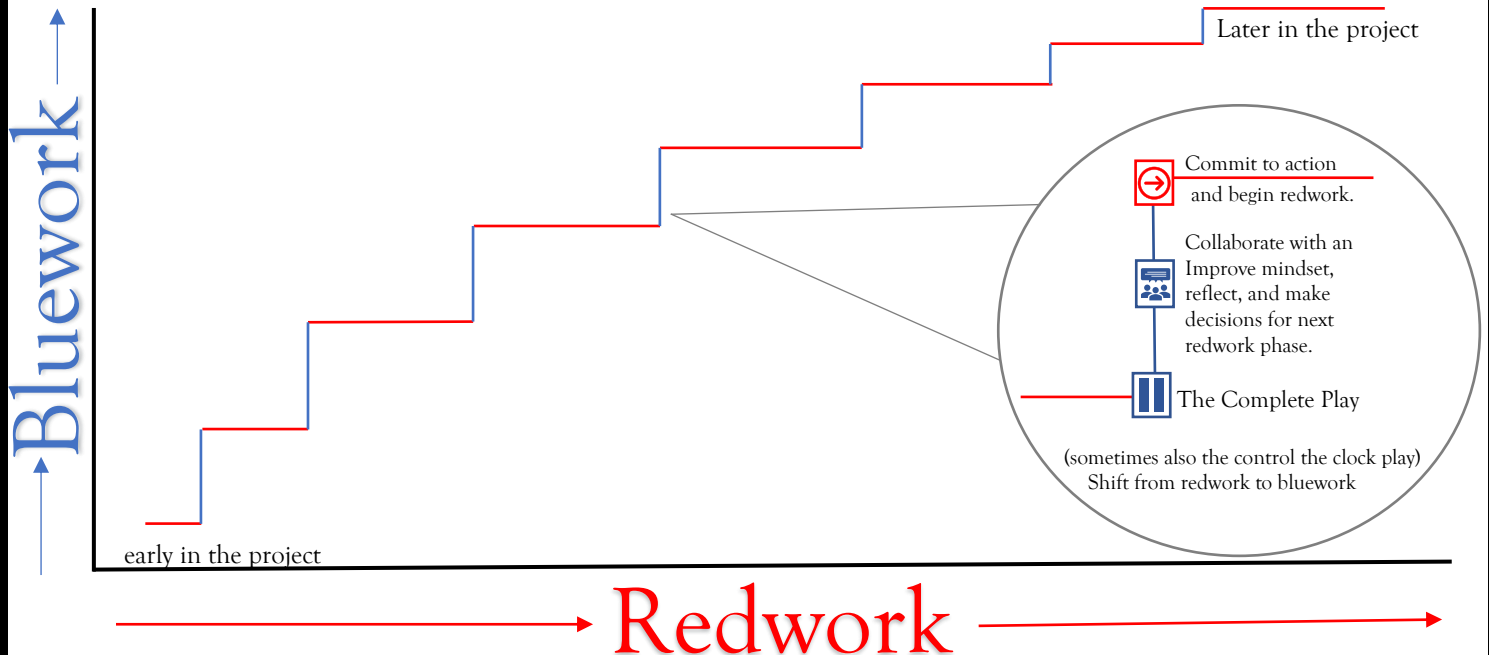
WHY IT MATTERS: Early in a new product or process when there are a wide array of options in decision-making you want to bias the team toward bluework (learning, improving pauses in the work). The front-loading of bluework allows faster learning and decision-making when there are more options. Then, as the project matures or the process stabilizes, you want to capitalize on the learning already done with a shift toward doing, and production. There still learning and improvement bluework sessions, but the bias shifts toward the redwork of getting it done.

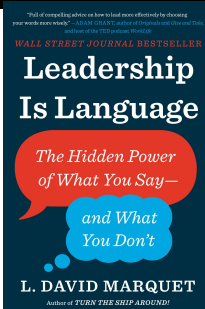
Early in the project:

- Less experience
- More decisions
- More options
- Emphasize learning, growth and improvement
- More bluework periods

Later in the project:

- More experience
- Fewer decisions
- Fewer options
- Focus on doing
- Longer redwork periods



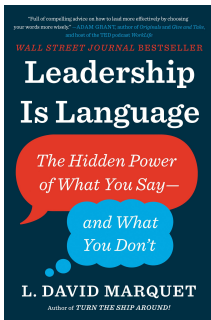


The “Complete” Play

HOW TO COMPLETE: *Complete* marks the end of *redwork* and is the signal that we go back to *bluework*. Before we get to the collaboration of *bluework*, however, we rest and celebrate. Completion is about a sense of progress and accomplishment. Progress feeds progress. The *Complete* play also lets us test our hypotheses and the decisions that we’ve made thus far. Executing the *Complete* play gives a sense of psychological detachment from our previous actions. This sense of “moving on” and “letting go” enables us to look dispassionately at our past actions and decisions with an eye toward getting better setting us up for the next play, *Improve*. Here are three ways to execute the *Complete* play.

1. Chunk work for frequent completes early, few completes late.	2. Celebrate with, not for.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Early in project - more bluework than redwork. ○ Later in project - more redwork than bluework. ○ Complete allows celebration. ○ Celebration reinforces behaviors. 	WITH “I see that you’ve organized the presentation into three sections—I’ve got your points organized in my head now.” “I saw that the proposal went out yesterday. Thank you. That will allow the client to look at it before the weekend.”	FOR “Good job.” “I’m so proud of you!” “You’ve really outdone yourself here.”
3. Focus on behavior, not characteristics.		
BEHAVIOR “I can see you put a lot of effort into this.” “It looks like it took difficult departmental planning to deliver this.” “Thank you for working hard on this project.”	CHARACTERISTIC “You are so smart.” “You’re a talented team!” “You are the best at this.”	

Learn more about the complete play in chapter 6 of *Leadership Is Language* by L. David Marquet



The IMPROVE play

The “Be Good” Self

vs.

The “Get Better” Self



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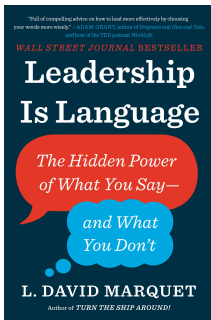
“How might you see it differently?”

“How could I have done it better?”

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“What is one thing we could change to make this better?”

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THE CONNECT PLAY:



Power Gradient Trappings

WHAT IT IS: The power gradient is the feeling of “how much more important are people in the next tier in the hierarchy than we are” and “how much more important are we then people below us.”

WHERE IT CAME FROM: In Industrial Age organizations (where we conformed to our roles) we wanted a steep power gradient because that allowed us to coerce the team to do what we wanted them to do. They would comply with their jobs.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Information and ideas flow inversely proportional to the power gradient. With a steep power gradient, very little information is going to flow up and it's going to be highly curated, massaged, and will be worded just right. These examples of steep power gradient are Industrial Age vestiges ensuring separation of executives and workers.

Measurable power gradient indicators:

- salary or pay rate
- office size
- carpet thickness
- physical separation such as reserved parking spots and private dining rooms
- access to particular people and inclusion in particular meetings
- stripes on sleeves
- seating location (distance from the top boss)
- number of and attractiveness of assistants (male or female)
- amount of talk time allocated
- tolerance of tardiness
- Share of Voice - How much more someone talks than others in the room, meeting, etc. 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.

Immeasurable but felt indicators of power gradient:

- the meeting doesn't start until the most senior person shows up
- punishment runs down the power gradient not up
- who chairs the meeting
- who sums up the discussion
- who allocates actions
- who we look at for reactions