

Enabling people to make best use of their freedom to act and make decisions

Building on the work of L David Marquet

When we developed the Agile Strategy concept, we defined six key practices that underpin it. Two of these practices help formulate strategy to allow agility and three of them support an agile operating model at the organisational level where strategy and execution meet. The final practice enabling people to make best use of their freedom to act and make decisions supports empowered execution. It focuses on the beliefs, values and behaviours leaders require to be effective in an uncertain environment.

Our challenge was to create a framework to bring this practice to life. It had to be easily relatable to real-life situations, so we could develop a suitable training package around and leaders would readily adopt and apply it. We also wanted to complement existing work we respect and admire on leadership in fast-changing and uncertain situations.

Our framework is evolving. As we deploy and test it, it's already clear there is scope for improvement, hence this summary is intended to invite feedback and critical challenge. The most important source for our work is the 2020 book by L. David Marquet *Leadership is Language*. David is a respected thought-leader and advocate of intent-based leadership. In his book, he uses a variety of powerful examples to illustrate the impact of language patterns on leadership.

David uses the analogy of an NFL coach's playbook to describe pre-planned responses that leaders can deploy with confidence. He hypothesized that most leaders are working with an outdated playbook, better suited to the industrial age than the dynamic situation we face. He contrasts each of six new leadership plays with the old play it replaces.

Leadership is Language provided the framework. But within the context of agile strategy, we noticed something was missing. We defined a foundational play designed to embed the behaviours we associate with an agile operating model. That is:

Use intent, not instructions

Old-world organisations tend to issue detailed instructions, or plans, to tell people what to do (and often how to do it). They believe that a reductionist approach reduces the risk of people not doing what is expected.

When you use intent, not instructions, everyone can be involved in thinking as well as doing. Intent implies a focus on the 'outcome' you want to achieve (and why it is important) rather than issuing instructions. Rather than telling people how to do their jobs, leaders focus on creating clarity about 'what' and 'why'.

Leaders can focus people on intent by explaining what success looks like from the perspective of their boss and their boss's boss. But they should provide direction only to the level immediately below them, rather than issuing instructions to the level below their direct reports. Remember 'two up' and 'one down'.

In organisations used to telling people what to do, the detailed instructions required often lack contextual information, so intent should always include the supporting rationale. Your aim as a leader is to ensure the intent is understood. People should respect it but have the freedom not to pursue it blindly if it no longer makes sense based on the situation around them. Organisations that embed the use of intent are more agile, better aligned and more able to adapt to change.

Play 1. Control the clock, don't be controlled by the clock

When you're under pressure, time is rarely your friend. It starts to control you. This is the play many of our clients need to work on. Whether you are doing anything or not, you consume time and in a competitive environment, you don't have an unlimited supply of it. Those who can act fast on new information and learn from it are in the best position to win.

Teams must find ways to use time more wisely, so they can out-think rather than outdo the competition. They need to create opportunities for teams to take time out and reflect on what they are doing. It is tough because taking time to think breaks the cycle of production, but that is exactly what is necessary for a thinking organisation.

Play 2: Collaborate, not coerce

If you control the clock, you have more time to collaborate. Old world managers tend to exercise more decision-making authority and rely on 'persuading' teams to do what they have decided. In contrast, the new play emphasizes the need to create a psychologically safe environment where people will be willing to share ideas, dissent and contribute to decision making.

Language patterns are at the heart of creating a safe culture in which to collaborate. We're working on developing training material and activities to help leaders make informed choices about the language they are using day-to-day to elicit knowledge and encourage collaboration.

Collaborate, not coerce, and play three (commit, not comply) share much common ground with The Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team® model derived from Patrick Lencioni's Five Dysfunctions of a Team.

Play 3: Commit, not comply

When a leader promotes productive conflict and open, non-judgmental discussion, collaboration will result. And when people collaborate, they are more likely to commit to decisions, even when they don't necessarily agree with them. Commitment implies full engagement and discretionary effort (some describe this as buy-in with 'head and heart'). It's a stronger bond than mere compliance.

Commitment moves the game from a decision to action. Leaders can do two things to support commitment. Firstly, to give people choice about how they get the job done and secondly by making it easier for people to commit. In an uncertain environment, this might involve treating decisions as hypotheses to be tested or committing to actions intended to learn something before a decision is confirmed.

The concept of 'disagree and commit' in which people are invited to commit to taking actions, not change their beliefs is an important idea here. It's been attributed to Andy Grove, CEO at Intel in the 1980s, and adopted by others including Jeff Bezos at Amazon. It helps teams avoid a consensus trap in which a lack of consensus leads to inaction.

Play 4. Complete, not continue

Play four is about ending periods of 'doing' to enable teams to think. In the old-world managers typically wanted to keep teams in production mode for as long as possible. Regrettably, we hear many stories of teams that are too busy (continuing) to stop, think and improve. They need to 'complete' to make sufficient time to improve. There are obvious connections between this play and 'control the clock' and parallels with the world of agile where short sprints have defined goals, followed by a period of reflection when the changing situation can be reviewed. Regular completion limits the risk of escalating commitment in a changing situation and allows for a sense of progress and accomplishment.

Play 5: Improve, not prove

Once a phase of work is complete, there is an opportunity to improve. But when people are stuck in a mindset that they need to prove themselves, they will only seek to justify their actions or competence rather than develop innovative solutions. The improve play relies on leaders creating a conducive environment where people will scrutinize past actions and events without ego or defensiveness and think about what could be better.

The improve play is facilitated by planned opportunities for reflection and improvement in team schedules and after significant events. Some organisations standardize frameworks for this purpose, like the After-Action-Review (AAR).

David Marquet identifies the role of language in linking a growth mindset with empowered choices over behaviours. This is the essence of empowered execution. Leaders must give people control over their ability to improve – this means they have the power to call the 'improve' play and to decide for themselves how and when to make changes necessary to improve.

Play 6: Connect, not control

The final play is called connection. It describes the glue that bonds the other plays together and is about building the environment where people will display cohesive teamwork within and between teams to serve the organisation.

General Stan McChrystal in Team of Teams described the old leader paradigm as the chess master, seeing everything, analyzing and determining each move. In the new leadership paradigm, he described leaders as gardeners, growing people and nurturing a safe environment where teamwork flourishes. That's why we've decided to describe the old play as 'control'.

With input from several sources, we identified five specific things leaders need to do to connect people to the intent, join up organisations so they think and act as a single organism and remove barriers to cohesive teamwork.

Heuristics not SOPs

Our view on these new leader plays is evolving. What is clear so far is that they should not be separated from one another. They overlap and are interdependent. They are not MECE (mutually exclusive or collectively exhaustive). They are heuristics, not a set of Standard Operating Procedures.



It's clear that language patterns make a bigger difference than processes or frameworks, so our work continues to develop practical experiential training to support leaders to develop and rehearse changes to the language they use. Watch this space for further updates.