
Your Words are the Technology of Leadership

The Things We Don't Know We Know

When we drive, there are hundreds of things that we do every minute that we don't consciously think about. Over time, we get so good at making these constant adjustments to speed and direction, gas and brakes, that we forget just how hard it is to actually drive a car. If we're not careful, our concentration will slip and that can lead to trouble.

[The things that we don't know we know](#) are like that – they allow us to do incredibly complex tasks without thinking about them, but the unconscious nature of the action can also get us in trouble.

Leading and managing is a lot like driving. When you've done it long enough, parts of it become automatic. I don't get to manage much in my current position, so when I get a chance to exercise my management muscles and I can see all these actions coming back, I'm much more aware of them than I was when I was a full-time manager.

Management is all about influencing from a distance. The whole job is nudges and levers, questions and suggestions. Little adjustments to keep on course, or speed up, or slow down. That's the art of managing.

The academic term for the things we "know" but can't articulate is **tacit knowledge**. It includes mostly things that we learn from doing. Think about riding a bicycle – can you explain step-by-step how to balance while you're moving forward? It's actually pretty close to impossible – that's why we need training wheels.

We actually need training wheels as managers too. Here is how Henry Mintzberg puts it in his superb book [Managing](#):

Little of management practice has been reliably codified, let alone certified as to its effectiveness. That is why Hill found that people "had to act as managers before they understood what the role was"

*It should be emphasized that, unlike other workers, the manager does not leave the telephone, the meeting, or the e-mail to get back to work. These contacts are the work. The ordinary work of the unit or organization—producing a product, selling it, even conducting a study or writing a report—is not usually undertaken by its manager. The manager's productive output has to be gauged largely in terms of the information he or she transmits orally or by e-mail. As Jeanne Liedtka of the Darden School has put it (in a talk I attended): "**Talk is the technology of leadership.**"*

Talk is the Technology of Leadership

I love that quote from Jeanne Liedtka – talk is the technology of leadership. **When was the last time you thought about how you use words?** That’s something we learned to do ages ago. So long ago that we don’t even know what we know about speaking, or listening.

And yet, these are the core technologies of leading. Speaking, and listening.

If you’re leading, or managing, it pays to think about these technologies a little more deeply.

Tom Peters addresses listening in a great document that he recently posted called [Presentation Excellence](#). The main document is about presentation skills, and it’s useful. For me though, the goldmine is the appendix on listening.

He starts this by saying “Interviewing/asking questions is a critical—and under-studied and under-practiced—skill. Few have treated it as a skill to be mastered akin to learning to play the piano.”

He then goes on to give 59 thoughts on becoming a better listener. This is an invaluable resource – check it out.

In terms of speaking, I’ve also run across an excellent resource recently. It’s a book called [The Power of Framing: Creating the Language of Leadership](#) by Gail Fairhurst. Like the piece by Peters, this book contains a wealth of practical examples and tips for using language more effectively.

It’s time for us to consciously think about the things we do automatically. **If talk is the technology of leadership, than it makes sense to build our skills in this area.** As we do this, we should pay attention to one last quote from Mintzberg’s book:

“It’s not [the manager’s] job to supervise or to motivate, but to liberate and enable” (Max DePree of Herman Miller, 1990).

Read more from Tim [here](#).