



**Caroline Gear, Executive Director
International Language Institute of
Massachusetts**

At the end of Stakeholders 2020, it was hard to press the Zoom leave button. I love the sense of community that EnglishUSA created through the conference. We are all dealing with so many unknowns, and those hours together were reassuring—especially the discussions in breakout sessions with peers who are struggling with many uncertainties.

A participant in one of the breakout rooms brought up the idea of a Book Club, and soon we were filling out a survey and making suggestions on what to read. The survey resulted in 12 books for a vote. *Leadership Is Language: The Hidden Power of What you Say – and What you Don't* was the winner. Our first meeting was set for February 24. All we needed was to make time to read.

Yes, the book lived on my nightstand for a good part of January. I would start reading a few pages before I fell asleep with it open on my chest. I realized that I needed to take this seriously if I wanted to be an active participant in the Book Club. With pen in hand, I started reading again, and the words began to speak directly to me. My copy is now filled with underlined passages and notes.

Author David Marquet uses a powerful example to prove the point that the words you use have an impact on the people you lead. A cargo ship, the SS El Faro, headed on a routine

trip between Jacksonville, FL and Puerto Rico, goes down in a hurricane with 33 crew members on board. Marquet presents specific passages from 25 hours of conversations that took place on the bridge of the ship to analyze the language used by the team in making what turned out to be life and death decisions. He clearly delineated how the ship's disastrous outcome might have changed under a leadership style employing different, more effective language.

As the author posits, "Ultimately, the purpose of learning and innovations is behavior change. If there is no intention of doing anything differently in the future, you can save yourself the mental heavy lifting of learning something new." At the International Language Institute of Massachusetts, we are always pushing our students to take risks with their language. We modeled that desired behavior when the pandemic hit, and our teachers took the big risk of embracing online teaching. Waiting for everything to go back to normal was NOT an option. For my part, I was open to new ways of improving my leadership while we examined how to improve the school and avert a disastrous outcome.

As I closed the book a few days before the first book club meeting, three key points resonated with me.

1. View variability as an ally, not as an enemy.
2. Focus on the journey and not the destination, remembering to pause and celebrate.
3. Good leadership continually reflects the language you use.

So, variability. My vision of leadership has always been a flock of geese moving together in the same direction. Now I'm taking a closer look at that V-shape to include the willingness of others to take turns in heading up the flock as we move forward. Increasingly, my leadership role is to create an environment in which folks feel safe to take the lead with a new

idea. As Marquet writes, “The point is that we do not want a ‘harmonious conversation.’ What we want is an accurate picture of reality. Dissent creates a sense of excitement and energy – a leaning forward, a rubbing-the-hands-together feeling of ‘this could be the start of something interesting and new.’”

To the point, I didn’t always have harmonious conversations with a particular staff member. I wasn’t appreciating their difference of opinion and often shot down their ideas rather than listening to what they had to say. As a leader, I wasn’t creating a safe workplace for this staff member. But I am learning to listen better, and our relationship is improving. In fact, I recognize they have good ideas that have helped improve the school. (Recently I came across Kate Murphy’s, *You’re Not Listening. What You’re Missing and Why It Matters*. This book is most definitely a good companion to *Leadership is Language*.)

And there’s looking at the journey rather than the destination. I always look at goal setting as a staircase with steps leading to a goal at the top. Marquet also uses the staircase visual. For him, it’s a journey divided into Redwork (doing) and Bluework (thinking). You’ll find more details about Redwork and Bluework in the link at the end of this article. Importantly, his staircase is not only about full steam ahead. It’s also about taking a pause to celebrate the work and to reevaluate where the project is going, creating a culture of collaboration rather than coercion along the way: “If we collaborate effectively, the result is commitment. If we coerce, the result is compliance.”

Finally, throughout the book there are examples of different ways to change your language to flatten the power gradient and enhance participation. This includes taking out judgment language and replacing it with observation language. Appreciate don’t evaluate. As Marquet reminds us, “Leadership

is about making the lives of others easier, not blaming them. Leadership is about the hard work of taking responsibility for how our actions and words affect the lives of others.” Changing one’s language doesn’t happen overnight, especially when you have been thinking and saying the same things over and over for years. Early in the pandemic, a speaker on a webinar reminded the participants that if you continue to do the same thing, you’ll always get the same result.

Reading *Leadership is Language* as part of the EnglishUSA book club has allowed me to look at my leadership, language and specific vocabulary in a new light as well as hear from other leaders in our field and how this book holds lessons for everyone. Therefore, when asked to write about our book club for the EnglishUSA Journal, it seemed that my voice shouldn’t be the only one in this article. Below you’ll hear from Jennifer Phillips, Lisa Kraft and Cheryl Delk-Le Good on how reading *Leadership is Language* impacted them. And if you click on this [link](#), you’ll also have access to a *Leadership is Language* One-Pager Resource that we used during the book club meetings. This group is open to new members, so please consider joining us!

**Jennifer Phillips, Director
Wisconsin ESL Institute (WESLI)**

I have so enjoyed reading *Leadership is Language* and have even more so enjoyed discussing the book during the EnglishUSA book club. What has struck me most about the book so far (fair warning, I have not yet finished the book) and our related discussions, is the concept of what Marquet describes as *Red work* (doing) vs. *Blue work* (thinking) and how that relates to the work that we do. By default of our industry, I believe we as educators are quite good at placing value in Blue work. However, when it comes to program administration, I feel that it is often difficult to find the time or space for this type

of creative thinking and decision making. The discussion on how stress significantly impedes Blue work is timely in light of the past year and how we've dealt with COVID-19, border closures, etc. This book has been a good reminder of the importance of taking time to pause, reflect and think of the multitude of possibilities we do have, rather than focusing on the current restrictions we must operate within. We must dedicate space in our schedules to reflect, be creative and build the capacity to be agile. Although finding the time can be difficult, or even impossible feeling, I have found that it has given me an increased sense of control over our current situation, which is incredibly motivating. And the ability to discuss these thoughts and hear from others in the book club has been invaluable and fun!

**Lisa Kraft, Director of Academics and International Special Programs
English Language Institute, Pace University**

An EnglishUSA book club... "YES, sign me up!" I've been part of a local friends' book club for many years and have enjoyed the comradery that comes with discussing a text and connecting it to our lives. Combine that with EnglishUSA professional development and you have a winning formula. The EnglishUSA book club has felt more intimate during a time when in-person networking events are not possible, and I've really enjoyed that.

The book *Leadership is Language* has taken all of us to another level when thinking about leadership and decision making especially as data and news that inform our decisions change on a daily basis. We've learned that we need to be nimble and flexible, and that it is ok to change direction at a moment's notice. This philosophy has even spilled into my personal life and how I consider larger life decisions.

I do not need to stay the course because that's what I decided two years ago; I can change direction without losing face or derailing my initial plans. If joining a book club and more professional development are on your wish list, please come and join us.

**Cheryl Delk-Le Good, Executive Director
EnglishUSA**

Being part of the EnglishUSA Book Club during COVID-19 has been one of the most rewarding professional development experiences for me. In addition, as Executive Director of EnglishUSA, it's been so informative for me to hear from members who are coping with the day-to-day operations in their English language programs and the challenges the pandemic has brought us all. The personal examples that are being shared about directing or teaching in a program have resonated with many of the concepts in *Leadership is Language*. One of the main concepts around "Questions" and the seven questioning types to avoid has been most useful and applicable to many of us in the group. The author provides specific examples of how to improve our questions with peers. For the past several months, I've been trying to avoid the "Why" question because even though it is open-ended and allows for an extensive answer, the choice of using "Why" is immediately evaluative. Prompting discussion and responses with "Tell me more" is more objective. We have also experimented with the author's suggestion of taking a Yes/No/Maybe vote *prior* to discussions to allow for honest and gut-reactions to be expressed by the whole group before hitting at individual input.

Join us for the next book club meeting on June 10th at 5:00pm (ET). We'll be discussing Chapter 6.