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FOREWORD

Let me save you some time and heartbreak: listen to what David says. I only wish I did sooner. It would have saved me a lot of grief and millions of dollars.

Like many people you know (or maybe even you!), I've spent my life trying to make it look like I had all the answers. I needed everyone to think I was smart. Whatever the cause, I was raised to believe being right and having the answers was a hallmark of leadership. It wasn't until my last company that I realized something was wrong.

After raising over $30 million, recruiting some of the best people I've ever worked with, and having the opportunity to lead and build product at one of the hottest start-ups in Silicon Valley, I couldn't escape a gnawing, enigmatic dread. We had enough capital, we had the right people, and yet everyone was miserable.

It took me a long time to see and admit it—but I was the problem. When I didn't know the answers, I felt insecure and I did not want people to see it. So I overcompensated by pushing. I cajoled people to get on board, go my way or get out. I had convinced myself that this was the right approach because of course I had the answers.

Everyone left. The company was recapitalized, and all the investors lost their money. No one else got a dollar. And I was depressed.

A few years before these events, I saw David Marquet speak. Everything he said was the opposite of the approach I later adopted at that failed business. In moments of clarity during those times, I would remember David's words and wish I could find a way to apply them to our work.

The chastening experience of that failure caused me to recommit to developing my leadership skills. At my next company, Assist, I rebuilt my approach from the ground up with David's guidance as my foundation. With my cofounder—Robert Stephens, the founder of Geek Squad—Assist became the leader in the AI space, powering brands on new platforms like Google Assistant, Alexa, and messaging apps. There is zero question that David's insight and guidance contributed in a giant way to our success.

From the first word I wrote to start the company, everything was through the lens of what this book is about. Curiosity was our core value. We celebrated what we didn't know, and know-it-alls weren't welcome. How we used our words became how we respected people and operated effectively. We practiced using language with one another that forced people to own making decisions. We would remind people it's OK to say, "I don't know." I hired people and asked them to teach me. We helped people go from saying "I think we should . . ." to "I've already done . . ." There was no need to ask for permission.

Today, my number one priority is partnering to create a workplace culture that expands the range of empowerment so more people have the skills and agency to act in the service of the greatest good. Inversely, the more permission that is needed, the less people will be empowered to think and lead, and the worse the place will be to work. It wasn't always easy; many people don't believe they can or should operate in this way.

Ultimately, I saw my job as CEO evolve to a place where my goal was to make as few decisions as possible. That's a long distance away from the guy who had to hide behind a mask of All Knowledge.

Everything in this book is exactly how I strived to lead Assist, and in 2019, Assist was acquired for millions. As I watched my colleagues move to great positions at prestigious companies, I felt incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to learn and grow alongside some of the best leaders I've ever worked with.

David's not promising an easier, shorter path, but, in my experience, it's one that leaves everyone feeling whole, empowered, and eager to dive back in the next day. That works for me.

Shane Mac
Nashville, June 2019
Feel free to say "Hi" on Twitter: @shanemac

INTRODUCTION

I used to think I was special.

It started in high school, when I earned better grades than almost everyone around me. This trend continued into my time at the US Naval Academy. Truth was, I was just a prescient and skilled test-taker, but after graduating and rising to the rank of captain in the navy's submarine force, I mistakenly concluded that I'd risen so quickly because I was more observant, disciplined, committed, thoughtful, and caring than the people around me. It's hard to admit, but at the time I felt pretty sure I was better at getting stuff done—and just plain better—than the people I worked with.

Secure in my sense of superiority, I became the first one to spot problems and the first to see solutions to those problems, too. I told people what they should do and—through rank, influence, and sheer rhetorical force—coerced them into complying with my instructions. In my haste to get stuff done, I left no time for others to make their own contributions. My division or department was an assembly line, one that cranked out actions instead of cars or lawnmowers. I was

the foreman of the action factory because I knew better than everyone else.

There were plenty of signs that my view was distorted—had I been willing to see them. People would hesitantly offer a good idea every now and then. Occasionally, they would take smart, decisive action without my direction. Once in a while, I would make a mistake, directing my team in a way that wasn't optimal or was just plain wrong. In these scenarios, my subordinates would comply with bad orders, despite all my lectures to speak up if they ever saw a problem. Afterward, when things went off the rails, they would shrug and say they were just doing what they'd been told. In response, I would double down on giving clear, concise, and correct orders.

I spent twenty-eight years being evaluated and ranked. The navy is highly competitive; top spots are scarce. In this environment of continuous judgment and evaluation, I experienced constant pressure to prove myself. Every exam, every monthly report, every inspection, every meeting, every *day* was another trial, another opportunity to prove and perform. A single bad outcome might affect a promotion, a pay raise, my social standing, even my sense of self-worth.

As I regarded my achievements with pride, I chafed at the sense that others didn't give me adequate recognition for my contributions. I adopted a closed, invulnerable persona, firmly rooted in a performance mindset. If life was going to be a rat race, you can bet your whiskers I was going to win it, however hard I had to drive my people to do so.

Operating this way—conforming to hierarchical roles, maintaining emotional distance from others, avoiding vulnerability at all costs—is lonely and unfulfilling. Although I was proud of my promotions and awards, something profoundly important was missing.

TURNING THE SHIP AROUND

My journey took an unexpected detour when the captain of the nuclear-powered submarine USS *Santa Fe* abruptly quit and I was suddenly put in command. *Santa Fe* was the laughingstock of the fleet. At the time, I joked that it had only two problems: the fleet's worst morale, and its worst performance to boot. Each month, the navy would publish the twelve-month reenlistment and retention rate for all fifty or so submarines and, inevitably, *Santa Fe* would be at the bottom of the list. Not near the bottom. All the way at the bottom, by a good margin, with 90 percent of *Santa Fe*'s crew getting out of the navy at the end of their time on board.

That was the morale problem I had to solve. The other problem was bad performance. *Santa Fe* was getting poor inspection scores across all its operations, from food service to firing torpedoes, from navigation to the nuclear power plant. It also had higher-than-average safety incidents.

Normally, my prove-and-perform leadership approach would have been just what the doctor ordered—if I had known the ship. But, as it turned out, I had spent twelve months preparing to take over a different submarine. I was driving blind.

When I came aboard my new submarine, I started asking questions. In the past, I'd always made a practice of asking questions, but they were more like test questions: I already knew the answers. Did they? Now, I was asking questions because I needed to know how the ship worked. This meant I had to admit to my crew that for many of the details, I did not know the answers. That was scary.

On our first day at sea, the crew and I were sizing each other up. I instinctively conformed to the role of captain as I'd been programmed: I would give the orders and they would follow them. Then, early on, I

ordered something technically impossible for *Santa Fe*: second gear on a motor that had only one. The order was immediately parroted by an officer, though he knew it made no sense. The sailor ordered to carry it out just shrugged helplessly and my error was revealed to all.

This was a life-changing moment for me. I'd always known ninety-nine out of every one hundred parts of my job. When there was the occasional gap in my decision-making, I simply resolved to "give better orders" in the future. Here on *Santa Fe*, I felt like I knew only one out of one hundred parts of what I needed to do. If I couldn't count on my own officers to point out an obvious mistake like this one, we'd end up killing the wrong people. Maybe even ourselves. Something needed to change.

All my leadership training up to that point had been about making decisions and getting the team to implement them. I had never questioned this paradigm until that moment aboard *Santa Fe*. Improving my decisions simply couldn't happen fast enough to matter. I needed a different solution entirely. The problem, I realized, wasn't that I'd given a bad order, it was that I was giving orders in the first place. By making tactical and operational decisions for the team, I was absolving them of their responsibility for outcomes. Moreover, I was giving them a pass on thinking itself. It was a pass I had to revoke if we were going to survive.

Like many organizations, the USS *Santa Fe* prided itself on its can-do culture. But can-do is fragile. As long as whatever we're can-doing is right, things are fine, but in our take-no-prisoners enthusiasm, we can easily propagate errors throughout the organization. We needed to match our zest for can-do with a zeal for "can-think."

The officers of *Santa Fe* and I made a deal that day. I agreed to never give another order. Instead, I would provide intent, the goal of what it was we were trying to achieve. They agreed never to wait to be

told what to do. Instead, they would provide their intentions to me, how they were going to achieve my intent. This shift was reflected in a simple change of language, replacing "request permission to" with "I intend to."

We shook hands on it. Then we went back to work.

Over the next twelve months, *Santa Fe* set a record when each and every one of the thirty-three sailors eligible for reenlistment that following year signed up to stay in the navy. The ship also performed brilliantly in every task the navy asked of it. *Santa Fe* received an all-time record inspection score for operating the submarine. All without firing anyone. For both performance and morale, *Santa Fe* had risen from worst to first.

This did not happen because I leaned harder on the officers and crew. It happened because I leaned back and invited them to lean in to me. As a result, we went from one leader and 134 followers to 135 leaders with a bias for action and thinking.

What happened over the next ten years was even more remarkable. The crew of *Santa Fe* continued to outperform their peers after I left. Ten of the officers from that time period were themselves selected to command submarines, five became squadron commanders or the equivalent, and two (so far) have been promoted to admiral. In the navy, this track record is, to put it mildly, extraordinary.

LEADERSHIP IS LANGUAGE

None of this happened because we became more skilled, knowledgeable, or dedicated to the job. We tinkered with some of the navy regulations, but we could only make minor modifications. This was a system over which we had little control. We couldn't change our schedule, major

assignments, promotions, technical requirements, legal obligations, most procedures and policies, or even who was assigned to the ship.

What we could control was how we talked to each other, the words we used. Starting with me. After all, what is leadership but language? As I changed the way I communicated with the rest of the crew, it affected the way they communicated with me and with each other. Changing the way we communicated changed the culture. Changing the culture transformed our results.

Changing our words changed our world.

The language changed in three ways:

- We replaced a reactive language of convince, coerce, comply, and conform with a proactive language of intent and commitment to action.
- We replaced a language of "prove and perform" with a language of "improve and learn."
- We replaced a language of invulnerability and certainty with a language of vulnerability and curiosity.

We were still speaking English, of course, but in many ways, it really felt as though we had learned a new language entirely.

Language was the starting point for all the other positive changes that happened aboard *Santa Fe*. Words went both ways—our language revealed our thinking and changed our thinking. Language was the way we could measure empowerment and collaboration, as well as improve it.

As captain of the ship, the way I said things made all the difference. Language was my lever. Everything started with me. I'd always believed that I couldn't remain quiet because people wouldn't speak up. Finally, I realized that people weren't speaking up because I couldn't remain quiet.

Something else I learned was that waiting for people to prove

themselves in order for me to trust them was backward. I needed to entrust people with authority and autonomy in order to give them the opportunity to prove themselves.

When I came aboard *Santa Fe*, I had it in my head that I would improve the crew's performance. Better performance would then lead to better morale. It didn't end up working that way. Instead, once people were given autonomy over their work, became connected to a purpose that mattered, and felt like part of a team, they became happier. Morale soared. *Then* the performance improved.

This started happening within a week.

SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT LANGUAGE

If you're curious about the full details of the transformation that occurred aboard *Santa Fe*, you can read my first book, *Turn the Ship Around!*. It was a humbling experience. It taught me that I wasn't special in the way I'd thought I was. Still, I am tremendously grateful to have faced that reckoning. I learned that if I can only keep my mouth shut for a few extra seconds, ask the kinds of questions that encourage people to share their thoughts, and actually pay attention to what others are saying, their ideas, points of view, and suggested actions are often as good as—often even better (!)—than what I'd had in mind.

In my rush to get people to do the things I wanted them to do, I'd been suppressing their engagement, openness, and creativity. While I felt a short-term psychological boost from making things happen, this behavior sapped the potential contributions of the people around me. Meanwhile, as the organizations I led grew in scale, my ability to know everything and manage everything myself diminished relative to the potential contributions of everyone around me. I'd been my own worst enemy all along.

Since leaving the service, I've worked to use my experience to help others become better leaders themselves. I show them how to create the ideal environment for their people and unleash all the passion, intellect, and initiative just waiting to be tapped within the organization. We do this through language, by addressing the way we communicate with others. It works.

In my new role as a coach and mentor for other leaders, I have become convinced that the lessons I learned on *Santa Fe* are effective across all organizations:

- The call center that reduced quarterly attrition from eight people to zero.
- The tech company that doubled revenue and size.
- The research center that started making award-winning products.
- The nuclear power plant that achieved top-level performance.
- The company selected "Best Place to Work."
- The mom who says her kids' bedtime is no longer a struggle.
- The police district that reduced crime by 3 percent.
- The operations manager who lost fifty pounds because she has so much less stress in her life.

All through language. All through changing the words we use to communicate and collaborate with others.*

For years, I have been working to change the way I talk to people, but I am still on my journey. It takes continuous self-awareness and reprogramming to avoid the imperative mode of communication that

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* We call this approach Intent-Based Leadership® because leaders state their intent, not their instructions, to the team. Then the members of the team say how they intend to achieve that intent, instead of asking for permission.

is the default in our society. Today, I try to pause before responding or reacting in order to give myself ample opportunity to phrase things in a more effective way. I've seen how powerful the right words can be at achieving results.

A NEW LEADERSHIP PLAYBOOK

As I developed my thinking around the language of leadership, I formulated responses for leaders in various situations at work. I started thinking about these preplanned and preprogrammed responses that we have—patterns of action (and in our case, language) in response to, and triggered by, certain events or scenarios. Just like a sports play, you choose your play by reading the field and then making a deliberate decision about how to act. But I wasn't sure about that metaphor and was still struggling with the overall structure of the book.

While this was going on, I boarded United flight 1139, the redeye from San Francisco to Tampa. I was headed home. Just after I buckled in, a man sat down next to me with a large duffle bag that he pushed under the seat in front of him. He pulled out a three-inch, three-ring binder and I could see a couple others in the duffle. It was a playbook, a football playbook! I did not recognize him, but it was Jon Gruden, who had just signed a contract to be head coach of the Oakland Raiders (again). He had served as head coach from 1998 to 2001. These were the playbooks for the Oakland Raiders.

I asked him about the playbooks. He accommodated me and flipped open to the front of the binder. The first "plays" had nothing to do with football. They were about how the players, coaches, and staff would act off the field, in the locker room, at team events, and at practice. It was only in volumes two and three that the traditional pass plays and running plays were portrayed.

When we started discussing the organization of the binders, the first words out of his mouth were, "Well, it's all about language." I took that as a sign from the heavens and settled on the playbook metaphor.

Because of how I got there that when I say "play," I often picture football, because in that sport there is a break between each action. The field is reset and the offense has time to deliberately decide their next action: run, pass, or something else. So does the defense. And both sides are trying to read the other in determining their plan.

This pattern of executing plays or preplanned responses already exists in human behavior, business leadership, and language. The problem is that most of us are working with an outdated playbook: plays that we have been programmed to run from an older paradigm of leadership—the Industrial Revolution. In the early chapters of this book, I'll explain how we inherited our language of leadership from the industrial era and why it's so poorly suited to today's work environment.

Above all, the promise of this book is to reveal not only the new plays appropriate for today's challenges but also their underlying structure, the logic behind them, and how to use them with your team. Once you understand not only what to say but why and how, you will be able to find the right language for any situation. This will help establish a more effective working environment, leading to better outcomes across the board and a more satisfying and meaningful work experience for everyone in the organization.

Over the course of this book, I'll introduce you to six new leadership plays, contrasting each one with the old plays. I will also show how the new plays work together, revealing an underlying approach that oscillates between action and reflection, doing and deciding. They are, in order:

1. Control the clock instead of obeying the clock.
2. Collaborate instead of coercing.

3. Commitment rather than compliance.
4. Complete defined goals instead of continuing work indefinitely.
5. Improve outcomes rather than prove ability.
6. Connect with people instead of conforming to your role.

Each of these plays hinges on specific use of language, and I'll explain in detail how to execute them in the chapters to come.

BALANCING DELIBERATION AND ACTION

Fred is a hardworking executive at a manufacturing company. Every day, he faces a list of problems to solve, from making machines run better to hiring new workers, from improving overall output to dealing with trade tariffs. He feels the relentless pressure of the clock and, in his rush to get things done, he tends to run roughshod over other people. Fred spends the day coercing the team to do what he thinks best, then goes home feeling depleted, without any sense of having made much progress. He maintains a "professional," arm's-length distance from his employees, conforming to the role of boss.

Fred isn't happy. Fred's team members aren't happy, either. They feel like Fred doesn't trust them. He tells them what to do constantly and micromanages their work. They feel like they have to leave their humanity at the door: their creativity, empathy, and sense of purpose. There is little sense of progress for them, either. Every day feels much like the last. Everyone complies with what they're told to do, but there's little passion in it. They give just enough to get by and save as much of themselves as they can for after the end-of-day whistle.

. . .

Sᴜᴇ ɪs ᴀ hardworking executive at a technology company across the street. Prone to contemplation, rumination, even depression, she struggles to make decisions. Everything seems like a big commitment. It's overwhelming. Sue has a good sense of what she wants each project to look like at the end, but is often paralyzed in figuring out where to start. While the company founder urges her to "fail fast" and "break things," she isn't exactly sure what those things mean to her. When she does make decisions, she feels like she gets second-guessed a lot.

Sue is frustrated. Sue's team members are frustrated, too. They see projects that need to happen and ways of improving existing products, but they can't get Sue's sign-off on making meaningful changes. When they bring forward suggestions, she asks them question after question until there's one they can't answer—at which point they are sent back for more research. There is little sense of progress and every day seems like the last. The lack of progress and completion wears at morale. Turnover is high and people are disengaged.

It might seem like Fred and Sue have opposite problems. In reality, their problem is the same: an imbalance in the rhythm between doing and thinking.

Doing and thinking are the basic building blocks of all human activity. The correct balance of these two activities helps us achieve our goals. Unfortunately, many organizations struggle to maintain a healthy balance, tilting too far toward action, as at Fred's manufacturing company, or too far toward deliberation, as at Sue's technology company. Rather than being deliberately engineered, the think-do

rhythm in most organizations arises accidentally, from the many small decisions we make every day.

The right balance of doing and thinking keeps an organization adaptive and agile, innovative and entrepreneurial. It gives the people in the organization a sense of purpose and progress, which helps drive continuous improvement. In short, the right balance of doing and thinking drives learning. It keeps the company relevant and solvent. It keeps employees happy. It leads to happy customers, too.

By *doing*, I mean physical interaction with the world, whether that means driving a forklift or making a presentation to investors. Doing something doesn't mean you aren't thinking, but the brain operates much more automatically. For familiar behaviors like deeply ingrained habits—getting dressed or driving home, for example—our brains can go into almost fully automatic mode, wandering freely even as we shave with a razor or drive seventy miles an hour down the highway. As a result, doing does not tax the mind the way thinking does. Doing is our default mode because it is faster and more efficient, and our brains are nothing if not efficient.

By *thinking*, I mean the deliberate, curious, and open exploration of information, beliefs, stories, and assumptions in order to interpret the world around us. In our model, thinking occurs before and after doing. Before an action, the outputs of thinking are decisions and hypotheses: What are we going to do and what are we going to learn? After an action, the output of thinking is reflection upon what we have learned. In stark contrast with doing, the process of thinking is cognitively taxing and leads to mental fatigue.

The difference between doing and thinking can be described in several ways:

Our interaction with the world is doing.
Improving our interaction with the world is thinking.

Proving and performing is doing.

Growing and improving is thinking.

A focused, exclusive, driving, proving mindset
is best for doing.

An open, curious, seeking, improving mindset
is best for thinking.

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 levelheaded perspective.

We will keep Fred and Sue with us because we have some of both of them in all of us. Sometimes we are like Fred, running around with too little reflection. Sometimes we are like Sue, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task before us and finding it hard to move forward.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The key to understanding the playbook we inherited and what we need to do to change it comes from understanding Industrial Age organizations. They divided their people into leaders and followers, deciders and doers. You can see the legacy of this division in the titles and uniforms people wear at work.

Since the deciders and the doers were two different groups of people, leaders needed to convince followers to perform work they had not been part of conceiving, work they had not "bought into." Leadership was, by necessity, coercive. It was all about getting people to comply with external directions.

For the doers, variability was treated as the enemy. Factory work needs to be as consistent as possible to achieve consistent results. So the language patterns developed in ways that naturally reduced variability.

Finally, since we were always trying to squeeze in more pieces of work per unit of time, there was always a sense of "obeying the clock," resulting in a performance mindset.

Now, that is all changed. For organizations to survive, the doers must also be the deciders. We need the same people who used to view variability solely as the enemy to periodically view variability as an ally. We need the same people who used to have only a performance mindset to periodically have an improving mindset.

The book is laid out in the following format:

At the beginning, I describe the reasons behind the changes we are seeing at work. I explain how to think about learning and illuminate the proper interaction between thinking and doing.

The main part of the book is organized into the six leadership plays we have been programmed for, and the six new leadership plays we want to replace those with.

Then I provide some examples of how you might apply these new plays to your life and work. I also explain what an operating rhythm based on this approach looks like at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

To give credence to this argument, we will begin with the gripping story of a real team in a real-life situation trying and failing to achieve a mission against tough odds. Our objective is to fully understand how today's teams actually talk—and therefore make decisions—even in high-stakes, life-and-death scenarios. Not how we teach them to talk, not how we hope they will talk, not how we tell them to talk, but how they actually talk.

The case comes from a 2015 incident in which a container ship, equipped with modern radios and navigation equipment, sailed directly into a hurricane and sank. All thirty-three people on board were lost. To understand how this happened, we don't have to rely on anyone's shaky memory of a specific conversation. We are fortunate to be able to draw on the full transcript of twenty-five hours of conversation on the bridge of that ship.

The name of that ship was *El Faro*, and this book will conclude by presenting an imagined scenario in which the crew might have been saved by following a different leadership playbook. But first, we must understand what actually happened on board *El Faro* during what would be its final journey . . .

Losing *El Faro*

TUESDAY

1,000 MILES FROM STORM CENTER

Tuesday, September 29, 2015, was a busy day on board the container ship *El Faro*, as the crew of thirty-three mariners finished their final preparations for sea. As with most ships, the time in port would have been quite busy, with the ship having arrived from its previous trip just the day before. The cargo needed to be unloaded, and the new containers and cargo loaded and lashed down. They would have been rushing to meet their normal underway time of 7:00 p.m. Like the crew of *Santa Fe*, the crew of *El Faro* was a "can-do" bunch.

It was the height of hurricane season, but the seas were calm in Jacksonville, Florida. Presently, the ship, over two football fields in length, would traverse the familiar 1,300-mile stretch directly from the northeast corner of Florida to San Juan on the island of Puerto Rico. In fact, the forty-year-old *El Faro* had originally been called the *Puerto Rico* when it started its life making runs between America's east coast and the small US island territory.

At 8:06 p.m., *El Faro* set sail. Directly in its path on the Atlantic

side of the Bahamas, Tropical Storm Joaquin was strengthening. The next morning, as *El Faro* made its way southeast, meteorologists upgraded Joaquin to a Category 1 hurricane and issued a hurricane warning for the Central Bahamas. By the end of the day, Joaquin would be classified a Category 3, capable of devastating damage, with winds of 129 miles per hour or more. Hurricane Joaquin would end up being the strongest hurricane to hit the Bahamas since 1866.

Prior to the ship setting for sea, an off-duty *El Faro* officer texted the captain, to make sure he was aware of the storm and to ask about his intended route. The captain replied that he planned to take the normal, direct route to Puerto Rico. Being the most direct, *El Faro*'s chosen course was the fastest, but also the most exposed to the hurricane. An alternate route, the Old Bahama Channel, was 160 miles longer and would take the ship an extra eight hours to traverse. But this route would put the Bahamas between the ship and the storm, buffering the vessel from the wind and waves.

You don't need experience in maritime navigation to understand the choice facing the captain and crew of *El Faro*. Once you've departed Jacksonville en route south to Puerto Rico, you have only two opportunities to cross over to the protected channel: at the north end of the Bahamas, where you turn right and follow the Florida coastline, or farther down the Atlantic side of the Bahamas, at the halfway point near an island called Rum Cay. At this point, there is a wide channel that cuts through the Bahamas. Once you pass that second turn at Rum Cay, you've committed yourself to the direct path, and to facing the full brunt of anything blowing in from the east. But the captain seems to have already made that decision, by himself, without discussion with his team, prior to getting under way.

At its current speed, *El Faro* would reach the first turning point at 7:00 Wednesday morning, the second decision point at 1:00 Thursday morning.
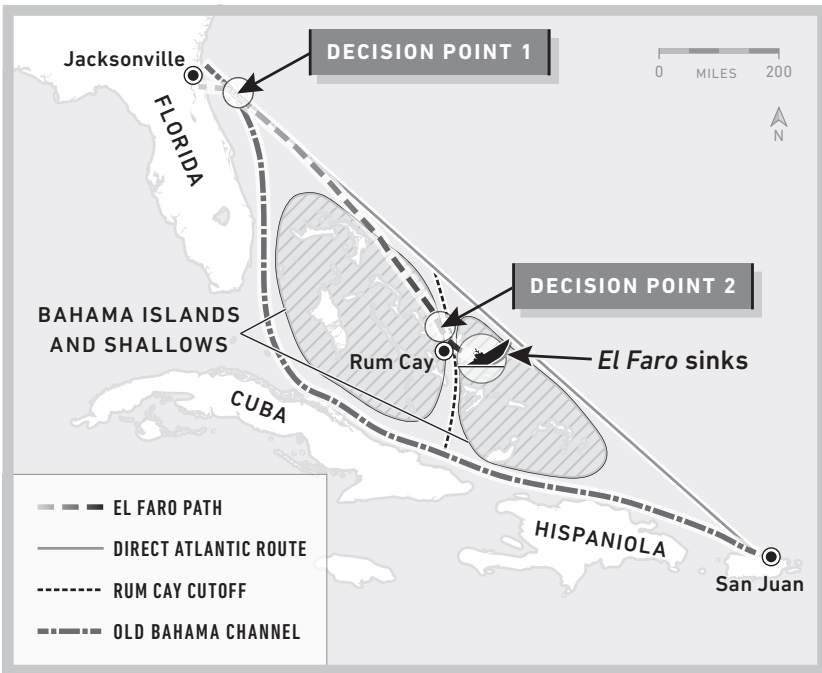
This chapter is about the power of our programmed language, rooted in the Industrial Age playbook. It uses the example of an oceangoing vessel facing a hurricane, but it could be about any team working on any big project. What makes *El Faro* worth discussing is that we have records of the actual words spoken and the actual actions taken by the captain and crew. This gives us an unparalleled glimpse into the language a team actually used when faced with life-and-death decisions.

This was a familiar route for the captain and crew of *El Faro*. They made the trip both ways on a regular basis and knew it inside and out. In other words, navigating from Jacksonville to San Juan was a classic, nose-to-the-grindstone task for everyone on board. In a situation like this, every member of the crew knew exactly what to do and when to do it.

Then the situation changed.

When *El Faro* left port, Joaquin was classified as a tropical storm. It was approaching from the central Atlantic, expected to turn to the right somewhere near the Bahamas. *El Faro*'s Atlantic route would then take it down the back side of the storm, the gentler side. If Joaquin turned late, however, *El Faro* would cross the front of the storm, where the forward motion of the hurricane would drive stronger winds and larger waves.

Once *El Faro* took the Atlantic route, it wouldn't be able to cross over into the protected Old Bahama Channel until Rum Cay. Experienced mariners know this, and these were experienced mariners. The captain had been a master for ten years, and the officers and crew had met all Coast Guard and International Maritime Organization requirements and regulations. Technical competence was not a problem.

WEDNESDAY

600 MILES FROM STORM CENTER

At 7:02 Wednesday morning, as the ship approached the northern Bahamas, the captain decided to take the Atlantic route, committing the ship to a route down the storm side of the Bahamas.

How was this decision made?

You could say that it was not deliberately made. There was a discussion on board *El Faro* between the captain and the chief mate. No one else was involved or even informed. It seems as though they did not even completely register it *as* a decision. On some level, the captain had already decided on the standard Atlantic route before leaving port. Early in the discussion, the captain said to the chief mate, "So we'll just have to tough this one out." Decision made. Done.

The only thing to be done was to continue with the plan. The rest of the conversation was about what they needed to do to make the ship

as seaworthy as possible. The discussion was not *whether* they should take the Atlantic route, but *how* to take the Atlantic route. This is the Industrial Age play of *continue*. Continue is what has many of us chasing our tails in continuous action without reflection.

Looking at the transcript, it's clear there was no discussion of the assumptions that supported the decision, nor much of a plan for gathering evidence to support those assumptions. Later, as it became evident that the decision was a bad one, the captain fell into the trap of an escalation of commitment—sticking with a failing course of action simply because the decision had been made.

Why did they decide to take the exposed route? It was the faster one. Container ships do not make money steaming through the oceans— they make money once they have arrived at their destination and get their cargo off-loaded. For this reason, all commercial mariners tend toward obeying the clock. This is what we call the Industrial Age play of *obey the clock*. Under obey the clock, we feel the stress of time pressure and are motivated to get our work done within our allotted time.

In the best cases, obeying the clock creates focus. It puts us into a performance mindset. This helps us get things done, which is fine, as long as the things getting done are the things that *need to* get done. As a stressor, however, it creates all the effects any stressor will have on us: we retreat into self-preservation mode, with a resultant reduction of cognitive activity and a narrowing of perspective.

THE LANGUAGE OF INVULNERABILITY

Later that day, while the ship steamed toward the exposed side of the Bahamas, here are some of the things the captain said to various crew members:

"We're good."

"It should be fine. We are gunna be fine—not should be—we are gunna be fine."

He mocked novice mariners willing to deviate for "every single weather pattern."

"Oh. No no no. We're not gunna turn around—we're not gunna turn around."

His was the language of "getting it done" at all costs, the language of invulnerability and invincibility, the language that discourages any expression of concern. It sends the message that these decisions should not be questioned, our path is set, do not challenge me or make me explain this again.

What was the captain's motivation in saying these kinds of things? What is any leader's motivation? Inspire confidence? Focus people on task? Get them to comply? It's language we see over and over again and it is part of the Industrial Age play of *coercion*. We are too polite to use that word so we call it "inspiration" or "motivation," but the fundamental issue is that the captain needed to get people who were not part of making the decision to comply with the decision to take the exposed Atlantic route. He just needed them to go along.

It would be easy to blame the captain, but let's take a closer look at his operating conditions. The company was planning to replace *El Faro* and its sister ships with a pair of newer vessels. Three ships would shortly become two. One captain had already been selected, leaving only one open spot for the two remaining captains. The captain of *El Faro* needed to prove himself.

As the day developed, the captain of *El Faro* sent an email to his operational supervisors. Beginning to experience some concern about the weather, he asked about the *return* trip. He suggested the possibility of taking the Old Bahama Channel while returning. Only the possibility; he added that he would await approval from his supervisors.