

Some notes and annotations to accompany

The lost arts of leadership

And how to get them back

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[These annotations accompany the slides of TLAoL as posted on slightlyeastofnew.com. The version presented at the Kanban Global Summit was slightly different. Because the Rotating Chains in slide 7 didn't work when projected on a screen in a large conference room, the KGS version had an additional slide, of the famous "café wall illusion," which displayed OK. That would throw off the annotations by one slide. Also, I don't want to risk the wrath of my agent by including the final, "Any Questions?" slide that portrayed her as a witch casting a lightning bolt.]

1. Not a leadership primer, just a few arts that somehow became lost by the mainstream business media.

2. How many books on leadership do you estimate Amazon has? I don't know, but at least 60,000. And gurus are still turning out the usual collection of magazines, journals, college courses, and workshops as well as flooding new venues like podcasts and social media. And YouTube videos. And Zoom.

Never throughout human existence have we had so many pathways to learning leadership. So, you might expect that the practice of leadership is reaching heights not seen since the days of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great.

3 & 4. But can you really say leadership is getting better?

Here are recent statements by a couple of America's most successful entrepreneurs. How could I possibly say they aren't great leaders? On the other hand, these statements speak for themselves: Firing people for not meeting arbitrary numerical goals or targets is not leadership (and Deming must be spinning in his grave).

This year marks the 40th anniversary of *Out of the Crisis*, which introduced his 14 Points for the Transformation of Management. Just to refresh your memory, here's Point 11b: *Eliminate management by objective. Eliminate management by numbers, numerical goals. Substitute leadership.* (From the Deming Institute website.)

Goldman Sachs is also reinstating its performance reviews, which could fire 5-10% of employees each year. "Goldman Sachs is bringing back its infamous performance reviews, but experts say it's a poor management strategy: 'Exemplary leaders are not going to give up on low performers'" by Aman Kidwai, *Fortune* Aug 3, 2022. Also "Goldman Sachs Plans to Cut Hundreds of Jobs," by Charlie Grant, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/goldman-sachs-plans-to-cut-hundreds-of-jobs-11663002265>

Concerning the second statement, I'm not making pronouncements on whether people



should work from the office, from home, or wherever. “Substitute leadership” suggests to me that the teams themselves should decide where they can be most effective. Top down edicts are not leadership. Period.

GS is also mandating a return to the office in order to “improve collaboration.” No better way to kill collaboration than placing your people into mortal conflict with each other.

A recent survey showed that “Three-quarters of all executives reported they want to work from the office three to five days a week, compared with about one-third of employees.” <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/08/return-to-office-why-executives-are-eager-for-workers-to-come-back.html>.

Could it be that leadership isn’t that important? I don’t think that’s correct, and I’ll give an alternative view of these quotes after I’ve sprung my definition of “leadership,” on slide 43.

Regardless, one inference we might draw from Zuckerberg, Musk, Goldman Sachs and many others is that leadership on the whole is about as good as it ever was, 60,000 (or more) books to the contrary.

5. So what’s missing???

6. Do you believe in magic?

Let’s define “magic,” for the moment, as “the art and science of exploiting illusion.” To show you what I mean, let me do a little magic for you.

7. (Rotating Chains by Akiyoshi Kitaoka <https://www.anopticalillusion.com/2016/01/rotating-chains-by-akiyoshi-kitaoka/>) Permission granted on his website for educational purposes.

Stare at one wheel. Notice that it stops. Now move to another wheel. It stops, and the first one starts to move. You need to view this illusion from nearly head on for it to work.

Magic.

8. What’s going on here? I don’t have a hidden camera watching the eye movements of each one of you and changing the animation accordingly.

This illusion, like all optical illusions, exploits how our brains work: You don’t actually see anything. Here’s a greatly over-simplified description of what’s happening:

The brain sits alone in the skull, isolated and in the dark, a roughly 3 pound gelatinous blob with an average volume of around 1200 cc or 73 cu in. and containing, by the current estimate, 86 billion neurons¹. It has been estimated that there are approximately 1 quadrillion synapses (inter-neural connections) in the human brain. This works out to about a 800 million synapses per cubic millimeter, about the size of a grain of sand. And these little guys are firing all the time. Ref: Tompa, R., “Why is the human brain so difficult to understand? We asked 4 neuroscientists.” Allen Institute, 4/21/2022.

You could think of perception, and perhaps even consciousness, as an emergent property of a very complex system consisting of 86 billion neurons communicating across a quadrillion

¹ Some estimates range as high as 100 billion — see Prof. Kanwisher’s course (below) for example. Incidentally, it also contains a roughly equal number of cells that aren’t neurons.

synapses. There may be other factors at work, such as the hotly contested theory of “quantum consciousness,” but the description above is complex enough for our purposes.

Our perception of the universe, then, is our experiencing a mental model, updated in near real time by sensory inputs. It is an illusion, which is usually very accurate — otherwise we’d be bumping into walls and driving a car or flying a plane would be unthinkable. But like all models, it is not the real thing, and it can be fooled, as we just saw. Thought we saw.

The German physicist, Sabine Hossenfelder, has just published a great new book on this subject, *Existential Physics: A Scientist's Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*. And MIT has an OpenCourseWare offering on the human brain by Professor Nancy Kanwisher. <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/9-13-the-human-brain-spring-2019/> An MIT course for free. It doesn’t get better than that.

In other words, you don’t see what you think you’re seeing. You only think you see what you think you’re seeing. Life is but a dream.

That’s what this slide is saying. The physical world itself may not be an illusion (or, then again, it may be: “Objective Reality May Not Exist at All, Quantum Physicists Say Reality might be ‘in the eye of the observer, according to new research.’” Stav Dimitropoulos, *Popular Mechanics*, June 29, 2022), but your impression of it certainly is, as demonstrated by this optical illusion.

The art and science of illusion is what we call “magic.” And since our perception of the world is an illusion, it might be a good idea to learn something about how magicians manipulate them.

You can have a lot of fun with optical illusions. Here’s another one I especially like (all the lines are straight): <https://www.deviantart.com/leshasillustrations/art/Lesha-Porche-Cobbles-Optical-Illusion-901413506>

9. Therefore ...

10. And so

11. As I shall now proceed to demonstrate.

12. We’re going to look at five aspects of magic that might prove useful for improving leadership. The first is what most people think of as “magic,” as in a “magic show.”

13. It’s important to recognize that I’m not suggesting you learn and perform magic tricks at your next team meeting. Instead, we’re interested in why magic works, the deeper principles involved. If your perception of your team is an illusion, as are all perceptions, including those by the people on your team, then learning how to create and manipulate illusion might be useful.

Ponder Teller’s statement for a minute. It’s never a good idea to lie to your team. But as the American strategist, John Boyd, suggested, leadership involves getting people to enthusiastically take action towards the accomplishment of uncommon goals (*Organic Design* 37²). So if you’re introducing a new methodology — LeanKanban, for example — there may be people on your team that don’t see why this is such a good idea. And they know you’re going to try to convince them that it is, and they will react defensively.

² All of Boyd’s works are available for free download from the Articles page at slightlyeastofnew.com.

So maybe we can learn something from how magicians do it.

Pay very close attention to the following video.

14. If you click on the image, it should take you to the video on YouTube. Just in case, here's the URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo5BRAKvJoA> Or you can search YouTube for "Penn Teller misdirection" (there are several — this one is from the Jimmy Kimmel Tonight Show.) Please watch it very carefully.

It ruins it for everybody else when someone gives away the secret to magic tricks, but in this case we need to know how the trick works so that we can see the misdirection. The answer — the gorilla was in the coop all along — is in the comments to the video, so I'm not really revealing any secrets.

Question: What is the misdirection?

Answer: It's everything they do to move your attention away from figuring out how the trick is done — curious language, gestures (including Penn poking his glasses), the what appears to be obvious attempt at distraction from the gorilla, the abrupt break with the lights, etc.

Those of you familiar with Sun Tzu might recognize a couple of points. "Accord deceptively with the intentions of the enemy" (give them a story they can tell themselves) from Chapter 11, and the surprise at the end (cheng / chi — an abrupt shift from ordinary to magical described in Chapter 5, also a subject I take a stab at for business in chapter 6 of *Certain to Win*.)

15. Note the reference to "story" again. What Penn & Teller are doing is making sure that the story your brain tells itself is the one they want it to tell. That's what curating attention is all about.

Once you have a mental model of the universe, you can use it to make predictions: What will happen if I do X? How about Y? etc., and then pick the one you like best. It's been said that the brain is a Bayesian prediction machine. Lots of articles on this — see e.g., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5836998/>

16. Which brings us to stage magic's evil twin.

17. "Mentalism" is the branch of the magical arts that exploits the illusion of mind reading and mind control. Or in this case, brain reading. (Shutterstock image)

18. You can make a very good living as a successful mentalist. Perhaps the best known mentalist practicing today is a British performer, Derren Brown. He had a Broadway show back in 2019 and has several movies on Netflix.

As soon as you leave this keynote, subscribe to his YouTube channel and watch his TED talk.

19. In 2019, *The New Yorker* ran a long interview with him, where he explains how his act works. It's behind a paywall, but if you can dig it out, I highly recommend it.

20. "Cold reading" involves throwing out a sequence of guesses, and by carefully observing reactions, determining information about the subject. "Anchoring" is its active counterpart — planting suggestions that will lead the subject to take certain actions. Brown explains the concept as, "No, it's not incredible. It's inevitable."

“Hypnosis” is in quotes because we’re talking about “stage hypnosis,” an aspect of mentalism.

21. To explain “confirmation bias” and “incestuous amplification,” I’m going to use Boyd’s famous OODA “loop” sketch from his presentation *The Essence of Winning and Losing*. Wikipedia has an article on confirmation bias, and you can find definitions of incestuous amplification using Google. For an exegesis of Boyd’s OODA loop, please see my paper on the subject, creatively entitled “Boyd’s OODA Loop,” on slightlyeastofnew.com.

You may recall the “invisible gorilla” experiment. This effect, also known as “Inattentional blindness” described by Dan Simons, one of its researchers, at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/but-did-you-see-the-gorilla-the-problem-with-inattentional-blindness-17339778/>

What the link from orientation to observation illustrates is positive feedback. And these, as you know, can become self-reinforcing unless dampened. Think of a microphone held next to a speaker.

What happens is that once the story gets planted in the brain, it looks for evidence to support it and tends to ignore or explain away contrary evidence. After a while, this pattern can become extremely strong, so much so that contradictory facts don’t faze it. Good explanation here: Cognitive Biases and Brain Biology Help Explain Why Facts Don’t Change Minds, Keith M. Bellizzi, *Neuroscience News* August 11, 2022, <https://neurosciencenews.com/facts-worldview-21233/>.

The process of incestuous amplification is helped along by research showing that people tend to default to trusting others over distrusting them, believing them over doubting them and going along with someone’s self-presentation rather than embarrassing them by calling them out. “How scammers like Anna Delvey and the Tinder Swindler exploit a core feature of human nature” Vanessa Bohns, *The Conversation*, 2/21/2022.

And then there’s the somewhat controversial principle of loss aversion (Wikipedia), and its cousin in this case, embarrassment (to us) aversion. And perhaps even a little of the Stockholm Syndrome. Or any of Elon Musk’s “50 Biases.” <https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/elon-musk-cognitive-biases.html>. Boyd’s approach, like magicians’, incidentally, would concentrate on pumping up and exploiting these in opponents and secondarily minimizing their impacts on our own thinking.

22. Mentalism is everywhere. “HUMINT” is “human-source intelligence.” Torture is great for obtaining confessions, whether the subject did it or not, but mentalism works much better for getting them to spill information.

Cultic religions: Their perpetrators use the techniques of mentalism all the time. Outsiders call it “brainwashing.” This is Aleistar Crowley, a very famous English magician, mentalist and cult figure of the first half of the 20th Century. He founded a religion, Thelema, that you can still join. A short story by Hemingway described him as the “most wicked man alive.”

Although behavioral modification techniques are not usually considered as magical arts, some practitioners of mentalism, e.g., cult leaders, hostage takers, and perhaps sales people and members of organizational teams, can use operant conditioning to reinforce the tools of mentalism: https://bigbangtheory.fandom.com/wiki/The_Gothowitz_Deviation.

I was going to use “seduction,” but my wife made me use “romance.”

Think about this last bullet. Now go watch a couple of Derren Brown's videos again. And draw the obvious conclusions.

23. Controlling the minds of your opponents might be a good talent to have in war. The concept of influencing opponents' mental processes goes back at least as far as the Sun Tzu text (e.g., anger the opposing commanders, confuse them, and encourage their arrogance so that you win before going into battle) from around 400 BC and is also central to Boyd's strategies.

Incidentally, the US defense establishment has just discovered a watered-down version called "cognitive warfare."

24 & 25. Boyd suggested a way to actually do it. He maintained that you can achieve the power of mentalism (he never used that term) by something he called "operating inside the OODA loop." Think of the stuff in the upper left corner as slight-of-hand for military commanders: A way to curate attention to produce ambiguity and facilitate deception. Much like Penn & Teller.

26. Mentalism in production control, by one of the founders of what we now call "lean." Not easy to do, by the way, because the boss tends to be quite visible when they show up on the production floor or Zoom call. I mention a couple of these in my OODA Loop paper.

In a larger sense, though, Ohno may have been alluding to a fundamental principle of Eastern philosophy:

*The Master doesn't talk, he acts.
When his work is done,
The people say, "Amazing!
We did it all by ourselves."*

Tao te Ching, 17 (Mitchell ed., 1989)

The woodcut is by Hokusai (1760-1849), who is best known for *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.

27. And even the rock hard Marines have bought into a little mentalism. Their doctrine of maneuver warfare is based on the ideas summarized in Boyd's chart 132. You should download this manual from the USMC: <https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%201%20Warfighting.pdf>

28. If you can control the minds of opponents, what about the minds of prospects and customers? Think of closing as the process of giving the prospect a story they can tell themselves, like, how great it's going to be if they buy your product or service. Look at any closing methodology to see what I mean.

29. Gambling? Could be considered another form of mentalism. I'm talking professional gamblers, who sit around with other players, not folks who pull the handle on a slot machine. It's got to have a mind for mentalism to work.

30. As you can see from this description from an online course. Note that the instructor is six times World Champion. You can't do this just by luck.

Also check out the YouTube video on “taking the luck out of gambling” by Adam Kucharski that goes a little more into the mind control aspects of gambling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=658xlubwnDc>

By the way, do you know who Sara Blakely is?

31. What about storytelling? It’s become quite popular as a “soft skill” of management. A feel-good subject. Example: “The power of storytelling: What nonprofits can teach the private sector about social media,” McKinsey Quarterly, February 1, 2011 Reprinted in 2022.

32. Here’s that “over 60,000” again.

33. If the big boss stands up and tells an inspiring story about some crisis the company weathered in years gone by, but then everybody goes back to the same old top-down micromanaged grind, where’s the magic? Get out the guitar — it will have just as much effect.

However, storytelling can be a most useful technique. Recall that Penn Jillette said to give the audience a story to tell themselves, and to make sure they told themselves the right one, he primes the pump with a story of his own. A form of anchoring.

34. Here’s a story you might get your team to tell itself. Incidentally, “anti-fragility” has a lot in common with “operating inside the OODA loop,” so the potential for magic runs throughout this model. You can register on this site and download a copy of the model: <https://www.kanbanmaturitymodel.com>

35. And it would help if you actually knew how to tell a good story.

36. If storytelling is so important, how many leadership and MBA programs require competence in it in order to graduate?

37. Here are some ways you can develop your storytelling skills — no shortage of opportunities. The course description in the upper left is from UCSD, and the online catalog from EdX. The techniques of storytelling, by the way, come in handy any time you have to give a presentation or write a paper. All writing is fiction, in a sense.

38. Here’s somebody you might not recognize. A young poet from Georgia, the one in the Caucasus, from around the turn of the 20th century.

Here’s a later picture that might be more familiar.

The description is from “Charmer,” Sheila Fitzpatrick, *London Review of Books*, November 1, 2007.

And here’s one of his poems:

*Know for certain that once
Struck down to the ground, an oppressed man
Strives again to reach the pure mountain,
When exalted by hope.
So, lovely moon, as before
Glimmer through the clouds;
Pleasantly in the azure vault
Make your beams play.*

The original was written c. 1895 in Georgian, which is not an Indo-European language, so translations are a special challenge. It's from "The empathy of Joseph Stalin," by Boyd Tonkin, <https://unherd.com/2022/02/the-empathy-of-joseph-stalin/>, Feb 21, 2022. And check out the fictional memoir by the Israeli historian, Martin van Creveld, *I, Stalin* (his *Hitler in Hell* is, well, hellarious, too.)

39. Now be honest. Everybody, at some point in their career, has had a moment when the ability to turn into a werewolf and rip somebody's heart out would have proved extremely useful.

40. Right? (Shutterstock image)

As useful a device as it might be, I don't know how to do it.

41. But I can give you some advice on something just as useful, if not quite so dramatic. ("Drama," get it? Sorry ...)

42. Now, every time I bring up acting as a component of leadership, somebody whines that "I want to be authentic!" I have news for you: Nobody cares about your authentic self.

And for that matter, your authentic persona isn't likely to be very inspiring.

Here's the point. When you take on the mantle and burden of leadership, you're asking people to give up their time, to give you their attention. They're depending on you to lead: to be clear, concise, and persuasive. Not to stand up and mumble.

43. To further explore the relationship between leadership and acting, we need a definition of "leadership." Here's mine. I think this may explain why entrepreneurs can often be effective leaders when the organization is young and growing: The new product or service or mission helps with both parts of this definition.

Later, it can become much harder. Different leadership styles for different situations, and it can be hard for successful entrepreneurs to make the switch. Perhaps the more successful, the harder?

But at any stage, by this definition, leadership involves persuasion.

And people have been studying persuasion for a very long time.

44. This picture shows Aristotle tutoring Prince Alexander of Macedon (Charles Laplante, V 1866). We can be sure one of the subjects he taught the future Alexander the Great was rhetoric, on which he later wrote a book (Alex already knew more military strategy than Ari ever would).

Aristotle must have known, and Stalin well knew, that the sound and "feel" of what you're saying is as important as the message itself — unless you believe people can follow your exquisite logic while they're daydreaming or asleep. The techniques of poetry can help.

45. Aristotle's three elements survive to the present day. Here's some pathos.

46. They really made a science out of persuasion. These are some of the rhetorical devices Pericles used in his funeral oration about 75 years before Aristotle started tutoring Alexander.

They are described in the referenced article, <https://greekreporter.com/2022/05/23/greatest-speech-history-pericles-funeral-oration/> and effective speakers still use many of these today:

Anastrophe: “Ask not what you can do for your country.”

Procatalepsis: “This is not some jive ass story ...”

Anaphora: “You know it’s the vanishing chicken trick. You know ...”

Anaphora: But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground.

They combined their words with dramatic gestures, like hand movements and slapping their sides, using all means of persuasion, as Aristotle insisted. Lincoln was a master of rhetorical devices and he also used his great height — he was our tallest president at 6’4”/1.93 m — by, for example, bending down and then reaching way up to make a point. A little harder to do on a Zoom call.

Point: they took the art of persuasion seriously. Back in the day, rhetoric was one of the foundational courses in a liberal education (part of the *Trivium*).

You, too, can use these devices to make your talks and presentations more, well, magical. If you get the opportunity to watch the video of my presentation, you should be able to spot several of these.

Here’s a great YouTube video that will add a little magic to your presentations: How to Speak, Prof. Patrick Winston, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Unzc731iCUY> From MIT Open Courseware. Prof. Winston was a highly respected researcher in AI who, unfortunately, passed away shortly after this video was made.

47. And effective leaders continue to study and practice one of the most important techniques of persuasion. You could argue that all of the others rely on it — acting.

Here’s Patton with his famous scowl, which he practiced in front of a mirror. And a picture of Hitler polishing his demagoguery, taken by his official photographer, Heinrich Hoffman. Hitler certainly understood that how you said something was at least as important as what you saying.

48. As its practitioners (except people like Crowley) take great pains to admit. Can we use real magic, double-double-toil-and-trouble stuff?

49. You mean like these? Before I answer, it’s worth noting that people have believed in these a lot longer than they’ve believed in science.

There’s evidence of magic on cave walls going back 40,000 years. It’s hard to find much evidence for science, that is, explaining the events of the world through natural causes rather than the actions of gods, much further back than the Ionian Enlightenment, which began in the 6th century BC.

Witchcraft was a capital offense in the UK from 1563 - 1736, when “The British Parliament passes an act repealing the laws against witchcraft, and imposes fines or imprisonment on anyone who claims to be able to use magical powers, which are now considered fraudulent.” *BBC History Revealed*, April 2022, p. 31 During that same period in Scotland alone, there were 3,212 recorded trials for witchcraft, p. 42.

Roughly 30,000–60,000 people were executed for witchcraft in Europe between 1427, the start of a series of trials in the Duchy of Savoy, and 1782, when the canton of Glarus, Switzerland, beheaded Anna Göldi. She was finally exonerated in 2008. BBC *op. cit.*, p. 44.

Elizabeth Johnson, Jr. (that is her correct name), the last person to be convicted of witchcraft in Massachusetts (in 1693), was exonerated by the Massachusetts legislature on July 28, 2022. (not a typo) She was convicted but not executed.

The Bible affirms the existence and power of these black arts, although it also forbids them (see e.g., Leviticus 19:31, Exodus 22:18, and Deuteronomy 18:9-10). Didn't stop them from being used. This young lady is the Witch of Endor, as depicted in "The Endorian Sorceress Causes the Shade of Samuel," by Dmitry Nikiforovich Martyanov, 1857. As recounted in 1 Samuel 28, King Saul, the commander of the Israeli army, wanted to consult with a colleague the night before a big battle. Unfortunately said colleague was dead, so Saul retained the witch as a consultant to bring him back. It worked, by the way.

From Nat Geo "Witch Trials in the 21st Century": A 2005 poll of Canadians and people from the United Kingdom found that 13 percent believed in witches. For Americans, that number was even higher: 21 percent. And why not? It's in the Bible.

By the way, we're talking real in-league-with-the-Devil witchcraft, not Wicca or neo-Paganism or nonsense like "white witchcraft." Nor the miracles related in the New Testament and those attributed to various saints and deified Roman emperors.

50. Academically speaking, magic, real magic, involves controlling supernatural beings and powers. The key word is "controlling."

51. One might call it "Glendower's Dilemma." As we see in Henry IV Part 1, Act 3, Scene 1. Owen Glendower, by the way, wasn't the buffoon Shakespeare made him out to be.

52. So if you can do it, you can use it. Good luck. Just stay away from me.

53. To close, people have noticed the relationship between magic and technology for a while. And I would add, between magic and highly polished skills. Indeed, performance magic and mentalism require a lot of skill and deliberate practice, which give them the "How did they do that?!!" effect. See, e.g., <https://hbr.org/2007/07/the-making-of-an-expert>

54. Elon Musk tweeted it well.

55. My paraphrase. Leadership is a skill, and no reason why it shouldn't be magical.

56. Here's some practical advice for you. Not only can well developed leadership seem magical, I have tried to show here that it needs skill in the magical arts to excel. One reason for this, perhaps, is that both leadership and magic embody both the expected and the extraordinary, Sun Tzu's cheng /chi principle.

Again, I'm not suggesting you start your next meeting with some sleight of hand. That would get people's attention. Once. But you need to understand why these work. What is "curation of attention" and why did Penn and Teller use it? How did they create it? How did "incestuous amplification" fit in? What are some ways you can get people to "tell themselves a story," in particular, the story you want them to tell themselves?

But I do think you need to develop some level of skill in two of these, mentalism and acting, not just understand their principles. You might add storytelling to the list or lump it in with acting.

What magical rhetorical devices are you going to use to help persuade people in your next team meeting?

And on that note, I'll leave you with a final principle, one that you as a leader must never, ever violate.

57. You owe it to your team, your other stakeholders, and yourself.



Shutterstock image