



wholesome talk

language patterns for feedback and learning

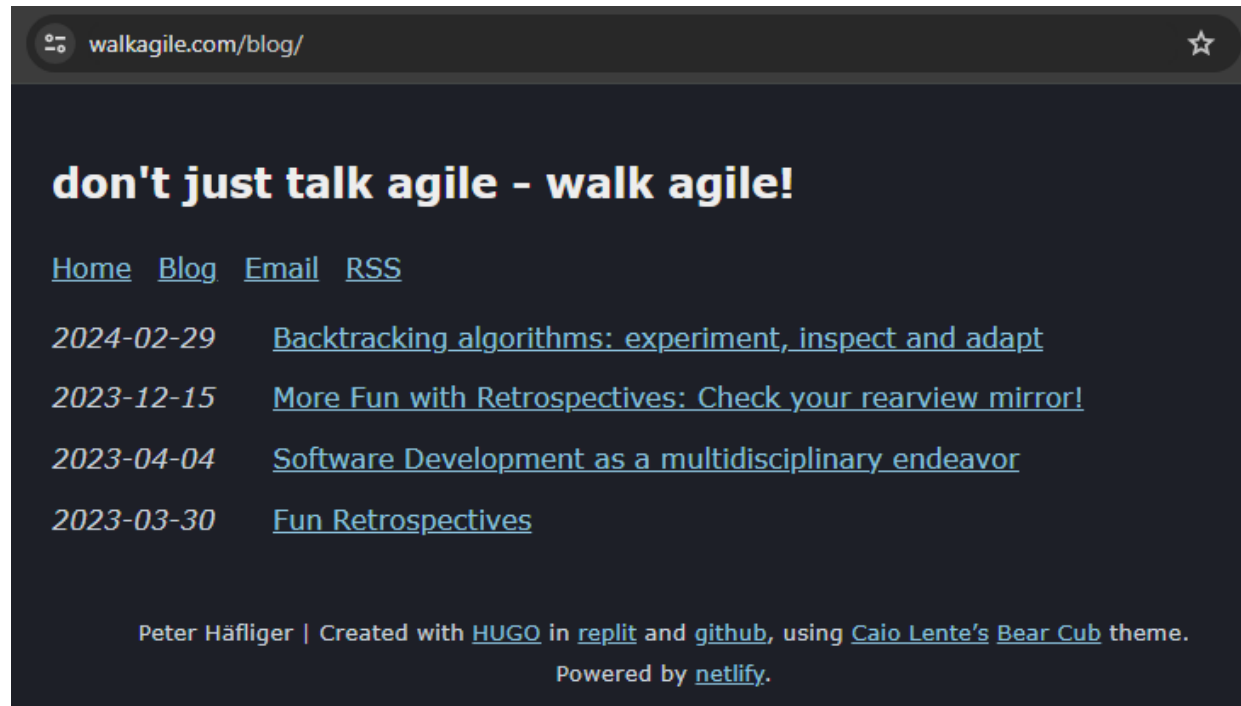
Peter Häfliger, agile software developer, business analyst and product owner at Avaloq
ignite talk at DevOpsDays Zurich, April 17th, 2024

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The walk is more important than the talk.

Too many people just use agile **buzzwords** instead of applying agile **principles** and living agile **values**.



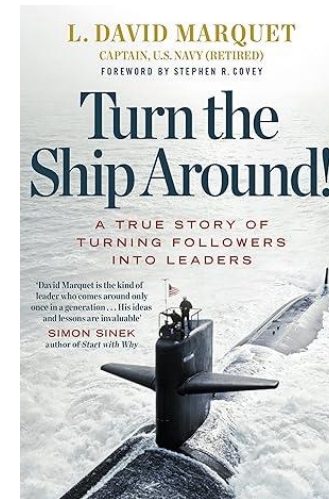
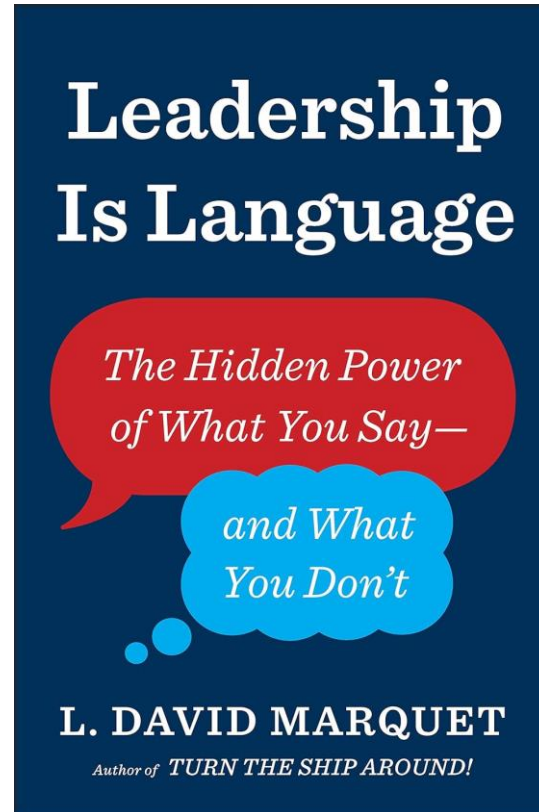
<https://walkagile.com/>

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But there is another type of talk which *enables* the walk.



<https://davidmarquet.com/>

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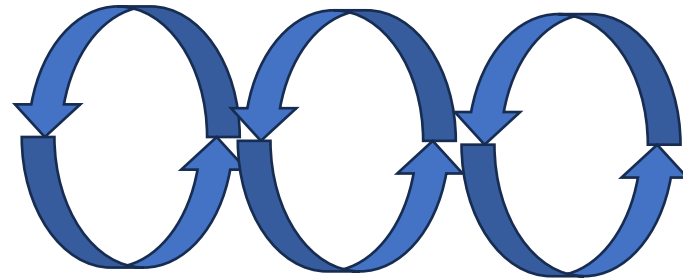
I call this “wholesome talk”.

It consists of language patterns

- which invite **feedback**



- and foster **learning**



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Precondition: Leaders have to care about feedback!

Some leaders don't want any feedback.



Image sources:

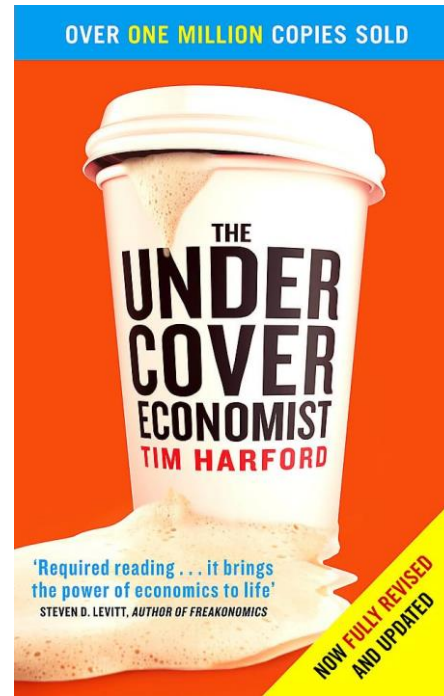
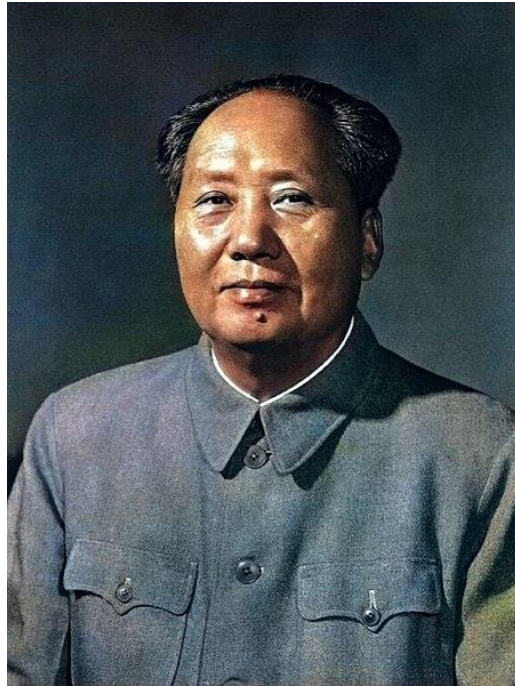
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Donald_Trump_AFPI_Portrait_Cropped.jpg
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Putin_Looking_To_Left.jpg

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The anti-pattern: Mao's Great Leap "Forward"



<https://timharford.com/>

Image source:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mao_Zedong_1959_color.jpg

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You can ignore feedback ...



... until you can no longer ignore it.

Image source:

- https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:StateLibQld_1_113616_Horse_stumbles_after_the_jump,_ca._1927.jpg

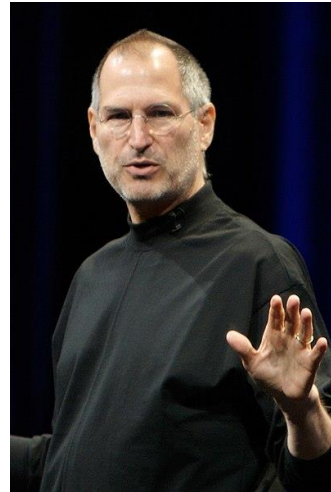
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Leaders must listen first and speak last!

Leaders are **convincing**.



If they present their ideas and opinions **first**, ...

Image sources:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elon_Musk_April_2022.jpg
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Angela_Merkel_Juli_2010_-_3zu4.jpg
- [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Steve_Jobs_WWDC07_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Steve_Jobs_WWDC07_(cropped).jpg)
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oprah_in_2014.jpg

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Leaders must listen first and speak last!

... the others will listen but not speak up.



Image source:

- <https://pixnio.com/people/three-people-listening-intently-to-a-speaker-during-meeting>

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Flatten the Power Gradient!

“ I have more
experience! ”

“ I have done
this before! ”

“ That’s how this
is done best! ”

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Flatten the Power Gradient!

~~"I have more experience!"~~

~~"I have done this before!"~~

~~"That's how this is done best!"~~

"Your fresh eyes will be valuable on this!"

"I have done this so many times, it's hard for me to see it objectively."

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Avoid the 7 Sins of Questioning! (1)

One of them is **binary** questions:

“ Is it save? ”

“ Yes.”

They **force** a 55% “yes” into a 100% “yes”
and put the **full responsibility** onto the receiver.



“ Well, *you* said it was safe! ”

Illustration source:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Explosion-417894_icon.svg

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Avoid the 7 Sins of Questioning! (1)

Don't use binary questions:

~~"Is it save?"~~

~~"Yes."~~

Use **"how?"** questions instead:

"How save is it?"

"I'd guess 4 out of 5."

Or **"what?"** questions:

"What might go wrong?"

"What would be valuable alternatives?"

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Avoid the 7 Sins of Questioning! (2)

Even worse are **self-affirming** binary questions:

“ Everything okay? ”

“ Makes sense? ”

Ask **open questions** instead:

“ What am I missing? ”

“ What could we
do better? ”

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Avoid the 7 Sins of Questioning! (3)

Don't ask "why?":

" Why would you want to do that? "

It puts the receiver into **defensive** mode:

" Because ! "

Again, ask "what?" questions or **open questions** instead:

" What's behind this decision? "

" Please tell me more about it! "

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Praise for behaviour, not characteristics!



“ Mommy is so proud of you!
You´re such a great artist! ”

Image source:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Child%27s_drawing_A.JPG

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Praise for behaviour, not characteristics!



~~“ Mommy is so proud of you!
You’re such a great artist! ”~~

“ Great job! You worked
so hard on this! ”

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Image source:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Child%27s_drawing_A.JPG



Being good is good. Getting better is better!



That's why we want feedback and learning.

Image source:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pertandingan_loncat_api_indah_di_ujian_pencak_silat.jpg

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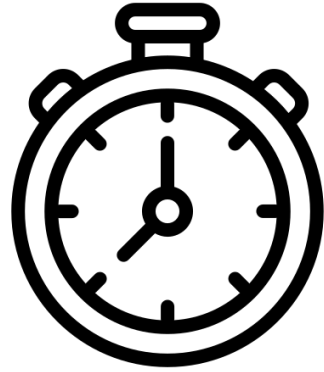


Recap: wholesome talk

- Leaders must **care** about feedback and diversity of opinion!
- Leaders must **listen first** and **speak last!**
- **Flatten** the Power Gradient!
- **Avoid** the 7 Sins of Questioning, like for example
 - **Binary** Questions
 - **Self-affirming** Questions
 - **“why?”** Questions
- **Praise** for **behaviour**, not characteristics!
- Being good is good. **Getting better** is better!
- And of course much, much more ...

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- ☹️ **Oops ... 5 minutes up already!**
- 😊 **Thank you for listening!**
- ☹️ **No time for feedback now ...**
- 😊 **... but welcome anytime!**

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Sessionize: <https://sessionize.com/peter-haefliger>

Blog: <https://walkagile.com/>

The biggest inspiration for this talk has been L. David Marquet's book "Leadership Is Language":

<https://davidmarquet.com/leadership-is-language-book/>.

The book is about a lot more than language patterns. Read it yourself!

The term "wholesome talk" has been inspired by a Bible quote (Ephesians 4:29 NIV):

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

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