

The Only Trait of a Leader

*A field guide to success
for new engineers, scientists,
and technologists*

by
John E. West

The Only Trait of a Leader

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It is not the purpose of this text to reprint all available information on leadership skills and techniques for technology professionals, but instead to complement, amplify, and supplement other texts. You are urged to read all of the available material to learn as much as possible and tailor the information presented here and elsewhere to your individual needs.

This is a sample from the new book “The Only Trait of a Leader,” by John E. West.

If you're interested in learning more, check out full details on the web site, www.onlytraitofaleader.com. There you can download samples of other chapters, or buy the entire book in PDF or print form.

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 3

Written Communication

It is nearly impossible to overstate the benefits of being able to write well.

In my experience it is more important to be able to write well than to speak well, at least until you reach very senior levels of your organization or are interacting regularly with the public directly as a representative of your company.

Writing's twin skill is speaking, both public and private. Most of us handle the mechanics of private speaking (verbal interactions one-on-one or in small groups) fairly well after a lifetime of practice, and in the next chapter I'll review some techniques for becoming even more effective. Then there is public speaking: because so many people are not comfortable speaking publicly, and because the issue is so emotionally charged for so many people, almost everyone can accept a speaker who is simply adequate. As we'll see in the next chapter, though, if you'll work to improve this skill you can dramatically accelerate your impact.

Writing, however, is different. Because of the central role it has in the success of an organization and the execution of the mission of

that organization, the ability to express yourself only adequately is simply not, well, adequate.

Much of what you will produce as a scientist or engineer will be written products. Product documentation, Web sites, progress reports, feasibility studies, and so on are all part of the products we are helping to develop. You may be setting out to build and sell biochips for medical monitoring, but if the instruction manual or installation guide or product design guidelines for your biochip are unintelligible, your product and your company are not going to be successful.

With the importance of e-mail in all professions, but especially in technology professions, writing has become the foundation of that all-important interaction: the first impression. Many times the first interaction—perhaps the first of several interactions you have with a client, a peer, or a boss will be via e-mail. Writing well and clearly communicating your message will shape a positive first impression of you and the kind of person you are, and also of your technical competence. Creating a poor personal first impression in writing is something you can recover from when you actually meet the person, but you will have a hard time recovering from the poor impression your e-mail recipient will form of your technical abilities. They shouldn't be related, but they are (this is because you are actually selling a service; more about this in the chapter on branding).

The importance of the written word in storing, sharing, and communicating ideas at all levels of all organizations makes a poor facility with the mechanics of writing a severely career-limiting fault. Even if this doesn't inhibit you in an entry-level position, you will run into a wall on your first promotion. Team leaders have to maintain a variety of written documents, including project progress reports and plans, which many people will review. If you cannot create these written documents effectively, you will quickly stagnate. You might say to yourself, "Well, that's fine for those money-grubbing prep-school folks, but I want to be an engineer the rest of my life. I don't care about getting promoted, so my writing doesn't

matter.” Wrong! If you want to spend your life head down in the trenches, it is probably because you care passionately about what you are doing. In order for your designs and ideas to be implemented, however, you’re going to have to be able to communicate them to others in ... guess what? ... writing!

What’s here

This chapter covers the different types of written communication you’ll encounter in your career, and provides pointers on how you can shape the way you think about the written word and approach writing, ways that will help you turn this powerful tool to your advantage. I will not spend much time talking about the techniques of effective writing or the mechanics of style and grammar. There are literally hundreds of books, classes, and workshops that cover these topics, and I urge you to take advantage of them to develop fully your ability to communicate powerfully in writing.

Communicating in writing: the platinum rule

The act of writing is fundamentally the act of communicating information to someone else. This sounds simple enough, right?

Pick up a technical article in your field. Or, even better, pick up one in a field you don’t know much about. What do you see? Does the author organize his material in an easy-to-follow, logical progression from background through the technology advancement being discussed and then explain the ramifications? Or does she assume you know all the details and jargon of delay-tolerant packet routing protocols and jump right into the details of RFC 1934? Are the sentences grammatically correct, relatively easy to read, and written with standard vocabularies? Or do you get lost in sentences that are a paragraph long? Is she so impressed with her own vocabulary of 5 and 6-syllable words that you feel sure she is writing only to convince you she’s smart?

The platinum rule of the written word is that you aren’t writing for you, you are writing to communicate with the reader. Act accordingly.

Writing in technology—outside of the consumer-level press designed specifically for my mom, generals, CEOs, and eighth graders—is riddled with jargon, complex sentence construction, and words seemingly selected only to amuse budding dictionary writers. Why? People who write this way are writing solely to convince other people that they are smart, whether they realize it or not. They are not writing for clarity, to share their ideas with others, or to advance technology. They are not writing to communicate.

How many times have you read something that was too complex to decipher? You might think that person is smart, but you probably wouldn't turn to her for help in a pinch. At the gut level, you might be too intimidated to approach him for fear of looking stupid. At a more sophisticated level you might be concerned that you wouldn't understand the explanation and so asking him would be a waste of time anyway.

Now think about the people and places you do go regularly for help, for example, a particular Web site on network configuration or semiconductor chip design. I'm willing to bet that the reason you turn to this resource is that its information is concise, clear, and easy to understand, even when the topic is complex. This is one reason that discussion forums and the *Dummies* books are so popular. In both cases, information is presented for consumption by regular people. There is no jargon (at least not without definitions), and no complex and fancy grammatical structures to hide meaning. What is there is a single-minded focus on communicating information.

The permanence of the written word

Writing is communication that lasts. If you don't believe me, Google for the phrase "antiquarian books" or "rare manuscripts." You'll see books, codices, manuscripts, scrolls, and tablets going back millennia. White papers are stored for future reference. Progress reports are passed up the chain and stored as a permanent record of accomplishment. Journal articles are entered into vast

bibliographical databases to support other research. And e-mails are stored indefinitely on hard drives all over the world. No matter what you are writing, write well the first time, every time.

Obviously you'll have drafts of work in progress that won't be your best work, and you may even share this work in draft form with coauthors for early input. When creating their first draft of a document I know many people who sit down and, once the ideas start coming, let them flow unedited, uncensored, and uncorrected. This is a great approach to getting started with your product because it is often easier to edit than create (you can't correct a blank sheet of paper!). But the first time something goes out of your immediate group, or up the chain in your organization, spend the effort to make it as clean, tight, and clear as possible. Get your first draft done, and the main ideas captured, as quickly as possible if that's your style, then edit, edit, edit.

"Except e-mail, right?" Nope, that too, and this does mean you.

Most of us spend a lot of time writing and reading e-mail, and most of us have our first experiences in e-mail communicating with our friends. In this respect e-mail sometimes resembles instant messages, and you may treat them interchangeably with regard to form: sentence fragments, abbreviations (LOL, IMHO, AFAIK, and others), inside jokes, obscure references ("it's only a flesh wound"), and strange vocabulary are part of what has enabled us to convert a formerly rigid medium—the written word—into a powerful mechanism for building and sharing in virtual communities with people we rarely or never see. This is wonderful and amazing.

Once you begin to have professional communications (whether related to your academic career or to life after school), however, these practices are out of place and damage your ability to communicate effectively with others to whom you are not so intimately connected by circumstance, age, and culture. If you are reading this book, the odds are pretty good that you've already started your professional life, even if you are still in school or working to complete your training. Now is the time to start breaking these

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