

The Hand on the Tiller

On Vague Words, Shared Vision, and the Difference Between Steering and Rowing

Mike Thomas • Founder & Director | 6 min read • August 2026

I once rearranged my office so that a short list sat where staff would see it when they came to talk their lesson plans through with me. Not a to-do list. A list of words that weren't allowed.

“Teamwork” was one. “Communication” was another.

They weren't banned because they don't matter. They were banned because they matter too much to be used carelessly — and we were using them carelessly. Every time someone said “we'll work on teamwork” or “we need to develop communication,” the sentence sounded like a plan. It wasn't. It was a fog.

The Problem With Big Words

We reach for words like leadership, teamwork, communication and resilience as though everyone in the room agrees on what they mean. We don't. They're containers — and most of the time we never check what's inside.

About eighteen months ago I was presenting at a conference, speaking about the models and frameworks we lean on when we teach. Partway through, I put a question to the room — a room full of teachers and outdoor education facilitators, people who use these words every working day. I gave them three: resilience, empathy, optimism. What do they actually mean? I gave them time. They talked in small groups, and then we went around and shared.

There were similarities. But no two definitions were the same. Not small variations on a theme — genuinely different accounts of words we had all assumed we understood in the same way.

If a room of professionals can't agree on what “resilience” means, what exactly are we asking our learners to develop?

Getting Specific

The way out of the fog is to get specific, and there's a principle underneath it worth holding onto: if you can't explain an idea plainly to an ordinary person, you don't yet understand it well enough. Einstein put a more careful version of the same thought in a lecture at Oxford in 1933:

The supreme goal of all theory is to make the irreducible basic elements as simple and as few as possible without having to surrender the adequate representation of a single datum of experience.

Strip away the formality and it says something useful. Understanding means getting down to the smallest true parts. So let me do that with the three words I put to that room.

Resilience isn't just the ability to pick yourself back up. It's the ability to see other options when something doesn't work, and to keep moving towards your goal. You don't have to travel in a straight line. You can go around, over, or under. Resilience is refusing to treat the first obstacle as the end of the road.

Optimism, for me, isn't about looking on the bright side. Notice that the first four letters of *optimism* are the first four letters of *options*. That's the heart of it: optimism is the ability to see the options in front of you, rather than deciding everything is a dead end.

Empathy is the one we get most wrong. We reach for “putting yourself in someone else's shoes” — but have you really had their exact experience? Every one of us is shaped by a lifetime of moments that are ours alone. We haven't walked their mile. Said the standard way, “I know just how you feel” is quietly condescending — I went through it, and look at me, I'm fine. That isn't empathy. Empathy is this: I haven't been through precisely what you're facing, but I've been through hard things of my own, I understand the shape of what you're feeling, and I'm here to help you through it.

Three commonly used words. Three definitions that only appear once you stop and take them apart.

Breaking Leadership Down

Now apply the same method to the biggest container of all. Take leadership. Can we get it into a single sentence?

Here's mine: **the ability to unite people to achieve a shared vision**.

Ten words — and every one of them opens up. **Shared** means building consensus, which means communication: I have to get my idea across, and I have to get people to buy into it. **Vision** means reaching both the rational and the emotional — why it matters, what we lose if we don't act, what we gain if we do. **Unite** means empathy for where people actually are, and the consensus and decisions that follow from it. **Achieve** means a plan: the stages that get you there, and a choice at every step about how.

And you keep going. Each of those breaks down further still, into smaller and smaller chunks, until what began as a vast abstract idea — *be a leader, build great teamwork* — has become something bite-sized: an achievable, teachable outcome.

This is exactly what we do when we teach a computer. Douglas Adams put it like this in *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*: the best way to understand something is to try to explain it, and the duller your pupil, the further you have to break the idea down — until it is reduced to steps simple enough for even a machine to run. That, he says, is the essence of programming; it is the essence of teaching, too. Big ideas don't transfer — small, well-defined steps do. And Adams saves the real sting for last: “the teacher usually learns more than the pupil.”

The Part We Get Wrong

Here's where it turns.

The part some people get wrong is this: if your team succeeds, it isn't down to you. If leadership is genuinely about uniting people to achieve a shared vision, then when that vision is achieved, the success belongs to the team.

That's not how it usually gets told. When a team, a company, or a country does well, the person at the top — the CEO, the Prime Minister, the President — tends to assume it was down to them. They were in charge. They're called the leader. So it must have been their doing.

It's a false correlation, and a costly one.

The success might belong to policies set by whoever came before. It might belong to the people who pushed for a new direction and worked hard to reach it. When a government changes hands, it rarely means the public voted for that particular leader — it usually means they wanted change. When a company thrives, it's sometimes because employees quietly ignored the instructions they were given and did what they knew was right.

There's a line that gets passed around leadership circles: *it's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit*. It's been attributed to half a dozen people over the years and probably originated with none of them — a fitting irony for a sentence about not claiming credit. The point survives the confusion: the leaders who achieve the most are usually the ones least interested in owning the achievement.

A leader is only the hand on the tiller.

The ship moves because of the crew. The weather and the sea are, for the most part, outside anyone's control. A good captain steers — but they can't take credit for the sun, or for a calm sea, and if the rowers refuse to pull, no amount of steering will move the boat. Steering is not rowing. Both are needed. Only one comes with the title.

So What Is the Job?

If it isn't taking the credit, what is it?

The leader's job is to find out what the people they serve — citizens, employees, students — actually want and need, and then to steer in that direction. Not to impose a vision and claim its success, but to unite people around one and hold the course while they do the work.

Adam Grant, speaking on the *Doing It Anyway* podcast, put it plainly: “Your job as a leader or a manager is to help people achieve your shared mission.” Not to please them, not to be liked, not to be seen to be leading — but to serve the mission, together. Everything else is ego wearing a title.

Practical Takeaways

- Define before you deploy** — take any concept you're about to teach or ask for, whether it's leadership, resilience, a company value or a KPI, and get it into one clear sentence. Can you give it as an elevator pitch? If you can't, you don't yet understand it — and you certainly can't expect your staff or students to. Break it down until every part is trainable.
- Don't assume shared meaning** — before a team sets out to build “resilience” or “better communication”, check that everyone actually means the same thing by it. Define it together first, or you'll all work hard towards different destinations.
- Test for change, not delivery** — at the end of a session, don't ask whether you covered the content; check whether knowledge, attitude or skill actually shifted.
- Diagnose before you take the bow** — a good result is rarely down to one person. Work out honestly what else was in play — earlier decisions, the people around you, plain good weather — then give the credit to those who did the rowing. Your job is the tiller, not the applause.
- Lead from what people need** — start by finding out what those you serve actually want, then unite them around it. That is the whole job.

A leader's hand belongs on the tiller — but it is the crew who move the ship.

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Mike Thomas

Founder of Outside-In, a Hong Kong-based experiential education company. With over 25 years of experience across outdoor education, emotional intelligence coaching, and organisational development, Mike writes about practice, professionalism, and the conditions that help people and teams grow.

mike@outside-in.online • www.outside-in.online • +852 9709 9504

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