‘Gist’ is a difficult concept, but a crucial one to learn

One of the most important and difficult concepts you’ll tackle when choosing to lead is “gist.” This is somewhat ironic because gist is, ultimately, simple almost by definition. Gist means “core essence” and refers, in the sense I use it, to something that’s fundamental, deep, and meaningful to you.

You can find gist in just about anything. For example, what do you see as the core essence of leadership? What is the core essence of your identity? What is the core essence of a speech you just listened to, or of a book you read? Finding answers to these questions is a key part of your leadership development.

To understand gist, think of a play. When you’re at the theater, what the characters on stage say to each other is descriptive—their words describe their conversation. But what does the conversation tell us about the characters’ relationship? What is it meant to reveal? Why did the playwright choose those particular words? To understand gist, we have to go beyond description and try to understand why. This requires us to engage in analysis.

A lot of people think that they need more knowledge in order to become wiser. But you won’t understand leadership by collecting books on a shelf; you have to extract your own unique understanding from those books, as well as from other materials and experiences. What’s important is not how much you read but how much you understand in your own terms. This is the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

Theatergoers experiencing the same play can have different impressions of it. Some people might even take opposing views of the playwright’s intentions. This is why it’s important to customize your learning in leadership: your gist may not be the same as someone else’s. You have to do your own analysis in order to understand what you consider the core essence of something. You have to find your own gist.

In his book *Rules for Radicals*, the community organizer Saul Alinsky wrote:

> Most people do not accumulate a body of experience. Most people go through life undergoing a series of happenings, which pass through their systems undigested. Happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are related to general patterns and synthesized.

When I read this for the first time, I realized why we don’t learn automatically from an experience: we’re often having happenings instead. Those happenings are much like the dialogue in a play: just words. You have to process those words to understand your gist. Otherwise you’re just accumulating knowledge and information but not becoming wiser.

Self-understanding is a key skill for seizing leadership opportunities—for deciding when to lead. It allows you to be confident in your choices and aware of the impact you can have in motivating and inspiring other people. You need to be able to analyze and understand your core essence in order to articulate your values and goals and convey them to others.

**The management of meaning**

There are a few strategies you can use to communicate gist once you’ve found it. One of the most important ways to man-
It’s important to communicate gist in a way that is neither concrete nor abstract. It’s important to get to the “mezzanine,” that sweet spot in a discussion that’s above the level of the muck and details but below the clouds.

Choosing Leadership: A Workbook
By Linda Ginzel, Agate B2, 2018

age meaning is through the use of symbols.
When I was a young professor, Stanford’s Jeff Pfeffer taught me about the importance of managing meaning. Executives manage meaning in many ways. You can do it by highlighting success stories in newsletters, on websites, and in social media, for example. Because things that catch our attention are readily available in our memory, they become emphasized in our decisions. In psychology, this is called availability bias. Symbols can help you use availability bias to your advantage to capture people’s attention and make something more salient for them. At a ceremony, people gather publicly and recognize someone, making salient the value behind or the reason for an award.

Here are three examples of ways I use symbols to manage meaning in my teaching:

• In my executive-education classroom, I use a symbol to welcome back previous participants who have returned to take another course with me. I give them a small, symbolic gift for returning to my classroom, and I do this to publicly acknowledge the people who found enough value in my teaching to return for more. This is the availability bias in action.

• I also use a “whistle-stop award” to make salient another value I want to communicate: that of stopping to consider an alternative course of action. Teachers, myself included, put a lot of hard work into planning their lessons and, once in a classroom, may be so committed to their plans that they become less focused on the students. They sometimes don’t have the motivation to stop and change course if students want to go in a different direction. Recognizing this tendency in myself, I created an award to demonstrate to students that I value their input. When a train travels through the countryside, it has scheduled stops on its route, but it will make an unscheduled stop if a passenger pulls the whistle. When someone pulls the whistle in my class and stops the train to ask a perceptive question, I publicly give that person a wooden train whistle. This symbol shows the students that I am willing to make that stop. The whistle has this particular meaning only because I use it to communicate this gist directly. Out of context, it’s just a noisy, wooden toy.

• In my classroom, I show a photo of my favorite zigzag bridge, a style of bridge common to Asian gardens. A zigzag bridge typically doesn’t have handrails—so that, it is said, you must be mindful when crossing it to avoid falling into the water below. I want students to associate that image with the importance of slowing down, being in the moment, and reflecting. I show an image of a zigzag bridge whenever I want to remind students to take time for individual reflection. This is how an image can manage meaning.

Join me on the mezzanine
When communicating gist, it’s important to do so in a way that is neither concrete nor abstract. It’s important to get to the “mezzanine,” that sweet spot in a discussion that’s above the level of the muck and details but below the clouds. On the mezzanine, we have an understanding that can be generalized beyond the current situation. We get the gist of a concept.

The phrase “join me on the mezzanine” originated with my husband some years ago when we were having a disagreement. I was trying to make him understand my side of the argument by using concrete details from our conversation, but the information was too detailed for him and too directly tied to my viewpoint. In exasperation, he looked at me and asked, “Would you like to join me on the mezzanine, so that we can actually solve this problem?” He was basically saying, “Bring it one level up so we can communicate.”

My husband is a professor who does research in communication, so in this example, he was thinking about communicating, while I was thinking about understanding. Although I hate to admit it, he is correct: we need to communicate as well as come to an understanding on the mezzanine.

Learn fundamental knowledge at this level of analysis so that you can apply this knowledge not only to the specific example that you may be dealing with at work but to other situations. You need to get to that sweet spot and bring people to the mezzanine.

Mezzanine, applied
This notion of the mezzanine is central to choosing leadership. You want to be able to take certain fundamental knowledge and apply it to situations that matter to you, at three levels of understanding:


**AN ACTIVITY TO FIND YOUR ‘GIST’**

This activity is inspired by National Public Radio’s *This I Believe*, which describes itself as “an international organization engaging people in writing and sharing essays describing the core values that guide their daily lives.” The organization was inspired by a popular 1950s radio show with that name.

The idea is to write a few paragraphs that sum up your personal beliefs and explain their significance. This is intended to serve as a point of departure as you work to both develop and communicate personal knowledge. These writing guidelines are a slightly tweaked version of those posted on the *This I Believe* website:

**Tell a story:** Be specific. Take your belief out of the ether and ground it in the events of your life. Consider moments when belief was formed or tested or changed. Think of your own experience, work, and family, and tell all of the things you know that no one else does. Your story need not be heartwarming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be real. Make sure your story ties to the essence of your daily life philosophy and the shaping of your beliefs.

**Be brief:** Your statement should be between 350 and 500 words. That’s about three minutes when read aloud at your natural pace.

**Name your belief:** Rather than writing a list of your core beliefs, consider focusing on one, because 500 words are used up quickly. You should be able to name or explain your belief in a sentence or two.

**Be positive:** Avoid preaching or editorializing. Tell us what you do, not what you don’t, believe. Avoid speaking in the editorial “we.” Make your essay about you; speak in the first person.

And on the mezzanine, it’s easier to recognize core principles and psychological biases. Learn to observe and work with them at several levels of understanding. The same principles can be applied across various levels if you understand the gist of any given thing you’re trying to apply.

From the mezzanine, you can also get more perspective on certain words. Just as I prefer the term “champion” over the terms “managers” and “leaders,” Stanford’s Hal Leavitt liked the hybrid term “manager-leader.” Instead of focusing on the words themselves, move to the mezzanine and think about the fundamental principle underlying what each of us is saying. We’re all trying to think more productively about what it means to lead and to manage.

Linda E. Ginzel is clinical professor of managerial psychology at Chicago Booth. *This essay is adapted with permission from Choosing Leadership: A Workbook*, by Linda Ginzel, Agate B2, October 2018.