

Poetry, metaphors, and storytelling are leadership tools that can be used to build trust, demonstrate empathy, inspire others, and create more effective communication. (Grisham, 2006) While poetry may seem an odd tool for a leader, people have used poetry and its sisters – alliterative language, metaphors, storytelling, etc – to communicate complex ideas and inspire others throughout our shared history. William Shakespeare used poetry and playwriting to comment on the society of his day, creating significant influence across cultures and class divides. His words are still quoted and echoed today as not just pretty decorations but as vehicles to elicit emotions and share inspiration. Many of his plays and sonnets contain valuable lessons for leaders – Othello shows us the tragedy of having too much pride and listening to gossip, and King Lear the hazards of placing too much value in yes-men (and women, in this case). Macbeth demonstrates the follies of ambition without morals. The young and influential Hamlet learns the cost of inaction and procrastination, a lesson for leaders who struggle with making decisions.

Don't worry – we won't dissect all of Shakespeare's tragic heroes and write in iambic pentameter. When we talk about poetry, we are talking about more than rhymes. The word choices, rhythms, and pauses of our conversations with others give them a sense of poetry. (Grisham, 2006) Like storytelling, poetry is a way of conveying complex emotions or concepts in shorthand.

### **Impactful Language**

A less structured type of poetry is “poetic speech”. Think back to Martin Luther King, Jr's famous *I Have a Dream* speech: this iconic speech uses elements of poetry to inspire and

convey a very complex and meaningful message. Winston Churchill's 1940 speech *We shall fight on the beaches* uses many of the same elements. Both use repetition, with Dr. King's repetition of *I have a dream...*, mirroring Churchill's repetition of the sentence structure of *We shall...* Both use potent metaphors and allusions to convey a message of hope and victory over turmoil. Where Dr King kept his sentences short and impactful, pacing them like a church sermon leading up to an emotional climax, Churchill uses rousing language and longer sentences as the speech goes on, ending with an impactful climax not unlike a symphonic crescendo. These famous speeches, and many others like them, use poetic language as a tool for leaders to create inspiration, impact, and action from others.

Leadership and poetry aren't limited to the past. The iconic Think Different Apple Commercial features the mercurial leader of Apple, Steve Jobs, narrating a poem that creates a powerful image and statement about Apple as a company and its customers. TED Talks are another excellent example of how leaders in various fields use poetry, metaphors, and storytelling to inspire, educate, and connect with people in about 20 minutes. Even politics has a place for poetry. The UN routinely invites speakers to share their perspectives prior to talks on scheduled topics. In this brief window of time, the speaker must find a way to communicate not only their passion and the interests of those they represent but must also provide an emotional anchor to the real world outside the politics of the formal delegates' room. An excellent example of the power of a poem occurred in 2014, when Marshall Islands climate-change activist and poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner spoke at the opening of the United Nations Climate Summit.

The UN sought to have the voice of a citizen, rather than a celebrity or dignitary, to open the summit to connect the politics of the room to civil society. Her poem, *Dear Matafele Peinem*, is both a story and promise to her young child, and an impactful statement to the summit. The emotional impact of her reading on the delegates, and the following summit, is clear. (Jetnil-Kijiner, 2014)

# Activity

## **Self Portrait: Words**

Create a self-portrait on this page using words. You can write them in, cut them from books or magazines, draw them, make them fancy or plain. Start by writing your name in the center of this page and surrounding it with words, sentences and phrases that represent who you are and what you feel.

# Reflection

How did this activity make you feel, or what kinds of insights did you gain from it?

## Finding Your Voice

If you want to practice your vocalizing skills and find your own unique style as a speaker, poems are a wonderful place to start. Many poems were meant to be read out loud. If you doubt me, then I challenge you to first look up and read the poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling. After you read it, look up a video or audio of Sir Michael Cain reciting the poem. Almost certainly you will immediately see a difference in the pacing, pauses and inflection he uses to breathe life into the reading. Or, one of my favorites is *Invictus* by William Henley. A short poem that is brought to life depending on the reader: you can compare a reading from Tom Hiddleston and Morgan Freeman to see the impact that your tone and pauses have on the meaning and message. Poetry is a way to give a voice to emotion, saying the important things in a compact, impactful message. Practicing your speaking by reading poetry out loud – whether it is Maya Angelou’s bold and affirming statements in *Phenomenal Woman* or the almost-real-but-not-quite-dreamy feeling of the non-sense poem *Jabberwocky* by Lewis Carroll – trains your ear and brain towards more impactful word choices. If you struggle with feedback on your speeches or presentations that you tend to drone or notice that people seem to drift in and out of consciousness when you speak at length, poetry can teach you the value of cadence and the effect of well-timed pauses.

*Vocal verve* is another benefit of reciting (or listening to) poetry. Verve is a noun that means “the spirit and enthusiasm animating artistic composition or performance: vivacity”, and it is synonymous with words like *gusto*, *intensity*, and *gumption*. (Merrim-Webster, n.d.). Vocal verve refers to the unique style of speaking that one has, particularly one with spirit and enthusiasm. Julia Child had a readily identifiable vocal verve. Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole and

Janice Joplin are musical examples. If you are familiar with televised preachers, you'll quickly recognize the pacing, pauses and popping consonants that make the style of speaking so identifiable. Vocal verve is essentially the *person behind the words*, the one bringing the words to life. This is done through poetic elements like tone, rhythm, and diction. The imagery of the text, the choice of punctuation, the expressions and body language all contribute to creating a whole image. If you are still unclear on what vocal verve is and the benefits of mastering the technique, take some time to explore Slam Poetry, either online or in your local community. The dramatic readings will clearly demonstrate the emotional impact and wide range of rhetoric that poetry can provide.

# Reflection

Using the poems mentioned in this section, the internet, a library or by simply asking your social circle, find a few poems that you like. They can be famous or not, but you will also need an audio of the poem being read. If you are not connecting to any poem, you can also find a speech you feel is particularly impactful. Follow the prompts below to reflect on the meaning and impact behind the poem *before* listening to it.

Poem Title and Author:

First, read the poem to yourself either silently or spoken out loud. How did the poem make you feel? Did you like it? Is there a part that is particularly notable or memorable for you?

After reading and reflecting on your own, find an audio of the poem being read. How did *listening* to the poem make you feel? Did you have the same kinds of feelings or different ones? Were they more intense or less so? Was there anything surprising or different between your reading of the poem and how it was performed?

What elements of either the poem or performance can you use for yourself? (You may identify variations in tone, emotional language, impactful pauses, or countless other things - this is a general impression, not a school course)



## The Value of Constraints

Haiku is a form of poetry that originated in Japan. It is a highly structured poetic form, requiring a particular three-line format with 17 syllables: 5 in the first line, 7 in the second, and 5 in the third line. There are variations of the Haiku format worldwide due to differences in language and grammar, but the three-line, 17-syllable format is widely accepted as the English standard. Aside from the requirements for length and syllables, there is one other pretty hard and fast rule to haikus: They do not rhyme.

Traditionally, haikus were written about the natural world, often focusing on a single moment in time or juxtaposing two different ideas or images. The traditional Japanese haiku also includes a *kigo*, or seasonal reference, and a *kireji*, or a cutting word. This cutting word is intended to create a pause in the haiku. The closest correlation in English is the dash ( - ) or ellipsis (...). Today, haikus are less prescriptive, have fewer rigid structural requirements, and come in many different forms.

There are many examples of famous haikus: Matsuo Basho, one of the most famous poets of the Edo period in Japan (1600s) is today considered the master of haiku. In 1686, he wrote the following haiku (there are variations in translations, so I have chosen one following the English format):

An old silent pond

A frog jumps into the pond –

Splash! Silence again.



Kobayashi Issa is another Japanese poet and Buddhist priest known for his haiku's. He is considered to be one of the four haiku masters of Japan, the others being Matsuo Basho, Yosa Buson, and Masaoka Shiki.

A world of dew,  
And within every dewdrop  
A world of struggle.

Both examples bring forth imagery and meaning within the tight boundaries of the haiku format. This strict structure forces the author of the poem to choose only the most impactful words and the most essential concepts to communicate their message. This is a mirror of a leader in any organization: No company – not even the Mythical Giants of Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft – has unlimited resources. Despite different budgets and bench strength, time is everyone's limiting resource. This tight structure is emphasized even more during economic downturns and uncertainty.

As a leader, focusing on the most important parts of a situation sometimes becomes necessary. The more succinctly you can craft a compelling message, the more apparent it should become. The constraints, whether they are the number of syllables you can use or the budget for the next quarter, can be a leadership challenge to overcome but can also be a source of inspiration. To illustrate the point, try this next activity before continuing.

# Activity

## Inside the Box

In this space write as many rhyming couplets as you can think of in 5 minutes. (Think of these like greeting card couplets, i.e. "Here's a birthday cat / wearing a birthday hat!")



5 mins



Rhymes

## **Homemade Breakfast and Air Mattresses**

Between 2007 and 2009, America went through an economic crisis impactful enough to become known as “the Great Recession.” Following years of macroeconomic stability, America was hard hit by losses on mortgage-related financial assets, compounded by the impact of the “bank bailouts” of 2008. Homes were being foreclosed as Americans' mortgage debt rose from 61% (1998) to 97% (2006), and US gross domestic product fell by 4.3%. (Weinberg, 2013)

During this time of economic uncertainty, roommates Brian Checky, Nathan Blecharczyk and Joe Gebbia were struggling to afford rent on their San Francisco apartment. With the constraints of money and the economy, they were all looking for a way to continue paying their rent. Their opportunity came when a conference in San Francisco caused a shortage of hotel rooms. The men had a great idea: they could rent out space in their home to conference attendees without other places to stay. They named their newly hatched business “Air Bed and Breakfast” because they rented air mattresses (Air beds) in their living room. They also provided breakfast in the morning. The success of this first Air Bed and Breakfast led them to discover that many people had trouble finding affordable or unique lodging, and Airbnb was officially founded.

Today, Airbnb hosts 7 million listings worldwide in over 220 countries, with a market capitalization of around \$100 billion. More than 1 billion guests have stayed in an Airbnb since it was founded in a San Francisco living room in 2008. The motivation and idea for it all came from the challenges and constraints the founders faced at the time. (IGMS, 2023)

# Activity

## Inside the Box

In this space write as many rhyming couplets as you can think of in 5 minutes using the listed words. (Think of these like greeting card couplets, i.e. "Here is a birthday bat / wearing a birthday hat")



5 mins



Rhymes

Bat	Coast
Race	Fall
Stop	Leader
Ranger	Breezy
Class	Sky
Cut	What
Day	Book

What the founding of Airbnb and the exercises illustrate is that constraints can be the key to freeing your mind and thoughts from patterns and habits. When you did the two activities, was it easier having a bank of words to choose from rather than complete freedom to choose any word you wanted? If the roommates were not in a situation to worry about bringing in extra money, the idea for Airbnb likely would not have come into existence. In order to succeed under constraint, you have to be willing to break up the status quo and challenge yourself and your team in new ways.

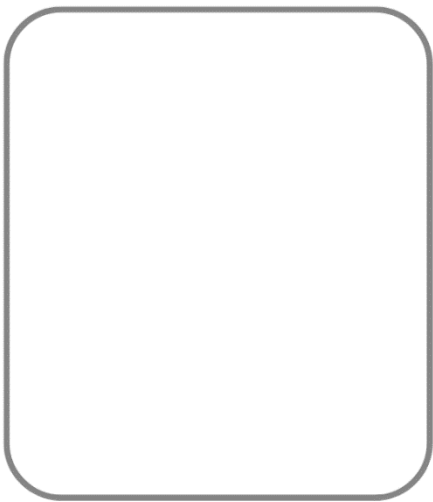
Think about a challenge you are currently facing, and the constraints around that challenge. In the activity on the next page, depict your challenge using words, images, or drawings in the box to the **left**. Then imagine what it would look like if the issue was resolved. Write, draw or otherwise create this image of “success” in the box to the **right**.

Beneath and above the two boxes, write in or draw any constraints that exist. They could be big (lack of funding for a morale event) or small (never having paper in the printer), but give it enough thought to identify as many as you can. Finally, draw a bridge connecting the two boxes. Label the bridge with some ideas you may have of how to connect the boxes in your real life (combining the proposed moral event with another committee or event, moving extra paper boxes to a nearby storage room, etc). If the gap between them seems too large, list out the small steps taking you as far as you can.

Draw a figure representing yourself on the bridge showing where you feel you are at. Are you in box 1, or closer to box 2 than you may have originally thought?

# Activity

## Bridge Over Troubled Waters



# Reflection

How did this activity make you feel, or what kinds of insights did you gain from it?