The reality of fiction: how reading can help you become a better leader

Reading literature, not just the usual management books, can help executives comprehend the world better and be more empathetic leaders.

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“One last thing,” said Beatty. “At least once in his career, every fireman gets an itch. What do the books say, he wonders. Oh, to scratch that itch, eh? Well, Montag, take my word for it,

I've had to read a few in my time, to know what I was about, and the books say nothing! Nothing you can teach or believe. They're about nonexistent people, figments of imagination, if they're fiction."

These are the words of one of the characters of Ray Bradbury's classic dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, in which books are outlawed and firemen burn any that are found. The aim is to suppress individualism, and to rid the world of troubling distractions, so that people can focus on being more productive.

As Bradbury warned after writing the book in 1953, "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them."

His fears are arguably more relevant in today's digitally saturated world than ever before.

But don't novels just speak of "nonexistent people" and "figments of imagination"?

Not according to Keith Oatley, a prize-winning British/Canadian author and professor emeritus of applied psychology at the University of Toronto in Canada.

"Many people think of fiction as something that, because it has been made up, doesn't have any significance beyond being something to amuse oneself with, the way that some people like doing crosswords."

But reading fiction is far more than a simple pastime or hobby, he insists. It represents "a simulation of selves in the social world."

"An author sets up situations that the reader might not have thought about before," says Oatley, who likens the heightened drama of novels to flight simulators. "For anyone learning to fly a plane, a simulator gives you the chance to encounter many more situations than you would if you just flew ordinarily and nothing very much happened, as in normal day-to-day life."

The characters in a novel help us to perceive the world through fresh eyes, to understand the way that people think and learn, and to teach us about human nature in general.

"By reading fiction," he says, "you get better at understanding what goes on in life."

Reading helps you navigate complexity

Life is never simple. For business leaders navigating a world of increasingly complex relationships, the practical wisdom of literature — with its natural "spirit of complexity," as Milan Kundera put it — offers scope to see things from another perspective, beyond your niche, and to reflect on the ethical dimensions and implications of one's actions and interactions.

"It's no good just having a single view of things," says Oatley. "The moment two people start talking, there is bound to be complexity. The more you are prepared for that, the more likely you will be a person able to understand things — and earn others' respect."

Today, more than ever, people need to learn how to navigate, filter and make sense of endless information flows, and to hone their innovative thinking and social intelligence. In this, the study of literature and the humanities can help.

Yet, perversely, most modern education tends to relegate such disciplines to the sidelines.

In his book on *Power,* Stanford University professor Jeffrey Pfeffer highlights that building a path to the top requires self-knowledge, which "requires the discipline to concentrate, make notes and think about what you are doing."

He cites the example of Joe Beneducci, who at the age of 39 was named one of the most tech-savvy CEOs of the year. He credited his success to extensive reading — at least one book a week — as part of a practice of structured self-reflection.

Technical knowledge may be fundamental for a computer programmer, says Oatley, but less so for managers. For them, getting a job done requires that they have a deep understanding of people, enabling them to build working relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

When it comes to reflecting on the nature of human relationships, the humanities have rather a lot to say.

Reading gives you greater insight into people

This is not to say that we all become nerdy bookworms. In fact, the notion that having your nose stuck in a book somehow cuts you off from reality is untrue. Indeed, research shows that, far from being an escape from social relations, reading fiction actually heightens social

awareness.

This is because the process of entering into an imaginary world requires an ability to suspend judgment, empathize with others and open yourself up to new possibilities and alternative conceptions of reality.

Oatley, together with Raymond Mar, has done research on the social skills of readers of fiction and nonfiction, and in particular their perceptions of emotions and social knowledge. Their findings show that people who read more tend to be more empathetic, have a more nuanced understanding of their social environment, have broader social networks and are better equipped at reading emotions.

This ability to read emotions enables us to take other people's perspectives into account, as well as appreciating that their mental patterns, beliefs and motivations may be markedly different from our own.

Children begin to develop this ability to "read minds" — known in the field of psychology as the "theory of mind" — from the age of four, when they start discerning other people's beliefs, desires and intentions as distinct from their own. Encouraging children to develop regular reading habits helps them to sharpen this skill.

Changing the way you see others — and yourself

For the French philosopher and writer Jean Guitton, the loveliness of reading a book is that it allows you to step into another person's experience.

The emotional connection that you establish with a character in a novel empowers you to think about other people the same way that you think about yourself, to see their lives from the inside out, says Oatley.

For example, if you have an uncooperative subordinate who resists doing anything you say, one possible way to approach this problem is to ask yourself: How would I feel if I were in that person's shoes? This may make it easier to resolve the dispute.

The reader doesn't experience a character's emotions directly, but rather feels his or her own emotions in response to the desires, actions and circumstances being described by the writer. And it is precisely these emotions that hook us.

“It’s a partnership between the writer and the reader,” says Oatley. “The writer suggests things, but it is the reader who brings them to life.”

Neuroimaging studies by Jeffrey Zacks and others have shown that the events being described in a story activate the same mental processes and stimulate the same regions of the brain associated with doing that kind of action in real life.

Oatley explains, “If you read, ‘He opened the door and looked into the kitchen,’ it activates the part of your brain that has to do with visualizing spatial scenes. And if you read about a character who is walking, then the part of the brain that is concerned with walking gets activated. You are using your own experience of doing these things in order to understand the story.”

So, if an executive reads about a character setting a goal and needing to persuade someone else in order to achieve the goal or overcome some obstacle, then he or she may be more prepared for doing the same in real life, he adds.

Reading helps you imagine different futures

Throughout the ages, philosophers have tried to identify the mechanisms behind imagination and their relationship with innovation. Immanuel Kant believed that literary creation offered us privileged access to knowledge, because it allowed us to feel or sense that which we could not experience directly. The Romantics saw it as a light illuminating the universe of the possible.

Put simply, reading expands your horizons. “When you’re reading, you’re imagining how the future might unfold. You’re thinking, ‘If she does this, what’s likely to happen next?’ Then, you read a bit further, and it turns out that it wasn’t quite as you had imagined, because the author wanted to surprise you.”

Whodunits are the classic example of this. “You’re anticipating all the time. Reading gives you more tools to imagine or think about things that may have seemed unimaginable at first.”

Recent research has affirmed the vital role of the imagination in the development of abstract thinking, making it much more important than previously believed.

Reading enriches decision-making processes

To test the belief that literature opens the mind, Oatley and his colleagues have studied the effects of reading fiction on what is termed cognitive closure — the need to reach conclusions, so as to avoid unsettling feelings of ambiguity or confusion.

Although necessary, this need for closure can obstruct good decision-making, since the more desperate we are to reach a conclusion, the more likely we are to seek out the most prototypical information.

When it comes to making sense of that information, we use simple, rather than complex, cognitive structures. As a result, we end up taking the least creative decisions.

By contrast, fiction imbues us with a completely different way of thinking that is not conditioned by the need to reach hasty conclusions or to feel defensive. This, in turn, allows us to open our minds, which helps us to make decisions that take into account the points of view of others as well as our own.

Storytelling communicates the human experience better than a report can

Terre Satterfield, a professor of Culture, Risk and the Environment at the University of British Columbia in Canada, conducted an experiment to show the difference that storytelling makes to decision-making. Two groups were asked to consider the advantages and disadvantages of an environmental project. One group was given a dry, analytical account; the other group was presented with a narrative.

When it came to evaluating the economic benefits of the project and its potential impact on a broad range of areas, the group that had heard the problem in story form was able to think better, and in a more fluid way, about the problems.

Satterfield’s research confirms what human civilizations have known for millennia: that telling a story is still the most effective way of communicating the human experience.

If we accept the educational value of fairy tales and fables for children, why would it be any less so for adults?

All reading helps — but quality fiction helps more

Can an airport bestseller produce the same effect as a literary classic?

When it comes to understanding other people, genre matters more than whether it is highbrow or lowbrow, says Oatley. It's more about the focus: nonstop action with no character development, or whether the story explores what's going on between and among people.

That said, the artistic quality of the work is important. Certainly, literature generally requires greater intellectual engagement and creative thinking, making it more likely that the reader will be transformed than they would through pulp fiction.

For example, Oatley and colleagues carried out an experiment in which one group of people read Anton Chekhov's *The Lady With the Dog*, while another read a version of it rewritten in the style of a nonfiction report. Those who read the original short story experienced small changes in their personality, albeit temporarily.

Oatley believes that the positive effects will be felt longer term if people make reading literature a regular habit.

"Works of art enable us to change. The quality of the work is important, but so, too, is the open-endedness of it — the extent to which one can think oneself into these different situations in a full and wholehearted way. What artists do is not to persuade, but to enable a person to think and feel more deeply about something."

Using literary classics in management education

Granted, reading requires time and effort. This may seem to clash with our modern multitasking lifestyles and omnipresent digital media. Yet Oatley sees an influx of humanities and social science graduates entering the business world, which he welcomes.

"Fiction and the humanities are absolutely relevant to business," he says. "It's not technical knowledge or the humanities. We need both."

This idea seems to be gaining traction in business education. Harvard Business School professor Joseph Badaracco has remarked that, “MBA students perhaps need a little less in the way of quantitative tools and a little more in the way of good judgment and self-knowledge, as well as a deeper understanding of human nature.”

In his classes on leadership, Badaracco uses classics, such as Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, to challenge students to think more creatively and develop moral judgment.

Another Harvard professor, Robert Coles, uses works by Flannery O’Connor, John Cheever and John Updike to get participants to think more deeply about the ethical dimensions of business.

Stanford University’s James March dusted off Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* to illustrate the qualities of good leadership to his students. The tragicomic knight of the Spanish tale imparts timeless lessons on imagination, vision, perseverance, commitment, dedication and joy.

Naturally, many executives will argue that their work schedules are already too full to accommodate a regular reading habit, to which Oatley responds: “If it’s important for you to understand other people and yourself as part of your job in business, then this is actually a very good way of doing it.”

Yes, it takes time, but how can you *not* afford the time to do it?

It is also worth noting that it is our linguistic richness that allows us to broaden the horizons of our thinking. The more limited your vocabulary, the more limited your ideas and means of expressing them.

The final message could not be clearer: Reading literature is not only a great form of entertainment, but it can help you to become a better person and a better leader. For those who haven’t picked up a novel in years, Oatley urges, it’s never too late to start again.

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