



## Leaders are readers

By Dr Stephen Brown

Harry S Truman said, “*not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers.*” Why? All leaders must model and demonstrate that they are learners. The examination and exploration of new ideas and knowledge, the questioning and challenging of perspectives and practices, the stimulus for self-reflection and enjoyment are many of the benefits of reading as a leader. Leaders sometimes say that due to the hectic nature of their lives they are unable to keep up with their professional reading even though they know it is an important professional practice and habit.

Michael Simmons (2017) in a blog entitled “*5 Hour Rule: If you’re not spending 5 hours per week learning, you’re irresponsible*” noted the commitment to a habit of ongoing learning with reading as a core activity by successful and busy leaders. He provides examples of leaders such as Warren Buffett and Bill Gates who are all avid readers and in turn, undertake learning at least 5 hours per week. Why? How? and What? we read are all questions for each of us to answer. However, to be better more informed leaders in this dynamic, disruptive world we need to access, retrieve and discriminate about information, ideas and knowledge. A necessary disposition is to establish a reading ritual by engaging through traditional forms or mediums such as books, magazines, blogs and online materials. Moreover, a reading regime and discipline coupled with other forms of knowledge acquisition such as YouTube and podcasts are useful ways to ensure leaders are leading with a curious, critical and informed approach to their practice.

Many times, I get asked by others, particularly leadership program participants to recommend books and articles they should read. I am always reticent to endorse particular works because I believe making the choice on what to read is a personal decision based on a varied set of factors such as purpose, stage of career development, leadership context and self-reflection on professional leadership needs. I am always prepared to share some of the seminal works that have contributed to my leadership formation and why they were/are relevant. With the above caveats I have accepted the challenge and encouragement of others to share a short initial list of these that others may find useful in the ongoing desire to grow and learn as a leader.

Here are my initial five, albeit not in any preferred order:

1. *Gardiner, Howard (2007), Five Minds for the Future: A brilliant exploration of the what the author describes as the critical mental habits and minds required for people to flourish in the future; the disciplined, synthesizing, creating, respectful and ethical minds. I have used this frame to reflect on my capacities as a leader and to support the development of others through various leadership development strategies. I had the experience of working with Gardiner and as noted on the dustjacket of the book “..the man who changed our notion of what it means to be clever”.*
2. *Wageman, R, Nunes, D, Burruss, J and Hackman, R, (2006) Senior Leadership Teams: What it takes to make them great? There is some much commentary, critique and dialogue on the importance of teamwork to workplaces. For me, this work by Ruth Wageman et.al based on decades of research is the best exploration of this important area of leadership practice. Harvard visiting scholar Wageman with colleagues continues to lead the field in evidence informed insights and diagnostics. I am delighted to continue to partner with Ruth in her ongoing work.*
3. *Chin-Ning Chu, (2002), Thick Face Black Heart. A friend handed me this book in 2002 at a time in my life when I was facing a number of significant life changing moments and challenges. The book is about ‘thriving and succeeding in everyday life & work using the ancient wisdom of the East’. I regularly re-read sections of the book because it invites you to explore issues, ideas and approaches to thinking from a different cultural perspective. Chin-Ning Chu’s book endorsements are typified by endorsements such as ‘a remarkable work’, ‘provides a new understanding of potential’ ‘astounding’.*
4. *Limerick, D, Cunnington, B and Crowther, F (2002), Managing the New Organisation: collaboration and sustainability in the post corporate world. A timeless and challenging work that has greatly influenced my thinking about organisational design and leadership. It explores contemporary issues such as collaborative individualism, socially and ecologically sustainable organisations, choice, agency, responsibility, mindsets and the age of discontinuity. I have used the meta-strategic framework to inform my doctoral studies and my work in leading organisational design/re-design/reform.*
5. *Heifetz, R, A and Laurie, D.L, The work of Leadership (2001). I have enjoyed reading the array of works by these authors. I always refer back to the final few sentences of this article and the following statement:*

*“The adaptive demands of our time require leaders who take responsibility without waiting for revelation or request. One can lead with no more than a question in hand.” (p. 13).*

I constantly use this reframe in my work. A powerful piece that challenges all leaders to be more strategic , to get ‘on the balcony rather than the dance floor’ and to ask those difficult questions.

I am keen to hear about the books and or articles that have been influential in your formation as a leader and you believe would be interesting for other leaders to consider. In my subsequent article I will share some of the contemporary books and articles that I have enjoyed reading. Finally, in these extraordinary times and restrictions it is good to be reminded about books:

*‘That’s the thing about books. They let you travel without moving your feet’ (Jhumpa Lahir)*