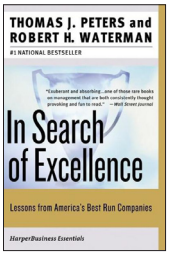
BY PATRICK IBARRA

MUST-READS FOR LEADERS: PART 1

Books to enlighten your leadership journey

It's been said that leadership is about plumbing and poetry. Some days you can be up to your elbows in muck and other days it's about the lofty side of your world.

Today's leaders confront a rapidly changing business and service delivery model, emerging resident/taxpayer/consumer needs and demands, increased desire for transparency, heightened visibility by social media, and building a workforce for tomorrow today—all with the perception of being a legacy operation.



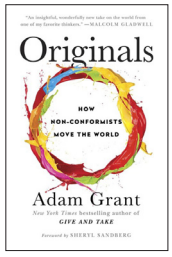
With a footnote to Tom Peters and Bob Waterman of *In Search of Excellence* fame, I offer that successful leaders "wander and wonder"; they recognize an open-door policy means they leave their office and wander around, and they wonder about things. They're also curious and recognize they are not the audience for their message.

I believe that leadership has less to do with titles and everything to do with behavior so in your role as the CEO (chief example officer). So I'm offering five of the 10 elements of effective leadership that will accelerate your journey to "getting better all the time" and identifying books that I recommend for your visit to the "brain gym." (The remaining five will be listed in the December *PM* Career Track.)

Creativity. Creativity has become the currency of success. Walter Isaacson makes several points in his biographies of four of the most creative people in history: Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Ben Franklin, and Steve Jobs. He discusses their willingness to engage in divergent thinking, realizing there are several ways to address the issue, not simply one.

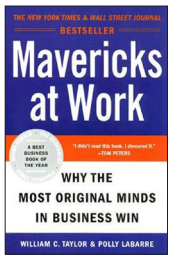
Steve Jobs offered that "We never invented anything at Apple, we just happened to find it," which exemplifies his mindset that creativity is not something one can just flip a switch and discover. Instead, it must be considered mission-critical and an anchor to a healthy workplace culture.

Doing the same old thing doesn't build success (i.e., we've always done it that way); however, being able to see a way to change and break out as a leader definitely takes creative thinking and vision.



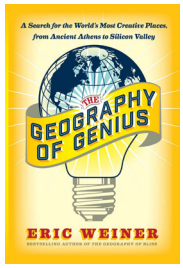
In his book *Originals,* author Adam Grant debunks the myth that successful nonconformists are born that way, and he shares studies and examples throughout history where being unconventional was the way to go . . . people just didn't know it yet.

Innovation. In *Mavericks at Work,* authors William C. Taylor and Polly Labarre offer a quote that is so applicable to government. "Playing it safe is no longer playing it smart." The conventional wisdom that government is risk-averse is a myth that needs to be discarded. Granted, mistakes are bad but what's worse is a culture that doesn't tolerate them.



Mavericks emphasizes that hiring people from the creative class and not simply the compliant class is essential to drive innovation in an organization. The book's authors assert that "the world is teeming with smart, skilled, passionate people whose greatest ambition is to have an impact by working on something that's important."

Local government is in the impact business, but top job candidates won't be remotely interested in your organization if what you provide as a job announcement is an utterly boring job description. It's time to discard those relics of the past and proclaim that "Adventurers Wanted to Build Our Community and Change Lives" in your next job ad.



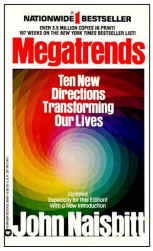
A slightly different take on innovation is *Geography of Genius* by travel writer Eric Weiner. The author visits seven cities that at one time were centers of the innovation universe—Athens, Calcutta, Edinburgh, Florence, Hangzhou, Silicon Valley, and Vienna—and gave rise to some of the most innovative thinking in human history about the arts, sciences, commerce, philosophy, and more.

He unknots the threads that people who never considered themselves as big thinkers and who never heard of outside the box, instead had a mindset of there is no box in their efforts to unearth new ways of living, leveraging the human condition and advancing society.

What I found fascinating is the author's observation that it's when resources are most limited that we do our best and most innovative thinking. It's an observation that questions conventional wisdom that healthier and bigger budgets and adding more people are the most vital resources to achieving superior results.

Change. I contend that change should happen in an instant and it should happen instantly every day. For several reasons, implementing change is fraught with stress, anxiety, and unpredictability, yet it's imperative to remain relevant in today's rapidly evolving world.

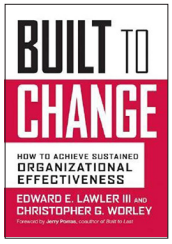
Crucial is realizing the merit of an idea has little to do with its successful execution inside organizations. Remember, every organization has a cemetery of ideas.



Focusing on two aspects of change—the headwinds and tailwinds—are the books *Megatrends* by John Naisbitt and *Built to Change* by Edward Lawler III and Christopher Worley.

While Naisbitt's *Megatrends* was published in 1982, it's remarkable how prescient he was about the changes occurring in society. His 10 trends hold up well even by today's standards.

A nugget I found to be fascinating was how Naisbitt generated the trends. He did it by measuring column inches in newspapers devoted to topics. I'm curious to know with the Internet how that measuring process might work now and what the megatrends would be.



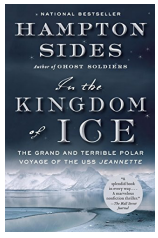
In *Built to Change,* the basis is to question that "stability equals effectiveness." Lawler and Worley recommend leaders "continuously strategize" or as I refer to it: strategic thinking and planning is a process, not an event.

The challenge is that government organizations are encouraged to institutionalize best practices, freeze them in place, concentrate on execution, increase predictability, and get processes under control. These expectations stem from the idea that stability is the key to high performance.

Consequently, public sector organizations are built to support enduring values, stable strategies, and bureaucratic structures—not to change. In today's chaotic world, however, organizations should be built to encourage, rather than hinder, change.

The authors' contention is that strategizing, creating value (lots of work needed in this area for local government leaders to define value), and designing (structure and roles) are the primary contributors to organization effectiveness.

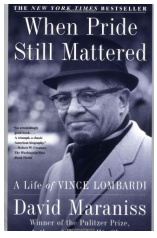
Courage. Two books I recommend are about historical events. First is *In the Kingdom of Ice* by Hampton Sides, which is about a sea exploration to the North Pole in 1879. The second is *Undaunted Courage* by Stephen Ambrose, on the Lewis and Clark expedition undertaken in 1804.



The circumstances each group encountered were unprecedented and required a deep reservoir of emotional resilience and courage in the face of extreme and unpredictable conditions. Sound familiar?

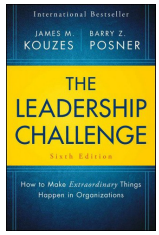
Leaders in each setting were advised to establish a compass (geographical and cultural) and enlist others in the journey to chart the future, often when it was riddled with uncertainty. I found both books to be page turners.

Leadership. There are several terrific and helpful books about leadership that are insightful, but I've narrowed it down to two.



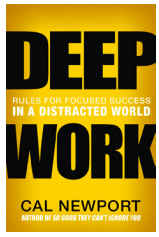
The first book *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi* by David Maraniss. The story is legendary on how Lombardi turned around the lackluster Green Bay Packers football team into a powerhouse in the 1960s culminating in the city of Green Bay being referred to as "Titletown USA."

He relished his role as a teacher, instilling principles and discipline to his players; consistency and success on purpose were his guideposts. Timeless virtues on trust and empowerment were the pillars of his foundation.



The second book, *The Leadership Challenge* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, I consider to be the seminal work on leadership. Their five principles of exemplary leadership are as relevant today as when the book was published in 1987: 1. model the way, 2. inspire a shared vision, 3. challenge the process, 4. enable others to act, and 5. encourage the heart.

I have facilitated the leadership challenge program for clients and its blend of the strategic with the practical helps leaders forge a path to influencing those positive outcomes they are responsible for achieving.



In his book *Deep Work,* Cal Newport chronicles that throughout human history when people "wandered off" the grid and contemplated the plight of the human condition is when the most compelling advancements and inventions occurred.

His assertion is that deep work is not some nostalgic notion but instead is a skill that has great value today, especially with so much of our time focused on such shallow work as text messages and e-mails. The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy.

While challenging, I encourage leaders to set aside some uninterrupted time for reading and critical thinking. Dedicate some energy to considering and developing plans to take on the inevitable challenges that come your way.

E-mail your questions and comments to me at the address below. Happy reading! PM



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