



**C & S PARTNERS**  
MATERIALIZING LEADERSHIP

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**Before reading about storytelling, first read lots of stories.**



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In Whit Stillman's 1990 film "Metropolitan" — a rom-com that follows a group of well-heeled students spending their Christmas break back home on New York's Upper East Side discussing philosophy, literature, and socialism as they hop between debutante balls — when the protagonist, an aspiring intellectual, is asked which Jane Austen novels he prefers, he answers without the least hint of irony: "I don't read novels. I prefer good literary criticism."

It's a great line. And it comes to mind every time I see the traditional end-of-year postings from leadership pundits sharing their reading list for the New Year. They're all laudable books: the types you'll find under the "Management" section for those still going to bookstores, or on the "Best Business Books of the Year" list compiled by your favorite weekly magazine. They are, however, as stimulating for the imagination as cold oatmeal. And that's precisely the problem.

Fiction's imaginative spark is increasingly linked to the improvement of empathy: a skill that seems to be gaining in favor among the leadership literati. Researchers tell us that "comprehension of stories shares areas of brain activation with the processing of understandings of other people," and that "engagement in fiction, especially literary fiction, has been found to prompt improvements in empathy and theory-of-mind"[1]. In a 2013 review of a number of experiments, researchers concluded that reading literary fiction improves both affective theory of mind ("the ability to detect and understand others' emotions") and cognitive theory of mind ("the inference and representation of others' beliefs and intentions"), more so than reading nonfiction, popular fiction, or reading nothing at all[2]. In short, reading fiction improves empathy: it improves our ability to understand others and see the world from their perspective.

This would be great news, provided we were avid readers of literary fiction. Unfortunately, that's not the case (at least in the United States, which is also a great producer of leadership advice).

In 2019, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences announced that the

*percentage of American adults who read at least one book for pleasure in the previous year fell to the lowest level on record in 2017 (below 53%). The greatest decline in book-reading rates occurred among adults under the age of 55.[3]*

Alarm bells, though, have been ringing for a number of decades.

In 2016 The Washington Post noted that “The percentage of American adults who read literature — any novels, short stories, poetry or plays — fell to at least a three-decade low” the previous year.[4]

In 2004 the National Endowment for the Arts published “Reading at Risk”, with the sobering analysis that “For the first time in modern history, less than half the adult population now reads literature.”[5]

And in one of the more notable battles of the pre-social media culture wars, The University of Chicago’s Allan Bloom concluded in 1987 that “our students have lost the practice of and taste for reading. They have not learned how to read, nor do they have the expectation of delight or improvement from reading”[6]: a warning shot fired two years before the invention of the world-wide web; five years before the first text message was ever sent; and seven years before Sony’s Playstation hit the market.

Empathy, we know, is positively related to job performance.[7] What’s more, when employees feel that “their manager is invested in them as people, [they] are more likely to be engaged”[8]. And there is even an argument to be made for empathy’s role in moral decision making[9] as well as in fostering trust.[10]

If indeed we’re engaging less and less in an activity shown to develop empathy, and given all the great things that seem to come with it, should we be surprised, for example, by the increasing lack of trust in societal leaders to do what is right, or by the fact that CEO credibility is at an all-time low in many countries?[11]

Shouldn’t we just expect stories of leaders abruptly laying off 900 people through surprise Zoom meetings[12]; or earning consulting fees by advising on how to sell more addictive synthetic opioids in the midst of a national health emergency driven by overdose deaths from those very drugs,[13] or of leaders who unabashedly express their indifference over genocide, assuming everyone else naturally shares the same view?[14]

But maybe you're not sold on empathy. That's fine. How about critical thinking?

It turns out there's evidence showing that reading literary fiction may indeed enhance this skill as well.[15] Which gives us something more to worry about.

Between 2015 and 2016, the Stanford History Education Group ran an experiment with more than 7,800 students from 12 American states, to understand young people's ability to judge online information. Describing the results of the study in an interview, one of the Stanford researchers noted that the students showed a "stunning and dismaying consistency" in their inability to identify fake news.[16] What was so stunning about the results?

*Over 80% of middle-school students couldn't tell the difference between "sponsored content" and a real news story*

*Over two-thirds of middle-school students couldn't see any reason not to trust a post penned by a bank executive arguing that young adults need more help in financial planning.*

*And almost 40% of high-school students believed that a photo of deformed flowers on a website was convincing evidence of toxic conditions near the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan...based on just the headline alone: with no source or location provided for the photo.[17]*

*But what about students at elite, highly selective universities that excel in STEM subjects and accept, on average, less than 5% of applicants? Say, Stanford University, the researchers' own institution ?*

Given the task of determining the trustworthiness of material published on two websites — the first, an established association of pediatricians with 66,000 members, operating since 1930; and the second, a fringe break away classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, according to the researchers — more than half the Stanford undergraduates concluded that the material from the fringe group was "more reliable", basing their judgements, not on any critical reflection or analysis, but on "surface features of the websites".[18]

They're not alone. Similar outcomes in other research studies with students at top institutions like Northwestern University show limited critical reflection about the information they read: the higher the information ends up on the results listing generated by the search engine, the more credible it is for them.[19]

In the words of the Stanford researchers, "At every level, we were taken aback by students' lack of preparation".[20] But again, should this be such a surprise, given not only the declining trends in reading literary fiction, but also in reading proficiency?

The steady improvements in math proficiency over the past 30 years among elementary and middle school students in the United States (grades 4 and 8), have not been matched when it comes to reading, which has remained relatively flat for this group. For students in their last year of high school (twelfth grade), the situation is worse: the average reading score in 2019 for twelfth graders was lower than it was approximately a decade earlier in 2009, and lower than the first assessment year in 1992.[21]

If indeed there's a link between critical thinking skills and the reading of literary fiction, then the mix of low reading proficiency and less time spent reading this genre, doesn't bode well. 45 years ago, we laughed at the absurd line of reasoning in Monty Python and the Holy Grail's witch trial ("So, logically, if she weighs the same as a duck, then she's made of wood. And therefore, she's a witch"). Today, with an optimized search engine, it could pass as sound logic.

All of which brings us back to the recommended reading lists of the leadership pundits: I'm not sure those books are making much of a difference.

Here's my advice. Don't read the literary criticism: go straight to the novel. Don't read about empathy. Don't read about emotional intelligence. Don't read about critical thinking. And before reading about storytelling, please, first read lots of stories.

Replace half of the books on your favorite leadership reading list with some good works of literary fiction. And don't worry, it's unlikely you'll miss out on any groundbreaking leadership insights among those books you didn't read. After all, when a premier leadership advisory firm answers the question of what's needed to succeed as a leader in a less-than-1-minute read, you're guaranteed to have plenty of time to fill the gaps at the end of the year.

And in case you were wondering about those students Allan Bloom complained about 35 years ago, they would now be in their mid to late 50's: the prime age group for CEOs in the United States.[22]

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