



Continuously Sharpening Your Personal Saw

By

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Introduction

Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* includes the tenet of "sharpening the saw." Covey explains this in terms of continuous learning. This makes practical sense in that the half-life of differentiable knowledge is eerily short. Moreover, the brain is a muscle that must be exercised to prevent atrophy. Consequently, effective inoculation to antiquation is continuous study. This is self-evident in private equity via the vertical specialization investment theses developed by firms, reinforced by collective and individual study via journals, conference attendance, and the like.

One of my more interesting adult observations is that effective critical thinking seems more natural in those who abide eclectic "saw sharpening." To wit, these professionals punctuate their study with novels, history, hobbies, and volunteerism. Indeed, I get some of my best ideas from these people. For example, I recently gleaned some insights on this phenomenon in David Epstein's book, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. Whereas the Adam Smith principle in *Wealth of Nations* argues

Your brain is a muscle. Exercise it to keep it fit!

productivity by specialization, Epstein counters with creativity by generalization. To wit, Epstein's brand of generalist cobles things together to create value because their broad vistas enable them to connect dots that tunnel vision precludes. I see corollaries to Epstein's argument in M3's practice. Because our toolbox is agnostic with respect to verticals, we often see opportunities for solution cross-pollination that a rigid industry specialty might miss. These opening points may seem vacillating to some. However, Max De Pree, former Herman Miller CEO, intoned that effective leaders have "strong opinions held lightly." Stated another way, De Pree was open to signals for "moving cheese," i.e., a prophylactic to groupthink and asinine autocracy. Andy Grove, founder and former CEO of Intel, honed this phenomenon into "only the paranoid survive."

My own saw-sharpening modus operandi came via a Christmas gift years ago by our daughters. Both are voracious readers. I am blessed that my needs are Spartan, and I do not want much—but this makes their shopping for dad a bit more challenging. Their solution at the time was an Audible.com (now an Amazon holding) subscription. My initial

reaction was “Where am I going to find time for pleasure reading?” Even so, I acquiesced, i.e., an Everett Rogers *Diffusion of Innovations* “laggard” displaying a modicum of manneredly diplomacy. Indeed, I surprised myself by how easily I could squeeze in a few chapters while commuting to and from the airport, waiting on flights, ascending and descending during flights, exercising, and even listening during a muted ballgame (which is an indictment on the nonsensical color during many game telecasts). I “read” from one to three books per month. To my amazement and delight, I managed to tackle most of the classics I evaded in high school and college, plus consumed a trove of great novels. I resolved to read *Wealth of Nations* because it should be required reading in any business school. It is as dry as the desert, but I am a capitalist—and besides, most of the content remains presciently relevant. For similar reasons, I consumed Charles Darwin’s *Evolution of Species*, after which my primary reaction was “Why it is so controversial?” It did not alter my Judeo-Christian worldview.

One of my greatest joys is sharing with MBA students—especially those matriculating while working fulltime. A dear friend and adjunct professor at Southern Methodist University’s Cox School of Business, Pat Hamner, Managing Director of Patriot Capital, has asked me in recent years to provide a recommended reading “short list” for his students. I post every book I have encountered which I think has business professional benefit on our website. As of this writing, the list has over 200 books. (see [M3 Reading List](#)). A short list of 10 is a big challenge and changes over time. Even so, “a” list—plus the reasons for their inclusion—is the objective of this value-creation installment. The following alphabetized list has 32 items. Think of it as a recommendation for a library and not merely a reading list!

Good Books and Their Merit

Disclaimer: These are not “professional” reviews, but rather my CliffsNotes version of personal rationale. Admittedly, the arguments are tailored to my target market.

- *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, by Jordan B. Peterson

This book is an effective antidote to mindless pop culture psychobabble. I stumbled upon an author interview while channel surfing and was hooked by his clarion, plainspoken reasoning for his dozen rules. He strikes me as a secular prophet. Here’s a sample: “Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping.”

- *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do: Take Back Your Power, Embrace Change, Face Your Fears, and Train Your Brain for Happiness and Success*, by Amy Morin

Let's be honest. Who doesn't want to be strong? These simple criteria help strong aspirations prevent self-destruction. This is especially beneficial for engineering our personal value propositions as competitors. In short, the long title is worth it. I was amused that Morin listed 13 items, which is a sneaky 14th caveat for superstitious people. This choice is a teaser: "[Mentally strong people] don't feel the world owes them anything."

- *The 48 Laws of Power*, by Robert Greene

This book seems to approximate a contemporary conflation of both Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. There are two ways to approach this book: offense and defense. Offensively adopting some of the 48 laws could turn one into a ruthless cretin. However, defensive awareness of that same subset may help one avoid victimization by a ruthless cretin. This is one of the more aspirational ones: "So much depends on reputation, guard it with your life."

- *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand

There is no better allegory for free market capitalism and individual freedom than Rand's novel. Her perspective was honed by Soviet communist oppression which she escaped in 1926. *Atlas Shrugged* may be appreciated as a prophecy for eventualities when we take civil liberties for granted. Ronald Reagan reminded us that "freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction."

- *Bringing Out the Best in People: How to Apply the Astonishing Power of Positive Reinforcement* (3rd Edition), by Aubrey C. Daniels

Leadership styles determine whether human assets are expenses or investments. Since happy, productive employees are essential to competitive differentiation, Daniels' insightful advice is worth a gander. Daniels was promoting emotional intelligence for leaders before the term was coined.

- *Building a StoryBrand: Clarify Your Message So Customers Will Listen*, by Donald Miller

Proponents of organic growth would do well to refine their understanding of the marketing and sales distinctions, yet with necessary symbiosis. Unless our customers

comprehend our goods and services to their satisfaction in their terms, we are forfeiting potential. Miller offers a worthy contribution to this epiphany. Over the past 20 years of consulting, I am continually intrigued by how many leaders speak definitively about their business model's unique value proposition in the absence of customer verification.

- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (2nd Edition), by Kerry Patterson

Dealing with conflict is a learned behavior--not an inherited one. We do well to train our people to resolve contention while minimizing collateral damage. The pointers proffered by Patterson are essential to the alchemy.

- *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.*, by Brené Brown

Brown walks her talk. She has a compelling life story which makes her leadership perspective on conflict resolution particularly poignant.

- *Emotional Intelligence* (10th Edition), by Daniel Goleman

"Tenth edition" is a hint: the message resonates. What we know is important. Who we know is important. How we connect with and relate to people—especially those we do not know—trumps everything. EQ is one of THE most essential skillsets.

- *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, by Adam Grant

Grant profiles the leadership styles of givers, takers, and matchers to substantiate that the givers are the more enduring and endearing mentors. Readers may be surprised to learn that effective givers sometimes wield tough love to develop their talent pools. Grant's giving model is worthy of deep reflection for competitive edge and leadership legacy.

- *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, by Angela Duckworth

This is an installment of mind over matter. "Grit" is a great word. If we want something badly enough, NOTHING will stop us from the mountain's summit. Amen.

- *Influence: Science and Practice* (5th Edition), by Robert B. Cialdini

A classic trade-off exists between authority and influence. A leader may *efficiently* direct (i.e., authority) but inflict collateral damage in the process. Alternatively, a leader may *effectively* influence to incorporate change-management principles, but this tends to take longer. In the "real world" direction and influence are bookends of a continuum in which

decision-making resides. Even so, leaders who enhance their influencing skills may discover that their followers more readily embrace suggestions that might otherwise be perceived a directive. Grandparents are particularly good at this! Cialdini punctuates his points with research.

- *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, by Robert B. Cialdini

This is thematically compatible and aligned with Cialdini's aforementioned book. The topic is so valuable. Reading both is worthwhile.

- *Lead with a Story: A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives That Captivate, Convince, and Inspire*, by Paul Smith

Long before writing was invented, stories were shared by tribes around campfires who perpetuated the model to succeeding generations. Perhaps our receptivity to stories in this model became encoded in our DNA. Allegories, metaphors, analogies, etc., help leaders resonate with their stakeholders. We need only harken to our childhoods to remember the lessons from Aesop's fables. A good storyteller makes points amid entertainment. Will Rogers' wit comes to mind in substantiation of this.

- *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if Your Life Depended on It*, by Chris Voss

Most of us were indoctrinated with *Getting to Yes*. *Never Split the Difference* is a thoughtful challenge to that staple—and game changer. Life and death scenarios are the ultimate limit test of a model. Voss authored the FBI's hostage negotiation protocols.

- *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World*, by Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall

This is a profound work whose arguments are substantiated by research. *Nine Lies* turns convention workplace wisdom about human asset management on its head. A couple of "baiting" points are that (i) people stink at rating others and (ii) leadership lacks a singular definition.

- *Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity*, by Kim Scott

Cultural dysfunction only metastasizes. This is another work which compels us to effectively defuse impediments to successful execution. Scott's pedigree includes Google and Apple.

- *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, by David Epstein

Specialization can devolve into myopia. The specialization criticism is that specialists may know more and more about less and less until they know everything about nothing. Epstein substantiates an argument that generalists see connections between specialties that may elude pure specialists. Combining the right specialties may result in profitable, differentiated commercialization.

- *Sales EQ: How Ultra High Performers Leverage Sales-Specific Emotional Intelligence to Close the Complex Deal*, by Jeb Blount

Blount makes a strong case that the return on investment is deficient for the \$20 billion annually spent on sales training. Product knowledge alone will not win the day. Blount emphasizes psychology. Good technique is essential. Bad technique correlates with eroding margins. Blount is a prolific web content provider worth absorbing. The hook for this book is inclusion of “EQ” in the title. Blount must have read Goleman.

- *Scaling Up: How a Few Companies Make It...and Why the Rest Don't, Rockefeller Habits 2.0*, by Verne Harnish

The practicality and simplicity of the Rockefeller habits are key to its effectiveness. Harnish transforms the habits into an operating model of tools and techniques which both redresses bad habits and promotes good ones.

- *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, by Simon Sinek

Sinek explains the science behind why people will invest themselves in what they believe. His model is crisp and potent. Sinek also has a TED video which is tantamount to CliffsNotes of the book.

- *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know*, by Malcolm Gladwell

Malcolm Gladwell is a gifted writer and has published many excellent books. This one admonishes us to analyze phenomena contextually for a cleaner comprehension toward legitimate decisions. His examples are familiar—but his conclusions may surprise you.

- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey

Moses has his 10 commandments. Covey has his seven habits. Both are eternally relevant. Indeed, this M3 value-creation installment was inspired by Covey.

- *The CEO Next Door: The 4 Behaviors that Transform Ordinary People into World-Class Leaders*, by Kim R. Powell and Elena L. Botelho

Powell and Botelho hail from the ghSmart organization founded by Geoff Smart. Geoff is the son of Bradford Smart who wrote *Topgrading* (see below). Geoff co-authored another good book, *Who?*, but I had to draw the line somewhere on this list. Coincidentally, one of my clients is a CEO subject in this book. Good choice. I won't spoil the surprise of your personal discovery of the four behaviors.

- *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done*, by Peter Drucker

Peter Drucker wrote it. That's good enough for me. Wisdom from sages is timeless.

- *The Ideal Team Player: How to Recognize and Cultivate the Three Essential Virtues: A Leadership Fable*, by Patrick M. Lencioni

I have read almost all of Lencioni's books, beginning with *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Given our challenge with talent pipelines, *The Ideal Team Player* is an essential installment in straightforwardness amid a sea of complexity.

- *The Laws of Human Nature*, by Robert Greene

This is another recommended Greene work, not to be confused with *The 48 Laws of Power*. Since humans wield the power, this book is a nice complement for an effective tandem.

- *The Phoenix Project: A Novel about IT, DevOps, and Helping Your Business Win* (5th Anniversary Edition), by Gene Kim, Kevin Behr, and George Spafford

Great processes enabled by technology is key to productivity. However, IT and "the business" are chronically challenged by effective working relationships. This book is essential to understanding how the vendor-customer relationship MUST work between technology enablers and their internal customers. I knew I struck gold with this book when one of the best IT leaders I have ever had the pleasure of supporting identified it as a staple to her change-management strategy on her company's deliverables.

- *To Sell is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*, by Daniel Pink

Pink punctuates his prose with research. A couple of hooks to ponder are (i) there is no statistical substantiation that extroverts are the best sales professionals; and (ii) while a perennial 11 percent of the employee base has a sales title, the other 89 percent are

sales people, too. This is a must read for any leader who recognizes that sales are the lifeblood of the organization.

- *Topgrading*, by Bradford D. Smart

Turnover is more expensive than GAAP measurement substantiates. Recruitment is expensive. Both impact productivity. *Topgrading* is an indispensable read for talent strategy. The GE human asset model during the Jack Welch era mirrors *Topgrading* principles. GE took a lot of heat over the 10 percent forced attrition. However, many of the criticizing writers never ran a business; consequently, the lack of contextual perspective may have biased their conclusions. Moreover, many writers did not acknowledge that a material portion of that 10 percent found happiness and a better fit in a different venue. Think “lifeboat principle:” it is more virtuous to sustain the loss of one to save the lives of nine than to drown all 10. Interviewing and reference check techniques described in this book are pure gold.

- *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization*, by Dave Logan, John King, and Hallee Fischer-Wright

Tribal Leadership is a revelation on (and indictment of) the mediocrity for a majority of corporate cultures. The authors argue how corporate culture may turbocharge competitive differentiation. You might also enjoy the dated but enlightening clip by one of the authors on TED.

- *Trillion Dollar Coach: The Leadership Playbook of Silicon Valley's Bill Campbell*, by Eric Schmidt, Jonathan Rosenberg, Alan Eagle

Campbell (deceased) is the posterchild for learning more from mistakes than successes. He leveraged what he learned to hone an effective mentoring model. Campbell's wit, candor, and succinctness were legendary. His fingerprints are indelibly upon some of Silicon Valley's biggest successes. Readers may deduce some philosophical connections between Campbell's modus operandi and Adam Grant's *Give and Take* arguments.

Parting Thoughts

People who know me as a “process monkey” may be curious how I accumulate my reading list. While I pay attention to best sellers, I pay more attention to people whose opinions I respect because of their worldview and accomplishments. Their book

recommendations register like the old E.F. Hutton commercial, i.e., when they mention something, I put it on my Audible.com wish list. By example, Eric Larson, Co-Founder and Chairman of Tilia Holdings in Chicago, is one of the most eclectic creatures I have ever encountered. I envy him in that not only has he read most everything I itemized, but he also knows many of the authors personally—plus has autographed hardcopies.

I must confess that my slant on content is increasing psychological in nature. When I encountered Psychology 101 as an undergrad, I naively dismissed its utility. However, as I matured and engaged an increasingly diverse spectrum of contextual personalities and

*Ask people you
admire what they are
reading and why.*

leadership styles, I developed an appreciation for mind over matter. Goleman's masterpiece, *Emotional Intelligence*, imparts what I deduced from practical experience:

interpersonal connection is a force-multiplier for technical expertise. Being proselytized in the phenomenon led to my terminal degree in strategic leadership. Eating my own cooking means that I will continue to sharpen my saw (per Stephen Covey's admonition) until my dirt nap ends my process.

I am continually humbled and gratified by the unsolicited responses evoked by my quarterly installments. I'll close this article with a request: Please share any "must reads" that you have digested. Consider this your "pay forward" investment in keeping my saw blade sharp.

Until next time, here's wishing you "good hunting" (borrowed from *The Hunt for Red October*) and successful value-creation!

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