



THE VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC READING

I was quite surprised at the comment a friend recently made. He said, "People stop reading once they finish school."

"That's nonsense," I said. "I see people reading all the time."

"What do you see them reading?" he asked.

"Lots of things," I said. "I see them reading newspapers and business reports on trains, magazines at doctors' offices, novels on planes. Lots of things."

"That's just my point," my friend replied. "People don't stop *all* reading after they've finished school. They just reduce their reading to two areas: things related to their work or technical expertise, and recreational reading—novels, magazines, newspapers, etc. But they stop challenging their minds; they stop using reading as a means to grow."

I was still dubious. But since that conversation my observations and conversations with others have confirmed my friend's statement: After people complete their formal education, they often limit their reading so that it is no longer a way to expand their minds, stretch, grow, and develop. This is unfortunate because keeping up-to-date, having the right information, and growing in knowledge and awareness are more important today than perhaps at any other time in history. And reading is one of the primary ways to develop professional expertise and leadership ability—and to stay competitive.

THE KEY TO THE FUTURE

In *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt points out that we have moved from the industrial revolution to the information age. Today, more people work with

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*Retaining
And
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information than with their hands. "The lever of the twenty-first century will be information and ideas," Joel A. Barker claims in *Future Edge*. And Peter Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline*, suggests the key to future competitiveness will be the rate at which organizations learn. Organizational learning, of course, depends on individual learning.

Peter Drucker observes in *Managing for the Future* that knowledge is the new source of wealth. "The learning society is taking over," he says. "From now on the key is knowledge." Drucker explains that knowledge is the founda-

Summary Keeping up-to-date, having the right information, and growing in knowledge and awareness are more important than ever. Reading is one of the primary ways to develop professional expertise and leadership ability—and to stay competitive.

Many persons are facing the new reality: Job security is an *inner* factor based on *inner* competence. Part of that competence has to do with one's ability and skill in continually learning. People who read not only develop more competence in their current abilities but, equally important, develop confidence in their ability to learn and meet the demands of accelerated change.

Reading helps people stay up-to-date and broaden their perspectives. Reading also provides enjoyment. But if we do not remember and apply what we read, it has little value. People therefore must read widely and read deliberately for retention and application.

To make reading a part of their lives, people must make a commitment to read every day, read material that interests them, visit bookstores and libraries, work at retention and application, discuss with others what they are reading, and test what they read against their own experience.



tion of two critical aspects of competitive advantage: productivity and innovation. When knowledge is applied to what we already know, we call it *productivity*. When it is applied to new and different things, we call it *innovation*. "For the first time in human history," Drucker continues, "it really matters whether or not people learn."

"But I've got a good, stable job," one might think. "And I already know how to do my work well." However, nothing is as constant as change. And in the current environment, cutbacks, layoffs, and job restructurings are affecting people who never would have expected such misfortunes to touch their lives. Many persons are facing the new reality: Job security is an *inner* factor based on *inner* competence.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius counseled, "Do not worry that you have no position; worry that you may not have the necessary qualifications. Do not worry that you are not being discovered. Ask yourself what it is you have that is worthy of people's recognition." Part of that inner competence has to do with one's ability and skill in continually learning. Staying competitive is (or should be) of highest priority for everyone.

Systematic reading—choosing what to read, developing and following a reading schedule, and implementing a strategy to apply what is read—is one of the best ways to stay competitive. It is one of the key means of learning and growing, both for the organization and for the individual. It is key not only because of *what* it does, but also because of *how* it does it. Reading helps build from the inside out. People who read not only develop more competence in their current abilities but, equally important, develop confidence in their ability to learn and meet the demands of accelerated change.

BENEFITS OF READING

Reading can help a person develop compe-

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tence and confidence in several ways.

Staying Up-to-Date Reading helps us stay current, fresh, and up-to-date. It helps us continually grow and develop. When the world around us is changing and we do not change with it, we become obsolete. As Victor Hugo pointed out in his masterpiece, *Les Misérables*, "Those who do not want the future should think it over. In saying no to progress, it is not the future that they condemn, but themselves. . . . There is only one way of refusing tomorrow, and that is to die."

Reading is one of the best ways of preparing for the future. It makes us aware of some of the gaps in our life and simultaneously helps to fill them.

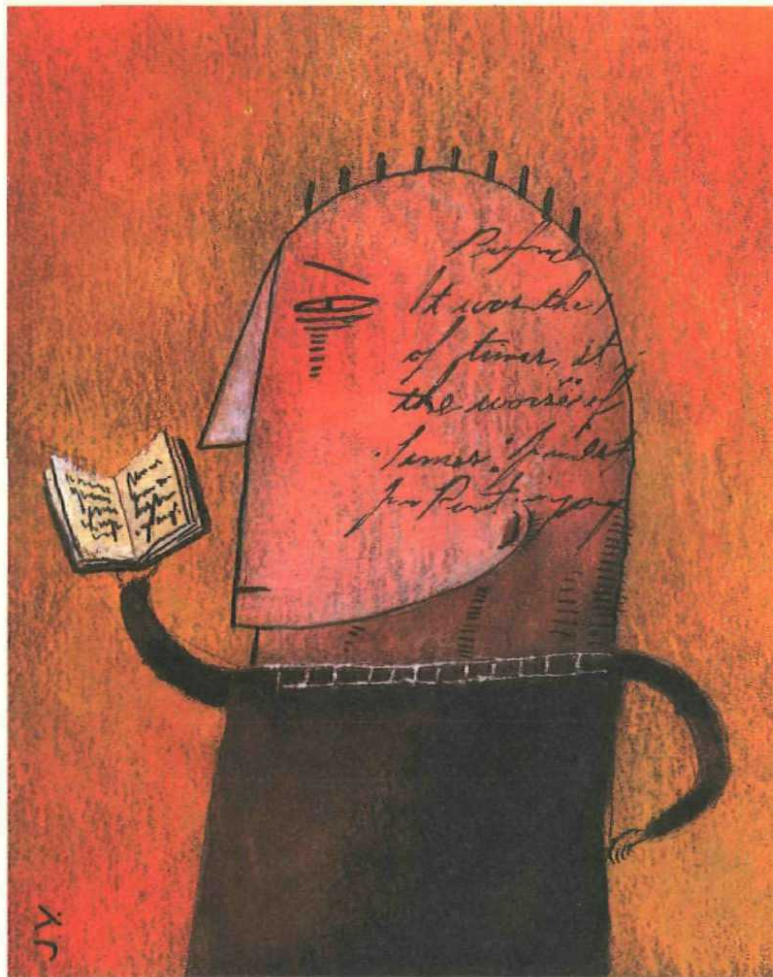
Developing the Inner Life Reading helps develop one's inner life; it helps develop the reader's values, core, and guiding purpose. It does this in three ways.

First, because most reading is done in some degree of solitude and quiet, these same conditions stimulate thinking about the deeper issues of life—where one is going, what one really values, what really matters.

Second, one will invariably read passages that cause one to stop and think more deeply. For example, from a Buddhist writing called *Dhammapadam*, we read, "While being mindful of your duties, set time aside to be alone with yourself. Cast off pretense and self-deception, and see yourself as you really are." Thus we get a little nudge in that direction.

The third way reading helps develop the inner life is through self-discipline. Because reading is not an activity that presses on us, people who read must discipline themselves to do it. Readers must *choose* to use some of their time to read. The self-discipline that this develops then transfers to other areas of life.

Broadening Perspectives Reading gives us a broader perspective on



James Yang



life by bringing to us events, observations, and insights of others. These events, observations, and insights in turn stimulate our own thinking about where we are in life. For example, it is hard to read some of the thoughts of Gandhi, Thoreau, Lincoln, or Hugo and not do some introspection:

One man cannot do right in one department of life whilst he is occupied doing wrong in any other department. Life is one indivisible whole. —Mohandas K. Gandhi

It is what a man thinks of himself that really determines his fate. —Henry Thoreau

Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing. —Abraham Lincoln

As with stomachs, we should pity minds that do not eat. If there is anything more poignant than a body agonizing for want of bread, it is a soul dying of hunger for light. —Victor Hugo

Balancing One's Life Reading helps bring better balance to people's lives. People frequently get out of balance by spending too much time in one or two narrow aspects of their lives. This happens most often in work. Reading helps people appreciate the need to keep all aspects of life in proper balance and not sacrifice some aspects for the supposed benefit of others. Through reading, we have the opportunity to see in a microcosm the effects of both a balanced and an imbalanced life.

Facilitating Working Together Reading helps people work better together. It helps people expand their views and perspectives and helps them unfreeze their respective views of each other. Readers both see and are seen as growing, developing people, rather than as hardened, set-in-their-ways, stagnated ones.

In work situations, for example, discussions about promotions often go like this:

"What about considering Joe for that new job?"

"I don't think so. Joe's good at what he does, but he's pretty set in it. I'm afraid that's all he can do. I doubt he could learn to do this new stuff."

Reading helps to unfreeze these "locked" views. The broad background gained from reading helps us in all our interpersonal relationships.

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As readers, we have more to talk about and a broader base of knowledge we can use to relate to other people. And the understanding and sympathies we develop toward the people we read about tend to transfer to the real people we deal with every day. Reading helps us see the intents of others and value their differences.

Providing Enjoyment Enjoyment is one of the most important benefits of reading. Learning new things—especially those things which you perceive as valuable—is one of the greatest sources of enjoyment. People describe this experience by saying, "I just couldn't put the book down."

SYSTEMATIC READING

An acquaintance once told me, "Unless you read 500 books a year, you don't know anything." I said, "Do you read 500 books a year?" His response was, "No, I only read 250, but then I don't know anything."

I do not believe we have to read 500 books a year, or 250 books, or any other specific number to "know anything." In fact, just reading for numbers is like digging a ditch and putting the dirt back in to fill in what you have just dug. In the end, you have nothing to show for your effort.

If we do not remember and apply what we read, the process has little value. Two factors are much more important than the number of items you read: *reading widely and reading deliberately* for retention and application.

Reading Widely It is easy to get stuck in reading ruts. At one time in my life I never read anything but nonfiction, self-help material. Then I discovered historical novels, beginning a period where that was all I read. Next I discovered spy and adventure stories and focused my attention almost exclusively on those.

Now, finally, I believe I am out of those ruts. I try to read a little bit of everything. I read work-related material, scientific literature, novels, and philosophy texts. And I find that the various materials I read are beginning to converge. I see commonalities in much of what I read. When we read broadly, we have more with which to relate the new reading. This also helps increase retention.

But one caution is necessary. Just as there is junk food that satisfies our immediate hunger but does not really nourish our bodies—and might even do us harm—there is also "junk" reading. Junk reading is something that consumes our time but does not nourish our minds and might even do us harm. We should be smart enough to treat our minds with the same respect with which we treat (or should treat) our bodies.

Reading for Retention and Application I used to read



books sequentially, one at a time. I would select a book, read only it until finished, then select another book and give it my exclusive attention until I finished it, and so forth. But I found a disturbing result: I could not remember what I had read just one or two books before. I often found myself groping for information, a quote, or an idea that I had recently read, but was unable to recall or use. It seemed as if each new book erased the learning from the previous ones. I was filling in the ditch I was digging.

So I have changed how I read. As a result, my retention and ability to apply what I read has increased dramatically. Now, I read several books at the same time. I read one book for a short period—half an hour or an hour—then I read another book for a similar amount of time. The next day I might read a third or fourth book, and so on.

As I am reading, I identify ideas I feel are significant or worth remembering, I underline them, and I fold over the corner of that page. Then before I pick up where I left off, I review the underlined parts. By the time I have finished reading a book, which may take several weeks or even months, I have reviewed the passages I consider worth remembering many times. My retention has increased dramatically, helping me apply what I read, use it, and share it much more frequently.

Sometimes I make a summary. I type up the main points marked. Periodically I read these summaries. This is different from the commercial summaries available for many books: My summaries contain what is important to me in my situation. And a summary of what I have thought over and feel is important has much more value to me than someone else's summary. As the German poet Goethe said, "All truly wise thoughts have been thought already, thousands of times; but to truly make them ours, we must think them over again, honestly, till they take root in our personal experience."

Finally, I often memorize one or more of a book's key ideas or quotes that I find especially meaningful. This takes some effort, but it solidifies the learning and gives me something permanent to take away. I often begin the memorization during the review stages. By the time I have finished a book, I may have already reviewed some key ideas 10 to 15 times. Memorizing them is a small step.

GETTING STARTED AGAIN

After I had presented these ideas at one workshop, a man came up to me and confessed, "When you said people stop reading after they finish school, you were describing me exactly. I haven't really read anything other than work-

DEVELOPING A READING LIST

A reading list must be individual. What one person considers "junk" may be "meat and potatoes" to another. Here are some suggestions for developing a list:

- Identify things immediately interesting to you.
- Ask others what interesting things they have read recently (people are willing to share this).
- Consider some of the classics, but realize some of them can be demanding; be careful that you do not get bogged down reading difficult books.
- Browse through a book store or library and see what books look interesting.
- Add a little bit of challenge: Read something different that you never would have picked up in the past.

Every person's
needs and
interests vary,
and you must
develop your
own reading
list to meet
your own
needs.

related stuff for years." Then he asked the critical question: "How do I get started again?" Here are some suggestions.

Make a Commitment You might plan to read 30 minutes a day, or plan to complete a book within a certain amount of time—a week or a month. You might want to set aside a certain period each day for reading. This could require a commitment to wake up a little earlier each day or to forgo some other diversion.

As busy as we think we are, a huge portion of our time is discretionary: It is up to us to use time as we please. How about choosing to spend some of it reading?

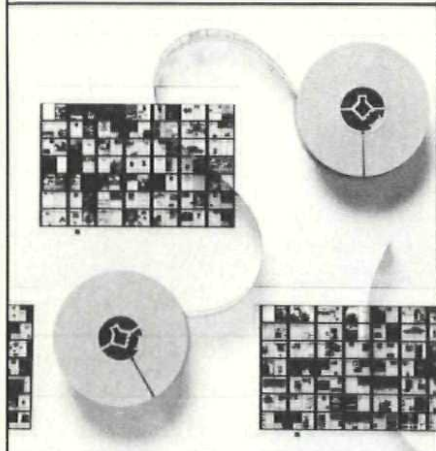
Select Interesting Material I have found it hard to read when I am not interested in the material or find it of no value. Start with something that motivates you. You might want to begin a reading list. When you hear about a good book, or when someone refers to something they have read and recommends it, write it down. Every person's needs and interests vary, and you must develop your own reading list to meet your own needs. As Drucker says: "People must learn to take responsibility for their own information needs. . . . In the information-based organization of tomorrow, people will very largely have to control themselves."

Visit Bookstores or Libraries Browse through libraries and bookstores to see what is available. Just being in the presence of books seems to stimulate our desire to get to know them better.

Deliberately Work at Retention and Application Marking and reviewing during your reading is a good way to retain and apply what you read. The counsel of Chinese sage Mencius, from 2,500 years ago, is still appropriate today: "One pursues

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OUTSTANDING LEADERS

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APPLYING LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY RESULTS

Identifying the competencies that mark outstanding leadership has important implications for training, personnel selection, career path development, and mentoring relationships.

Computerized programs exist that can match competencies required for a variety of leadership roles with the most likely candidates. Conversely, candidates who demonstrate leadership competencies can be assisted in choosing positions and responsibilities to prepare them to assume leadership roles in Catholic healthcare.

Mentoring relationships are worth special mention. We learned in the competency study that, at least in religious orders, outstanding men leaders do more mentoring than outstanding women leaders. This has significance for the healthcare field because more religious institutes of women than of men sponsor hospitals. Strengthening mentoring relationships could add outstanding leaders to the healthcare community as administrators, board members, and educators.

As John E. Curley, Jr., president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association, so eloquently put it in a presentation at Fordham University's Third Age Center's symposium on the Future of Catholic Institutional Ministries:

We view leadership development as essential to the long-term future of not only our ministry, but the whole Church. For this reason, we are convinced that the Church must undertake the task of designing and implementing a uniform, systematic, cohesive, and accountable leadership development strategy which is built upon the charisms, resources, and needs of all of its parts. □

THE VALUE OF SYSTEMATIC READING

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knowledge to gain understanding. Hence, after studying extensively, one must go on to integrate what is learned, so that truth may be apprehended."

Discuss What You Are Reading Discuss with other people what you are now reading or what you have just completed reading and check it against their experience. And, of course, it is important to apply and test what you have read against your own experience, too. Ask yourself, Does this ring true to me? Have I found this to be the case in my life in the past? In others lives? Can I follow this idea or concept and see if I experienced what the author experienced?

STAYING COMPETITIVE

At a time when knowledge is increasing in importance, many people have stopped reading. Systematic reading can be one of the best ways of staying competitive. It helps us stay current, fresh, up-to-date. It helps develop our inner life, gives us a broader perspective, brings better balance to our lives, helps us work together better, and provides enjoyment.

You may want to give systematic reading a 30-day test. Begin by making a reading list. It does not have to be a long one; just list some of the items you would like to read. Then acquire one, two, or three of them.

Set a goal for completion of the items within 30 days. Also set benchmarks (either weekly or daily), a schedule, and a place for when and where you are going to read (e.g., in the morning, during lunch break, evening).

Commit to carrying out your plan. If you miss some of your goals or fail to follow your schedule one day, do not bag the whole effort; recommit. You may have to recommit each week or even each day. Evaluate your progress and your plan, and modify it as needed.

Remember, the slogan "One who doesn't read is no better off than one who can't read" is very timely today. □