Adaptive Learning Book Reviews:
I’m a self-confessed eclectic and read rapaciously for pleasure and edification. If a book has to do with Mind, Body or Soul, I’ll give it a go. The human species is endlessly fascinating and eternally paradoxical; hence the bent towards trying to understand people as individuals (human nature, evolutionary psychology and neurobiology) and as interacting, dynamic groups (communities and organisations). I’ve tried to categorize the following reading selection, but this is happily arbitrary as increasingly the topics overlap and coalesce.

LEADERSHIP & ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
I have split this collection into two parts (neither of which has anything to do with management). The first I would call “Transitional Leadership Books – the leading edge of the previous wave”. These have more ‘traditional’ ideas about Transformational Leadership but remain in a paradigm originating from Industrial Age concepts and ways of seeing organisations. The second set I have started calling “Integral Leadership Books – the new wave.” These books have been written from a memeplex of ideas originating in the fusion of quantum physics, positive psychology, neurology, group therapy, evolutionary biology of adaptive systems, complexity, chaos and systems dynamics theories, to name just a few. They treat organisations as complex living organic entities and not mechanistic ones to be shaped and controlled. These approaches are more suited for individuals and organisations wishing to enter the Integral or Knowledge Age. They seem to hold clues for survival, success and significance in the 21st century. The real tension is between “what is” (the current reality in organisations) and “what can be” (the future organisation that will unfold through generative, integral leadership.)

Classic Transitional Leadership Books

A practical, evidence-based ‘handbook’ offering advice to aspiring leaders and entrepreneurs through their 5 fundamental practices of ‘exemplary leadership’: challenging the status quo; inspiring a shared vision; enabling others to act; modelling the way forward; tapping people’s inner motivation by linking rewards and performance.

A prequel to Built to Last that seems to be too far weighted towards the bottom line as being the measure of ‘greatness’ – but some good, if not great, approaches to level-5 leadership.

Provides a great case-study review of leadership methods over the past 20 years (at General Electric). Whether it was as planned and orderly as presented I leave up to you to decide.

Stephen Covey, “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, The Business Library, 2000, (1-86350-029-4)
Integral Age Leadership Books


Another leadership book which MBA students are likely to have missed out on. Wheatley was one of the first of the modern breed of corporate consultant to realise the systemic failures of the 20th century business model (being based on Newtonian thinking from 300 years earlier). Her thesis – that what we need in the new millennium are leaders who can navigate complexity and uncertainty – is beautifully illustrated by analogies from ‘the new sciences,’ quantum physics, complexity and chaos theory. While the science is sound, the prose is heartfelt and poetic.


A blunt and personal view of Leadership in the Australian context. Mant’s style is full of dry humour and a good dose of common no nonsense. He calls it how he sees it and doesn’t pull any punches. This book might be a shock for those brought up on standard management fare. Even the case studies of “Intelligent Leaders” are surprising in choice and content.


The first and last word on how to build values-oriented organisations. Here are the ‘secrets’ of how to maintain long lasting companies, and avoid the common pitfalls that affect the rest of the pack. The message unfortunately has been misunderstood – to be endlessly successful, organisations need to seek long-term significance and not short-term profit.


The results of a 25 year long research study by the Gallup Organisation involving thousands of managers and hundreds of organisations confirms what we have always suspected: current management ‘rules’ lead to mediocrity at best. Leaders who break all the rules to focus on those things which engage the hearts and minds of their people, succeed where others have failed. Also worthwhile is the follow-up, “Now, Discover Your Strengths” (by Buckingham & Don Clifton), Free Press, 2001 (ISBN: 0-7432-0114-0)


A quirky, fascinating and beautifully human story about the birth of the unique and highly successful UK based advertising company – St. Luke’s. Told with ‘warts and all’ honesty, this book traces the journey of discovery of a new way of working – one more in tune with the new millennium. A must read for anyone who believes that other than standard hierarchical models of organisational design are possible, and indeed inevitable.


This is the story of one man and the massive organisation he built; Dee Hock & Visa. But don’t be fooled into thinking that this is just another vacuous leadership autobiography. Hock provides convincing evidence that the 400 year-old industrial-technological age has ended and that a new way of thinking about work, leadership, business and society is required. His “Chaordic” model (built on the organising principles of evolution and nature) is well worth considering as a blue-print for future organisations and communities.


The most readable and straightforward book to date on applying Emotional Intelligence to leadership and the workplace. If you are a leader who believes that great organisations, which are people-sensitive and get the most out of their workforce, then this is the book for you. Cynics are warned, reading this will only serve to reconfirm all you know about the “touchy-feely” side of management.

Peter Block – “Stewardship – Choosing Service over Self-interest”, Berrett-Koehler, 1993 (ISBN: 1-881052-86-9) Block’s distinctly humanistic, people-centred views on leadership (stewardship), governance, organisations and a whole lot more. He is articulate, concise and honest to a point of bluntness – and in my opinion – right on the money. A must read for any leader who aspires to be effective and inspirational.

Economist and psychoanalyst de Vries in this his 17th book brings a refreshing perspective to the humanity of leadership and change. Two themes appear in this work: ‘Organisations are fractal living entities with their own identities and psychological profiles’ and ‘all relationships are coloured and influenced by previous relationships’. When trying to understand leadership and change in the organisational context both of these factors need to be taken into account.

An introduction to the concepts of ‘Presence’ (the transformation of ones self and will) and Scharmer’s Theory U. The book speaks of difficult concepts which ring true and take us to a higher level of consciousness. The authors strongly believe that we must be complicit in the unfolding of a new future which emerges through us and our ability to ‘shift the whole’ and operate from the heart. Challenging - not for the faint hearted.

Filled with our favourite themes of authenticity, trust, compassion, courage and spirit, this book is an inspiration to all aspiring leaders who passionately strive to heal their workplaces and bring holistic well-being to their organisation.

Joseph Jaworski’s personal and moving journey towards leadership and a fulfilling life. This is a no holds barred expose of one person’s inner-workings as they take a leadership journey which necessarily involves breaking free of our internal and external constraints.


I would also recommend two ‘on-line books’:
“Awake at Work – concepts and principles for creating better workplaces and a better word” by George San Facon (http://www.housing.umich.edu/pdfs/fac_awake-at-work.pdf) and
“The Concentric Man - the four human systems of communication, adaptation and defence” by Dr. P. Helbert Damsté (http://www.damste.com)
CHANGE (Cultures, Organisations, Communities)


Turner and Crawford (no not that Michael Crawford) are local researchers who looked at the factors which drove successful change in Australian businesses during the 90’s. Their understanding of tension between innovation and operational capabilities – and the need to nurture both – is the best I have seen.


Another home grown researcher into organisational change in a distinctly Australian context. Whiteley thankfully cuts across the crap written about corporate vision and values to get the real heart of values-driven cultural change. Her chapters on the history of management theory and thought are also not to be missed by anyone who wants to understand why organisations behave the way they do.


While the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is not everyone’s cup of tea, here is a book which sensibly uses the concept of personal diversity to explain the observed range of individual responses to change in the workplace. Good leaders intuitively know the essential differences between physical change and socio-psychological transition. It is the later – affecting both individuals and groups - which determines the success of organisational change.


Gladwell is a story-teller par excellent! Here is a thoroughly researched, abundantly illustrated study of the social and systemic dynamics which lead to transformational change, of literally, epidemic proportions. Gladwell takes us on a behind the scenes roller-coaster ride from viral infections like AIDS to meme-driven viral marketing as practiced by the biggest companies. Side journeys provide an insight into the special characteristics of Paul Revere, NY Mayor Giuliani and supersalesman Tom Gau and a host of others. In a word, this book is “infectious”. Not so impressive is Gladwell’s follow-up: “Blink, The Power of Thinking without Thinking”, Penguin, 2005 (ISBN 0-7139-9844-X) which seeks to explain the scientific basis of the humble ‘hunch’. The stories are still there but without the ‘stickiness-factor’ of the earlier book.


Gladwell is back in form with this erudite and thoroughly entertaining tale of why people really are successful. His findings might surprise those who thought that success derived from either hard work, superior intellect or old money. To cut a long story short, Gladwell proposes that where and when you were born and your ability to make the most of the relationships you form (the people you know) and the opportunities you see, define how successful your life will be. We might take exception to his materialistic definition of success, but the conclusions he makes are sound.
PSYCHOLOGY, NEUROBIOLOGY, EVOLUTION, PHILOSOPHY

A book to blow your mind. Everything you wanted to know about what’s happening up there in your head and how to use what you have better. Ratey reviews the last two decades of breakthrough brain research without jargon or hype, and leaves you no doubt how we can all improve our intellectual capabilities. Read it, then it is all up to you.

Up to date information about how neuroplastic and adaptable the human mind really is. Chapters on how modern technology, psychopharmacology and global connectivity are, if not evolving our minds, then at least restructuring and rewiring our neural networks.

A book to question everything you thought was true about humanity, written in an infuriatingly ‘I told you so’ and self-assured manner. I suspect only half of what Pinker writes in such uncompromising tones is true – the big question is, which half? Essential reading if only to get a different point of view.

This book marks the end of the Nature/Nurture debate. Well written, flowing and packed with complex science made simple from a master of the genre. Bottom line: Nature deals the cards; Nurture (experience & environment) determines which cards will be available when we need them. Two thoughts shine out: DNA might appear deterministic but the complex interaction between genes and the environment provides every human with free will and choice. You can’t use what you don’t have and you lose what you don’t use.

A book which offers so much from the man who gave us our current understanding of Multiple Intelligences. Read and apply the first three chapters and turf the rest. Gardner’s framework for the universal Changing of Minds is just a little too neat to fit with reality. The seven chapters of examples add little to the initial thesis.

LIFE (Living differently, Working differently, Thinking differently)

The world has become overly complicated, systems have developed which nobody take pleasure in nor understand, and the essential meaning of life has been lost. This is a book for anyone who wants to slow down the hamster wheel and get out of the rat-race. It shows us pictorially and verbally, a simpler way of living.

The title says it all – how can we live more meaningful and mindful lives. Langer is a Psychologist with a passive for innovative experimentation and exploration of the inner workings of humanity. If we are to move forward we must shrug off our lethargic lives, switch off the autopilot, extract ourselves from our ruts and habits and become more conscious of our surrounds and our impact on others and the environment in which we all live.

Handy formerly a leader of the ‘system’ is now a prophet for a more holistic and sustainable way of life. Handy is passionate and provocative and above all, totally convincing in his arguments – it makes sense.

As accessible and relevant as ever, Bucky was a man far ahead of his time. This book speaks to man’s past, present and future evolution and our need to nurture this planet for the betterment of all life.
Cutting-edge science writing made accessible to everyone. The book describes the complex interrelationships and interdependence of psychological, biological, physical, social, and cultural phenomena.

“A flow state ensues when one is engaged in self-controlled, goal-related, meaningful actions.” This quote about sums up Mihaly’s beliefs about how humanity can achieve wellbeing and happiness, and a whole lot more.

Choice is good, right! The more choice the better! Apparently not, according to this summary of rampant consumerism in the 21st century. Schwartz, a disciple of Positive Psychology, provides a compelling thesis that the vast number of simple choices bombarding the average punter as we go about our modern lives, is adding to the anxiety and stress we are increasingly feeling. Examples abound and the final chapters provide sound advice on what we can do about this self-induced malady.

Surowiecki looks at three classes of problem where ‘the many are smarter than the few’. These are in the areas of Cognition (two heads are better than one), Coordination and Cooperation. The book makes a pretty good case for utilising the minds of many to solve these problems and make more sensible decisions. Surowiecki argues that the challenger disaster or 9/11 was not inevitable, that the free-market mechanism has uses outside economics and that cooperation goes way beyond simply coordinating the way people work together.

To be honest Wilber isn’t for everyone, but you can not deny he ‘has something’ with his all quadrants all levels integral view of life and the Universe.

Unashamedly commercial and popular in style, Freakonomics still has enough meat to make you think “is what we are assuming about cause and effect in society, really the whole answer?” Levitt would have us believe classical statistical and economic analysis has a lot of catching up to do. Is he right, who knows, at least he is offering a different point of view to those of the traditionalists. Certainly gets you thinking – which is never a bad thing.

Seligman is America’s leading proponent of positive psychology and as such promotes happiness and wellbeing for the average person rather than focusing on the pathological. This is a book in two parts: The first looks at the science of optimism complete with detailed psychological experiments and real-life examples. Part two outlines how we can all make small changes to benefit from the findings of the research.
We can all learn to be more optimistic and live more enjoyable lives. Read this before you have children. (For an Australian flavour try: “Change Your Thinking” by Sarah Edelman, 2002, ISBN: 0-7333-1018-4) who takes Seligman’s Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) into the new millennium.

Not just a popular science book about evolution, but a story about the essential nature of man, told with clarity and wit. In understanding the development of life on Earth, we come closer to understanding ourselves. This is the book which introduced the concept of Memes to the world. Also highly recommended by the same author “The Blind Watchmaker”, 1986 (ISBN: 0-140-29122-9). (If you like this sort of scientific musing read anything by Daniel Dennett, Matt Ridley, Paul Davies or John Gribbin)
A republishing of Frankl’s classic work with a new forward by Harold S. Kushner. Despite the graphic details of life and death in the Nazi concentration camps, this book is paradoxically one of positivity and hope. Even in the worst of all possible situations, the spirit of people shines through. This is Frankl’s message which he embodied into the Psychological practices of Logotherapy: human beings are complete and embrace wellbeing when they discover the significance of their lives, be this through the achievements they make (the legacy they leave) or the service they give to others. I challenge anyone not to be moved by Frankl’s harrowing but uplifting tale of one man’s search for meaning in a world suffused with suffering.

Is the world heading to breakdown or breakthrough? Using up to date statistics and current theories, Laszlo makes a compelling case that the “tipping point” will be on us shortly – either we (humanity) acts to create a better future for all life on the planet or we may miss our chance. A must read for everyone concerned with sustainability and survival.

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