

Why Investing a Few Minutes Each Day to Reading Poetry Improved My Leadership

This simple daily habit changed my perspective on leadership-- and it's something any leader should try.

INC. MAGAZINE, AUGUST 1, 2021

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Years ago, I discovered I had a flat spot. Like many who do what I do, I love hard numbers. I also like and work best on focused tasks where siloed concentration achieves aimed-at results.

But at one point, something seemed lacking. Yes, I was good at what I did--results are always important and rewarding--but it was also becoming clear that too much focus had limits. I came to understand that an occasional change of perspective was not an enemy to focus but a powerful friend. That's when I began to look for ways to shift contrast, upend a bit of those customary thought patterns and problem-solving approaches, all to help round out my flat spot.

So in 2007, I began reading poetry. At first, it was hit-and-miss, just something to do. An experiment, really. But when I saw the effect it started having on how I was thinking and (oddly) the improvement in focus, it steadily became a morning ritual. It was a few-minute investment each day.

Every morning, either from an open book or a verse from [YourDailyPoem.com](https://www.yourdailypoem.com), I read and thought about what I read. I started with poetry about nature. Since then, I've grown to read a wide variety--from the small rhymes to larger narratives.

This easy morning ritual has a vast carry-forward on both creative and productive days, and especially on days where great focus is necessary. Here are just a few ways morning poetry shapes how I lead.

Poetry presents options.

On International Peace Day in 2019, I was the new CEO of a billion-dollar company. That meant that all of my energy was forward-focused on the heavy lifts coming my way. Exciting, yes, but equally worrisome. And I was not the only one excited and worried.

In my email that morning was "Peace Be Around Thee," a poem by Thomas Moore. I read it, took a moment to go over my thoughts, and it shifted my focus. In a company-wide email, I wrote the following to our employees and hit "send":

Team: Forgive some Saturday morning musings. Today is International Peace Day (aka World Peace Day). It brings to mind four events this week that make me think about peace at the international, national, community, and personal levels ... and what I see in our great company. ... Some of you know I like poetry and try to read a poem each morning. This morning, I read the poem "Peace Be Around Thee" by Thomas Moore. It is a prayer for individual peace:

All of us were under enormous stress. That was clear. The founding CEO had stepped down. Circumstances were unsettled. There were many questions pending. Lots of people knew me; others didn't. Some were trying to learn who I was, while those who knew me were wondering what I might do.

That morning, they might well have expected from me something on business objectives, new orders, cutbacks, hard changes, etc. But opening up, sharing something likely unexpected, and simply about peace, turned a corner, created new dialogues, other thoughts. We all exhaled. People stepped out of their foxholes of expectation and looked at the poem (and the reference to the day of peace). That conferred an altered and a welcomed perspective--breathing room--which had a good effect.

Turns out, that Saturday, a message on peace was exactly what we needed. Without the poem, I'm certain that we may have been denied useful steps to functional transition. I think it also helped those who needed it, to know me better. Since that first company-wide email, I have sent many more, and many of those emails were the product of poetry minutes each morning.

Poetry connects us.

Poetry is a condensation of ideas, spoken in memorable ways. At the height of the pandemic, my company-wide email messages increased to once a week. There

were outside-of-business references, yes, but often it was a poem--something applicable to what we might be thinking or experiencing, or it could be something entirely unrelated.

Employees, in turn, have shared poems with me--poems, that I then have shared with other employees both inside my emails and in other contexts. It is surprising what poetry, even from a different age, can do for us during times of turmoil, medical crisis, social unrest, or political upheaval.

On January 20, 2021, Amanda Gorman read her inspiring poem "The Hill We Climb" at the inauguration of President Joe Biden. Just 22 years old and wildly talented, Gorman managed two impressive feats on that day: First, she was the youngest inaugural poet in American history, and second, she made poetry cool again. My five children-- all boys-- have shown interest. I cherish the poems I have received from them for Father's Day, my birthday, and other occasions.

Poetry creates perspective.

As a young man, I had the great privilege of learning to speak Japanese and spent three years in Japan. Previously, English was all I knew. As I learned, I found that there were things I could express in Japanese that I couldn't express in English. Likewise, there were things I couldn't say as well in Japanese as I could in English.

This was a puzzle until a friend told me that you can't think a single thought without language. And each language is unique and somewhat limited in expression. Then he said speaking more than one language opens doors of expression you couldn't open with a single language.

Now, I believe the same is true about the various forms of language and language processes we use. For instance, logic and analytics generate unique and useful forms of expression, but they have their limits. And poetry, and other forms and shapes of language, present different useful avenues, of not only expression, but of thought itself. Much of my daily work is logical and analytical. So, I am inclined to use those forms, even when the problem may optimally call for a different approach.

Beginning each day with a poem, a different language form, somehow opens doors in my thought to what might be a needed alternative to my native inclinations toward problem-solving or whatever the day calls for. It's almost like looking above the rim of a trench you've been digging; yes, the trench has to be dug, and

you're certainly digging hard, but without the occasional up-look, you might find yourself digging in the wrong direction.

By presenting the contrast in form of different expressions or outside of normal topic, poetry can inspire needed change--even creative, functional resolutions to business challenges that, in previous attempts, might have been left unresolved or with sub-optimal results.

In its own way, poetry can, even by indirect means, supply bridges to previously unthought-of business solutions.

Finding your own path

I didn't set out to transform my leadership or communication style when I started reading poetry. It was accidental. But accidental or not, it was good--and all at the bargain-basement price of a few minutes a day.

Now that's me. Yes, I'm evangelical about poetry, but I know there are many alternatives to jump-start the creative side by using contrast to native habits or inclinations. The point is, we all need a way. Something every day that might shift focus enough to provide needed perspective. Read poetry, paint pictures, play music, but find something you like, something that sparks imagination, and if one thing doesn't work, try another until you find it. A brief up-look out of that trench will help you gauge direction, necessity, and speed.

Find a second language of form that creates contrasting expression and altered viewpoint. Don't give up until you find what works. Rounding out our flat sides is part of all our job descriptions. Our organizations and teams depend on it. Engaging the creative mind in different ways will bring down walls we hadn't seen and will harness perspectives we didn't know we had.