

# Opinion: For those who want to lead, they better read

By John Coleman, Harvard Business Review

When David Petraeus visited the Harvard Kennedy School in 2009, one of the meetings he requested was with author Doris Kearns Goodwin. Petraeus, who holds a PhD in International Relations from Princeton, is a fan of *Team of Rivals* and wanted time to speak to the famed historian about her work. Apparently, the great general (and current CIA director) is something of a bibliophile.

He's increasingly an outlier. Even as global literacy rates are high (84 percent), people are reading less and less deeply. The National Endowment for the Arts (PDF) has found that "[r]eading has declined among every group of adult Americans," and for the first time in American history, "less than half of the U.S. adult American population is reading literature." Literacy has been improving in countries like India and China, but that literacy may not translate into more or deeper reading.

This is terrible for leadership, where my experience suggests those trends are even more pronounced. Business people seem to be reading less – particularly material unrelated to business. But deep, broad reading habits are often a defining characteristic of our greatest leaders and can catalyze insight, innovation, empathy, and personal effectiveness.

Note how many business titans are or have been avid readers. According to the *New York Times*, Steve Jobs had an "inexhaustible interest" in William Blake; Nike founder Phil Knight so reveres his library that in it you have to take off your shoes and bow; and Harman Industries founder Sidney Harman called poets "the original systems thinkers," quoting

freely from Shakespeare and Tennyson. In *Passion & Purpose*, David Gergen notes that Carlyle Group founder David Rubenstein reads dozens of books each week. And history is littered not only with great leaders who were avid readers and writers (remember, Winston Churchill won his Nobel prize in Literature, not Peace), but with business leaders who believed that deep, broad reading cultivated in them the knowledge, habits, and talents to improve their organizations.

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