

Book Smart: Lessons from a Year of Reading Well



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According to [Lexico](#), a collaboration between Dictionary.com and Oxford University Press, the term “book smart” is an adjective meaning “Having knowledge acquired from books or study; scholarly, bookish; frequently implying lack of common sense or worldliness.” Although ‘book smart’ is often a pejorative term, my bias is that reading is the ultimate learning tool. One of my personal goals as CEO of NRMC is to marry risk management-related ‘book smarts’ *and* ‘street smarts’ and bring the combined knowledge to readers of the RISK eNews, Affiliate Members, and consulting clients of NRMC. To do that, I’m surrounded by a stack of books waiting to be read and a second stack of favorite, recent reads.

3 Simple Reading Rules

To maximize learning and discernment from what I’m reading, I follow three simple guidelines:

1. **Start anywhere!** Drop the notion that books should be read sequentially from the front cover to the back cover. Permit yourself to start reading wherever the topic strikes your fancy. For most of my 2020 reads, that was the prologue, introduction, or Chapter 1. But from time to time, I begin with a chapter whose title strikes me as intriguing, odd, or counter-intuitive.
2. **Don’t be a glutton for punishment.** If at any time while reading a book, I begin to dread the next paragraph or chapter, I simply put the book down, re-shelve it, and grab the next title in the stack. Fulfillment, enjoyment, and engagement highly increase the ability to absorb new ideas; be sure that you’re engrossed in your book to take full advantage of the lessons and insights within.
3. **Record—to remember—the takeaways.** The books in my office are defaced with underlines, asterisks, folded corners, ideas for future article titles, and the occasional “No!” or “True in RM too!” comments. After I finish each book, I retype anything I’ve underlined, circled, or asterisked in the book. The process of retyping my takeaways helps them take root in my brain. When I’m searching for a quote or comment to illustrate a point, my document of notes is a handy, curated encyclopedia of ‘ah-ha’ moments.

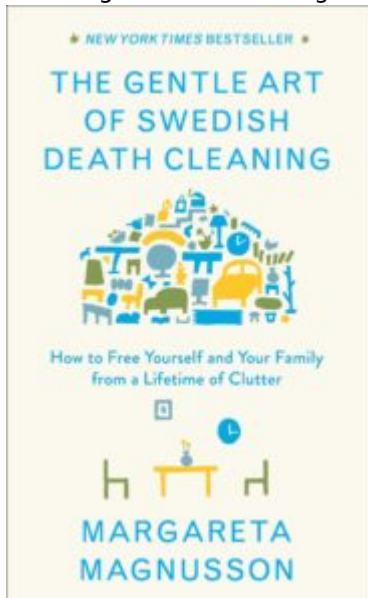
My **bonus ‘rule’** is:

Chat up the books you love to friends and colleagues; urge your favorite people to check out a book you’ve enjoyed. If they seem reluctant to purchase the book or check it out from their local library, offer to lend them your copy! Don’t keep your favorite reads under wraps.

Countdown: My Favorite Reads

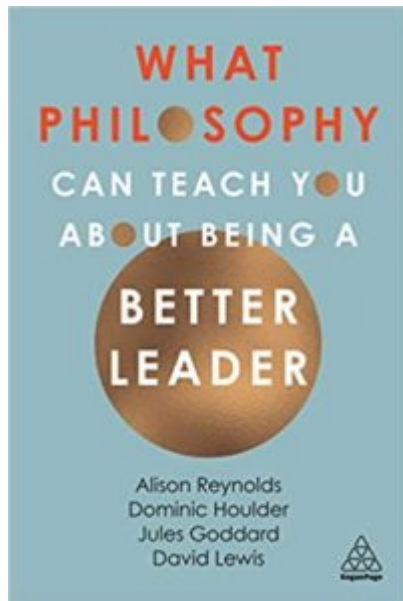


1. ***The ONE Thing*, by Gary Keller with Jay Papasan.** This book is an object lesson in the power of repetition. Repetition improves memory because it creates connections between different parts of your brain. The result is that when you repeat things silently, out loud, or simply reread the material, your ability to recall that information in the future will be much easier. The powerful and straightforward takeaway from *The ONE Thing* is that our personal and work lives will feel, and be, more productive when we learn to focus... on one thing. Maybe it's one thing every day, every week, or every year. Keller's definition of a suitable one thing is: one thing that if you were to do it, it would make everything else easier or unnecessary. This seems like it's too simple (good) to be true! But there is something incredibly powerful in this seemingly simple practice. In the NRM team's experience, many risk leaders wear themselves out trying to identify every imaginable mission threat. My takeaway from reading *The ONE Thing* is that at the top of every risk leader's 'New Year Must Do List' should be the **one thing** that will make every other risk thing easier or unnecessary if accomplished this year. We've not only repeated the 'one thing' mantra to ourselves this past year, but we also built it into our weekly staff check-ins. And instead of feeling demoralized by the long list of things we didn't finish last week, checking off our 'one thing' engenders pride and positivity.



2. ***The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*, by Margareta Magnusson.** My 10th read of 2020 was an eye-opener and personal game-changer. The book offers the wisdom of an artist who spent a year preparing to downsize from a home to a small apartment. Spoiler alert: this is not a book about 'how' to clean! (If you need tips on sorting and such, see Marie Kondo's *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*.) Instead, this book is about getting in the right frame of mind to sort and simplify your life. My favorite quote from the book is: "A loved one wishes to inherit nice things from you. Not all things." Since reading this book in early May of last year, I've discarded nearly 100 garbage

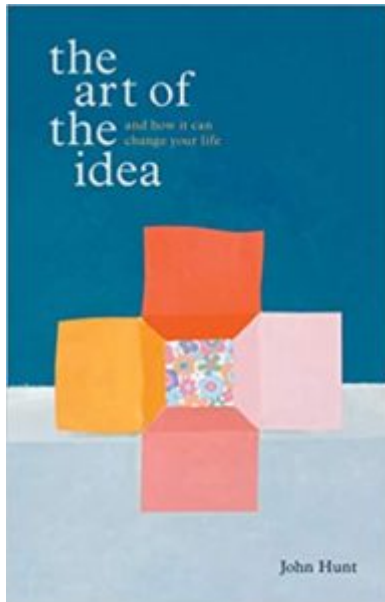
bags filled with ‘stuff’ no one would want to inherit from me, or anyone! I’ve also given away many decorative items and books by leaving them on a ‘free to a good home’ table in the driveway. I’ve had more fun watching strangers walk away clutching my former belongings than any joy I experienced watching the items gather dust on a shelf. My daughter is grateful and relieved. Lessons from this book can be applied to the workplace, as well. What ‘stuff’ is your nonprofit holding on to—outdated policies, copies of copies of copies, relics duplicated in digital files—that will burden the next generation of leaders? Ask, “Will my successor be glad I held on to this?” and, “Has legal counsel recommended that we retain this?” If the answer to both questions is ‘no,’ you know what to do!



3. ***What Philosophy Can Teach You About Being a Better Leader*, by Alison Reynolds, Dominic Houlder, Jules Goddard, and David Lewis.** When I began reading this book, I worried that its contents wouldn’t match the compelling title. With little to no knowledge of ancient or modern philosophy, I expected to be confused, bored, or both. My worries were unfounded! This book is a fascinating history of philosophy’s powerful lessons and observations and their relevance in modern times. I tweaked the authors’ intent for my own benefit and scribbled notes in the margins about the applicability of various philosophies to modern-day risk management. My absolute favorite takeaway from the book was from the philosopher and spiritual leader, Buddha. The authors write:

“Buddhist philosophy prioritizes the creation of value rather than capturing it; the development of an ecosystem of collaborative behavior as opposed to an adversarial ecosystem; and the ability to thrive under uncertainty rather than strive to control the future.”

Many risk leaders tell me they become frustrated and discouraged when their ideas and suggested new policies are met with resistance. If that circumstance sounds familiar, I encourage you to think about how to create an ‘ecosystem of collaborative behavior’ that will help your organization thrive under inevitable uncertainty. Nothing you will do today or this year will create a protective bubble for your mission’s destiny. But what you do daily can help build a culture that embraces innovation, risk-aware thinking, and optimism in the face of uncertainty.



4. ***The Art of the Idea*, by John Hunt.** This book was—hands down—my favorite read of last year. Hunt inspired me to think anew about the concept of ‘fresh thinking.’ When I hear the expression ‘think outside the box,’ I want to scream. Not because the term is overused and corny, but because the phrase is used carelessly. Many ‘out of the box’ ideas are just slight variations on a theme or a small tweak of a long-standing, unproductive practice. Life happens. Stuff happens. And we simply don’t know what will happen next. Hunt writes, “Reality is an unpredictable set of leaps and jerks that happen faster and faster. Fresh thinking is the only saddle we have to ride the unknown, so we might as well get used to making it up as we go along. It also helps if we start enjoying the ride.” This sentiment reminds me of the moment of Zen many risk leaders experience when they realize that uncertainty will never end, and their job isn’t to ensure predictability. A risk leader’s duty is to inspire confidence as the team saddles up and rides into the future.

Please reach out to me if any of my picks inspire you to add an additional title or two to your reading list. I view book recommendations as a gift, so send me yours anytime!

Melanie Lockwood Herman is executive director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Although she fell short of her ambitious reading goal in 2020, she’s grateful for the lessons, insights, and inspiration she experienced along the way. Reach out to Melanie at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.