

From Cradle to Manager: Children’s Books as a Pathway to Build Emotional Intelligence and the Managerial Skillset.

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The great NFL hall of fame coach Vince Lombardi (2023) said, “Leaders are not born, they are made.” Those who believe this to be true, have long tried to determine the right skillset and training to cultivate a great leader. Using successful leaders as units of study, researchers have found a defining trait separating a good individual contributor from a good manager is a high level of emotional intelligence (i.e., soft skills) (Goleman, 2017). A leader with a high level of emotional intelligence, can more easily diffuse conflict, empathize with others, develop deeper relationships, and ultimately motivate better team performance. To that end, organizations spend billions of dollars every year on emotional intelligence and soft skills training (Research and Markets, 2022). Furthermore, expensive leadership graduate programs continue to be in high demand as a viable path for mid-career professionals to develop and refine their managerial skillset and move up the corporate ladder. Yet, there is still a dearth of talent and a limited number of candidates who truly possess and desire the managerial skillset that is in such high demand. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), there are 1.1 million management vacancies each year and the growth for management professionals over the next eight years is expected to outpace the total average growth across all other professions, demonstrating the current and future supply and demand imbalance.

In this paper we address two fundamental questions:

- 1.) What is the managerial skillset that is in such high demand?
- 2.) How does one build the foundation for the managerial skillset early in one’s life?

The Managerial Skillset in High Demand

Measuring the managerial skillset can be difficult to define and assess. As such, we seek insights from the profession to understand what organizations most desire. The World Bank, in collaboration with LinkedIn, publishes data showing how professional skill requirements have changed over time using updates made to member profiles (World Bank, 2023). When LinkedIn members update the skills in their profiles, they do so to reflect the valued needs of their professions. The data collected from 2015- 2019, show that the top four soft skills for managers and management consultants were: 1.) Leadership 2.) Communication 3.) Teamwork and 4.) Negotiation. Interestingly, there was little deviation associated with the rankings of these skills across the five-year time span. Furthermore, the mass of literature that exists on these topics suggests that these same managerial soft skills have been in demand for decades.

Building the Managerial Skillset

Acquiring the managerial skillset can also be challenging with many managers finding themselves unprepared for the role. Research shows that developing high levels of emotional intelligence and a wide breadth of soft skills requires training, experience, and deliberate practice (Cooper, 1997). This raises the question of why the formal training process starts so late in one’s life. While training at any stage of life can be beneficial, simple exposure to positive examples at a very young age, can lay the groundwork for

one to learn managerial norms and mimic best practices, giving one a head-start in developing important managerial and life skills. This paper uncovers the important linkages between the themes in bestselling children's books and the managerial soft skills that are in such high demand, making the case for more exposure and deliberate practice earlier in one's life.

Children's Literature as a Deliberate Practice

Before one can read or even speak, managerial training tools exist in the simplest form: children's books. Reading, especially nonfiction, can broaden one's exposure to new information and expand one's vocabulary, anchoring experiences allowing one to keep an open mind in difficult situations. Research shows that the single biggest reading success factor is reading aloud to children (Trelease, 2013). Furthermore, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2021) recommends reading aloud to children as young as six months old. It is no surprise that many of our nation's most successful business CEOs are known to engage in this deliberate practice by reading several hours a day (Warren Buffet, Mark Cuban, Bill Gates, and Oprah Winfrey) (Seifert, 2020).

Engaging short stories consisting of colorful pictures and talking animals could be seen as allegories offering insight into real-life managerial scenarios. The elements of any children's book consists of five components: 1.) characters 2.) plot 3.) setting 4.) conflict 5.) and theme. Comparable structural elements exist in any managerial environment. On daily basis, managers must also navigate the complexities associated with 1.) internal and external stakeholders 2.) competing strategic objectives 3.) tenuous environmental factors 4.) personality conflicts 5.) and business implications and performance assessments. Through stories children are provided a pseudo steppingstone to a future managerial skillset. Sharing stories with cultural implication has been a foundation of civilization. Stories rich in cultural meaning offer specific reference points that can consciously or subconsciously anchor behavior. As a society, if we want managers to possess and model the traits that we most desire, it is imperative that we teach and reinforce those traits early to ensure there is a reasonable level of managerial literacy.

Parents and guardians should be aware of the influence that they have on a child's early development. Research shows that two thirds of the child's lifetime vocabulary is formed by the age of two, underscoring the importance of exposure to children's literature as a deliberate practice. During this period of neuroplasticity, the repetitive exposure to words, phrases, concepts, and themes is critical for language development and formative in how a child makes associations (Trelease, 2020). Reading aloud is not only an efficient formula for scaffolding literacy development, but it builds emotional circuitry that allows children to wrestle with the chaotic journey of the human experience. Children who are read to early and often benefit from rich oral tradition and deep emotional bonds with caring adults. Amid the widespread educational/mental health crisis, reading aloud can be considered a nutritional jump start to IQ and EQ.

Access to a wide variety of high-quality children's literature has for decades been one of the great equalizers in our country. The free use of a wide variety of high-quality children's books at public libraries across the country eliminates one of the larger financial barriers to entry. Yet, it is important to note that children cannot make the decision to pick up these books on their own. Arguably, the biggest barrier is the important role of parents and guardians encouraging and promoting this deliberate practice. Research shows that it just takes reading aloud fifteen minutes per day to have a transformative impact on child development. (Trelease, 2020).

Connections Between Children’s Literature and the Managerial Skillset

In any context, research shows that increasing one’s skillset to the level of expert requires deliberate practice (Gladwell, 2008; Ericsson, 2008). Being exposed to different scenarios, being forced to make decisions, and being assessed on the quality of those decisions enables managers to fine-tune their skillset. While we acknowledge there is no good substitute for managerial experience when one is a manager, we argue that regular exposure to high quality children’s literature allows a path to model that same deliberate practice when one is only a child. In the Appendix, we show the direct connection between ten of the bestselling children’s books and the elements of the managerial skillset. By following the suggested deliberate practice of just reading fifteen minutes per day, this reading list can serve as a starting point that can be completed in less than a month (423 pages * 1 minute per page/ 15 minutes per night= 28.2 days).

Empowering children to eventually take the career path they most desire is always a good practice but enabling them to have the most opportunity should be a best practice. Exposure to stories where characters encounter diverse challenges offers potential managers in training heartwarming and simple reminders that reinforce interpersonal and managerial best practices paving a path from cradle to manager. Albert Einstein (2023) said, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want your children to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.”

Appendix

Top 10 Best Selling Childrens Books by Volume

Title	Page Count	Connection to Managerial Skillset Learning Goals
The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle)	26	Leadership - The caterpillar’s journey can be viewed through the lens of growth and transformation given the right set of resources and a nurturing environment. Negotiation - While the caterpillar searched for resources, it often had to make compromises to consume what was available to achieve a goal.
Goodnight Moon (Margaret Wise Brown)	32	Communication - The book is a great example of consistency, routine, and repetition in producing and motivating the desired outcome. Teamwork - This book is a good reminder of acknowledging all elements or employees in an ecosystem for vital role they play. Negotiation - The process of bidding goodnight to each item in the room can reflect the concept of fair and equitable treatment, a skillset that managers must possess.
Where the Wild Things Are (Maurice Sendak)	40	Leadership - This story stresses the role confidence, determination, and gaining the respect of others by making difficult decision as a leader, yet power and being at the top of the hierarchy may not be a fulfilling priority long term. Communication - The book stresses the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication to maintain order. Negotiation - The book underscores the importance of understanding competing priorities and choosing a path.
Green Eggs and Ham (Dr. Seuss)	62	Leadership - Sam-I-Am demonstrates persistence to inspire and motivate his counterpart.

		<p>Communication- The book is a textbook example to illustrate the power of persuasion and utilizing a variety of messaging strategies to achieve a goal.</p> <p>Teamwork- The story illuminates a scenario where Sam-I-Am is working with someone who has a different opinion, and the process of working toward a consensus.</p> <p>Negotiation- Sam-I-am uses a simple negotiation tactics such as changing settings and creating different option to get to a yes underscoring the importance of flexibility and persistence in a negotiation, even after one receives a no.</p>
The Tale of Peter Rabbit (Beatrix Poter)	56	<p>Communication- Peter’s mother gives clear instructions about to convey a message and warning to her children. The messaging strategy is critical to ensure that the message is understood, and instructions are followed to ensure the most optimal outcome.</p> <p>Negotiation- Peter internally negotiates the risks and the reward associated with going into Mr. McGregor’s Garden.</p>
Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See (Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle)	28	<p>Communication- The story underscores clear and repetitive communication, which ensures a smooth flow of information.</p> <p>Teamwork- The diversity of animals represented in the story can be seen as a celebration of diverse abilities and skillsets.</p>
The Cat in the Hat (Dr. Seuss)	61	<p>Leadership- The cat in the hat can be seen as a bold, confident, and visionary leader. The illuminates how leaders must be mindful of the impact they have on others.</p> <p>Communication- The Cat has an uncanny ability to persuade using clear communication and high levels of charisma.</p> <p>Teamwork- This story could be seen as a cautionary tale to illustrate that when one person has too much decision-making authority or influence, there may be negative outcomes.</p>
Guess How Much I Love you (Sam McBrantney)	32	<p>Leadership- This story could be viewed as reflective of a mentor and a mentee, and the importance of providing nurturing support for one to meet their potential.</p> <p>Communication- In the story, the characters use expressive communication to demonstrate their feelings underscoring empathy and emotional intelligence in interpersonal relationships.</p> <p>Negotiation- The reciprocal exchanges between the characters are reflexive of a negotiation or a transactional relationship where each party is trying outdo one other.</p>
Madeline (Ludwig Bemelmans)	54	<p>Leadership- The main character demonstrates aspects of confidence, courage, and independence, qualities that exemplify leadership.</p> <p>Communication- In interactions, the book underscores the “sensing”, which is the ability to interpret communication and intuit deviations for what may be perceived as normal.</p>
Corduroy (Don Freeman)	32	<p>Leadership- The book explores traits such as determination, problem solving, curiosity, and sense of adventure.</p>

		<p>Communication- using nonverbal cues, the book underscores the importance of understanding the perspective of others and the importance of belonging.</p> <p>Teamwork- Despite individual imperfections that exist, the book illuminates the value of working together to accomplish a goal that would likely not be possible as an individual.</p>
Total= Ten Short Stories	423	<p>Leadership=7</p> <p>Communication= 9</p> <p>Teamwork=5</p> <p>Negotiation= 6</p>

Alternative Data presentation....

Title	Page Count	Leadership	Communication	Teamwork	Negotiation
The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle)	26	1			1
Goodnight Moon (Margaret Wise Brown)	32		1	1	1
Where the Wild Things Are (Maurice Sendak)	40	1	1		1
Green Eggs and Ham (Dr. Seuss)	62	1	1	1	1
The Tale of Peter Rabbit (Beatrix Poter)	56		1		1
Brown Bear Brown Bear, What Do You See (Bill Martin Jr. and Eric Carle)	28		1	1	
The Cat in the Hat (Dr. Seuss)	61	1	1	1	
Guess How Much I Love you (Sam McBrantney)	32	1	1		1
Madeline (Ludwig Bemelmans)	54	1	1		
Corduroy (Don Freeman)	32	1	1	1	
Total	423	7	9	5	6

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